

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 87

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalms 87 is a brief but densely theological song of Zion — one of the Zion Psalms (alongside 46, 48, 76, 84, 122) celebrating Jerusalem as the city of God's choosing and dwelling. The psalm opens with the LORD's declaration of love for Zion's gates above all the other dwellings of Jacob (vv. 1–3). It then moves to its most startling and theologically charged movement: God Himself recording nations — Rahab (Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Cush — as born in Zion (vv. 4–6). These are not merely nations that will visit Zion; they are registered as having been *born there*. The psalm closes with singers and dancers declaring that all their springs — all their sources of life and joy — are in Zion (v. 7).

The movement is: Zion is chosen → Zion's citizenship is astonishingly inclusive → all of life flows from Zion. The argument is not primarily political or geographic but theological and soteriological: the city of God is the mother of all peoples who belong to God.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to expand and reorient His people's understanding of Zion — not as a tribal possession but as the source of life for all nations. The intent is dual: to humble any nationalist or exclusivist reading of election, and to ignite wonder and worship in those who discover they are registered as citizens of the heavenly city. The psalm presses every reader toward the question: *Are you enrolled here?* — and then answers with astonishing grace: even the ancient enemies of Israel may be counted as born in Zion. The intent is doxological wonder at the breadth of grace and the centrality of the city of God as the only true home of all the redeemed.

Subject Sentence: Zion — the city of God's choosing — is the mother and true home of all who belong to Him, from every nation.

Primary Claim: God is declaring that Zion is not Israel's tribal property but the birthplace of all the redeemed — and He is calling every reader to marvel that their name is enrolled there and that all their springs are in Him.

Interpretive Evaluation

The central interpretive question is what it means for God to register Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Cush as “born in Zion” (vv. 4–6). Three readings require evaluation.

Reading 1 — Nationalistic/Geopolitical (ancient Near Eastern suzerainty): Some interpreters read the enrollment language as diplomatic — conquered or allied nations incorporated into Israel’s sphere, with “born in Zion” meaning something like “politically subject to Zion.” On this reading the psalm is a celebration of Israelite geopolitical supremacy. This reading must be *refuted*: it imposes an ANE political framework that the psalm’s doxological register resists. The text does not celebrate Israel’s dominance over these nations but God’s enrollment of them — it is God who writes in the register (v. 6), not Israel who conquers. The posture of the psalm is wonder, not triumph.

Reading 2 — Eschatological-Pilgrimage (broadly evangelical and some Arminian/Baptist readings): Many interpreters read vv. 4–6 as describing nations streaming to Zion in eschatological pilgrimage — fulfilling texts like Isaiah 2:2–4 and Micah 4:1–5. On this reading, “born in Zion” means spiritual conversion: people of all nations who come to worship the LORD are counted as Zion’s children. This reading is substantially correct and should be *acknowledged* and affirmed. The enrollment language — God writing names in a register — carries exactly this weight: covenant inclusion, not mere geography. This is the reading that opens into Galatians 4:26 (Jerusalem above is our mother) and Hebrews 12:22–24 (you have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem).

Reading 3 — Reformed/Redemptive-Historical: The Reformed reading builds on Reading 2 but grounds it more explicitly in covenant theology and canonical development. “Born in Zion” is not merely metaphorical — it is anticipating what Paul will call the new birth and what Hebrews will call the heavenly city. The nations are not being invited to assimilate to Israel; they are being enrolled by God Himself in the register of the city whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10). The Zion of Psalm 87 is the type of which the New Jerusalem is the antitype; the enrollment of nations is the type of which justification by faith — the breaking down of the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14) — is the fulfillment. This reading is to be *preferred* because it accounts for the canonical telos of the psalm, the divine agency of enrollment (v. 6), and the doxological close (v. 7) without reducing the psalm to either politics or mere aspiration.

Contribution worth retaining: The eschatological-pilgrimage reading rightly presses the *missionary* force of the psalm — God’s heart for the nations is not a New Testament novelty but is sung in Israel’s hymn book. This emphasis should be retained and amplified even within the Reformed reading.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 12:1–3** — The Abrahamic covenant already carries this universal trajectory: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Psalm 87 is the lyrical flowering of this original promise; Zion is where the blessing reaches all nations.
- **Isaiah 2:2–4; 49:6** — The Servant of the LORD is given as a light to the nations, and the nations will stream to Zion in the latter days. Isaiah provides the prophetic scaffolding; Psalm 87 provides the doxological celebration of what Isaiah predicts.
- **Ephesians 2:11–22** — Paul’s declaration that the dividing wall of hostility has been broken down and that Gentiles are “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” is the New Testament exegesis of Psalm 87’s enrollment. The nations are no longer strangers and aliens — they are registered in Zion.
- **Galatians 4:26** — “The Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.” Paul applies exactly the maternal/birth language of Psalm 87 to the church of the redeemed across all nations. This is the canonical fulfillment of v. 5: “This one and that one were born in her.”
- **Revelation 21:24–27** — The nations bring their glory into the New Jerusalem; the Lamb’s book of life contains the names of those who are enrolled there. The register of Psalm 87:6 is the Lamb’s book of life; Zion’s gates are the gates of the eternal city.

Aim: To move the reader from a narrow or tribal understanding of God’s people toward doxological wonder at the scope of grace — and toward a personal reckoning with whether their springs are truly in Zion alone.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	The LORD’s foundation is in the holy mountains	“Holy mountains” — Zion’s hills; the LORD chose to found His city here
2	The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob	Comparative love — not hatred of other places but superlative preference for Zion; “gates” = the city as a whole, its public life
3	Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God	The psalm itself is one of those “glorious things”; <i>Selah</i> invites pause on the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4a	“I will mention Rahab and Babylon to those who know me”	weight of this “Rahab” = Egypt (cf. Isaiah 51:9; Psalm 89:10); listed among those the LORD enrolls
4b	“Behold Philistia and Tyre, with Cush — ‘This one was born there’”	Philistia and Tyre — ancient enemies; Cush — distant African nation; all enrolled. The register includes Israel’s most threatening neighbors
5	“And of Zion it shall be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her’”	The enrollment is universal and individual — “this one and that one” — not nations in the abstract but persons registered
5b	“The Most High Himself will establish her”	Zion’s stability is not political or military but grounded in divine establishment — the Most High secures what He has founded
6	“The LORD records as He registers the peoples, ‘This one was born there’”	God Himself keeps the register; enrollment is a divine act, not a human claim; the repetition of “born there” emphasizes the reality of the citizenship granted
7	Singers and dancers alike say, “All my springs are in you”	The response to Zion’s grace is worship; “springs” = sources of life, joy, refreshment; everything vital flows from Zion

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	The City of God’s Choosing — Foundation and Love
2	4–6	The Register of the Nations — Enrollment by Divine Decree
3	7	The Doxological Response — All My Springs Are in You

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Zion — the city of God’s choosing — is the mother and true home of all who belong to Him, from every nation.

Primary Claim: God is declaring that Zion is not Israel’s tribal property but the birthplace of all the redeemed — and He is calling every reader to marvel that their name is enrolled there and that all their springs are in Him.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine where your springs actually are. (Mind/Belief) The closing verse of the psalm is not merely a lyrical flourish — it is a diagnostic. “All my springs are in you” is a claim about the source of life, meaning, satisfaction, and security. The question the psalm presses is whether Zion — the living God and His city — is functionally your source, or whether your springs are secretly located somewhere else: in your career, your family’s approval, your nation’s success, your own competence. The psalm does not allow a divided answer. If God has enrolled you in Zion, then Zion is where your life comes from. Audit where your springs actually are, and repent of every secondary spring you have dug in place of the primary one.

2. Receive the astonishing grace of your enrollment with wonder rather than presumption. (Affections/Worship) The nations enrolled in vv. 4–6 are not minor allies of Israel — they are Egypt (the house of slavery), Babylon (the empire of exile), Philistia (the perennial enemy), Tyre (the commercial power), and Cush (the distant and foreign). God does not enroll people with similar résumés to Israel; He enrolls those with no claim whatsoever. If you belong to Christ, you were enrolled in exactly this way — not because of your ancestry, your religiosity, or your merit, but because God wrote your name in the register. This should produce ongoing wonder, not casual assumption. Let the strangeness of your enrollment stop you in your tracks and produce worship.

3. Repent of every nationalist or tribalist reduction of the gospel. (Will/Behavior) The psalm confronts any reading of God’s people that makes election a reason for exclusivism. If God sings of Egypt and Babylon as born in Zion, no ethnic, national, or cultural group can be treated as outside the reach of grace — and no cultural in-group can be treated as its automatic possessor. Concretely: repent of the assumption that the gospel is most at home in your culture, your country, your demographic. The church that sings Psalm 87 is by definition a multi-national, multi-ethnic body, because the city they belong to has enrolled people from every nation since the days of the Psalter.

4. Let the breadth of God’s enrollment fuel your confidence in gospel proclamation. (Mind/Belief) The missionary nerve of this psalm is underappreciated. If God has already

determined to write peoples from Egypt to Cush in His register, then gospel proclamation is not wishful thinking — it is announcing what God is already doing. The preacher and the witness do not go to the nations hoping God might be interested in them; they go knowing that God has been enrolling the nations since before the exile, and that the risen Christ has purchased a people from every tribe and tongue and nation. Let the register of Psalm 87 be fuel for your confidence that the gospel will bear fruit in the most unlikely places, among the most historically hostile peoples.

5. Direct your grief, longing, and deepest delight toward the city of God rather than any earthly city. (Affections/Worship) Augustine's *City of God* opens from Psalm 87's logic: there are two cities, and the one you love most determines how you live. The psalm presses readers to ask whether their deepest civic loyalty belongs to the city whose builder and maker is God, or to some earthly political community that is passing away. This is not a call to political disengagement — it is a call to rightly ordered loves. Grieve what is worth grieving in your earthly city; work for its good. But let your deepest longing, your strongest delight, and your ultimate security be located in the city whose foundations are in the holy mountains — the city that will not be moved.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 87 teaches that God's electing love for Zion is not a narrowing but a broadening — the place He chooses becomes the source of life for all He enrolls. The divine act of registration in v. 6 establishes that covenant membership is God's prerogative alone: He writes the names; humans do not write themselves in or earn their way into the register. The enumeration of ancient enemies (Egypt, Babylon, Philistia) alongside Israel demonstrates that election does not depend on prior relationship, ethnic proximity, or political alliance — it depends entirely on God's sovereign love. The maternal language ("born in Zion") indicates that this membership is not a formal legal status but a new birth — a genuine participation in the life of the city. The theology of the psalm is therefore simultaneously covenantal (God chooses and enrolls), universal (no nation is excluded in principle), and transforming (enrollment produces doxology — all springs are now in Zion).

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 87 is a central text for the Reformed understanding that election is gracious, sovereign, and radically inclusive of the Gentiles — not as a New Testament surprise but as the explicit content of Israel's own worship. The enrollment of Egypt and Babylon anticipates Paul's argument in Romans 9–11 that God's election was never ethnically bounded: "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Romans 9:6), and Gentile inclusion is the mystery now revealed. The register of v. 6 anticipates the Lamb's book of life and grounds the Reformed insistence that

perseverance is secured not by human effort but by the One who keeps the register. Furthermore, the psalm's movement from divine election (vv. 1–2) through covenant enrollment (vv. 4–6) to doxological response (v. 7) mirrors the Reformed order of salvation's telos: election produces enrollment produces worship — and never the reverse. Zion-theology in the Reformed tradition (running from Calvin through Geerhardus Vos and into contemporary biblical theology) sees Psalm 87 as one of the clearest Old Testament anticipations of the church as the eschatological gathering of all the redeemed, constituted by grace alone, secured by the Most High Himself (v. 5b).

Main Takeaway

Your name is written in God's register — not because of where you were born, what nation you belong to, or what you have done, but because the Most High Himself enrolled you in the city He loves. That enrollment is the only citizenship that lasts, and it means your springs — everything that sustains and satisfies your life at depth — are already secured in Him. Stop living like a man without a city. You have one, and its foundations are in the holy mountains.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the psalm to a celebration of Israel's national greatness.** The psalm is regularly domesticated into a piece of Israelite civic pride — Zion is great, Israel is chosen, God loves Jerusalem. This misses the psalm's most startling move: the *nations* are enrolled. The whole argument turns on vv. 4–6, not vv. 1–3. Preachers who linger on the beauty of Zion without arriving at the enrollment of Egypt and Babylon have preached only the frame and missed the painting.
- **Treating “born in Zion” as mere metaphor for attendance or affiliation.** The birth language is strong and theologically loaded. It does not mean “visited Zion” or “appreciated Zion's culture” — it means genuine membership, new-birth-level participation in the life of the city. Preaching that softens this to mere religious association loses the force of the psalm and its canonical connections to Galatians 4:26 and John 3. The enrollment is ontological, not merely sociological.
- **Failing to identify the canonical fulfillment of the register.** Psalm 87 preached without connection to the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:27), the Jerusalem above (Galatians 4:26), and the heavenly city (Hebrews 12:22–24) leaves the congregation with a beautiful but incomplete picture. The register of v. 6 is not a historical artifact — it is the same register in which every believer's name is written. Preachers must close the canonical loop or the psalm remains an ancient curiosity rather than personal good news.

- **Skipping “all my springs are in you” as a mere lyrical close.** Verse 7 is doing diagnostic and doxological work simultaneously. It is the psalm’s application of everything that precedes: if Zion is the city of enrollment, then Zion is where life comes from — and the response is worship. Treating v. 7 as a beautiful but vague benediction misses its force. It should be preached as both a diagnostic question (are your springs actually here?) and a doxological declaration (they are, and therefore — worship).
- **Missing the anti-exclusivist force of the nations listed.** Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Cush are not neutral examples of “distant peoples.” They are Israel’s most threatening, most oppressive, most historically hostile neighbors. This is not accidental — the psalm is deliberately including the most unlikely candidates in the register. Preachers who flatten these names into generic “Gentiles” lose the scandal of grace that the psalm intends. Name the hostility; then name the enrollment. That is where the wonder lives.
- **Preaching the psalm as a warrant for generic multiculturalism rather than gospel-grounded unity.** The psalm’s universalism is theologically specific: the nations are enrolled in *Zion*, in *God’s city*, by *God’s act*. This is not a celebration of diversity as an end in itself — it is a celebration of grace that reaches every kind of person. The application to the church’s multiethnic identity must be grounded in gospel enrollment, not in cultural inclusivity as a social value. Otherwise the sermon has changed the subject from God’s register to contemporary politics.