



Psalm 82 - A Plea for Justice

A Psalm of Asaph.

Introduction

Some call this a community lament since it addresses God directly with a request on behalf of the whole people. Others call it a prophetic hymn like Psalm 81, interpreting its address to the 'gods' (v.6) as directed to unjust human rulers, whom God will judge. Both of these classifications have merit, which shows that one must use the psalm categories only as a rule of thumb, because the psalms do not always fit neatly in only one category.

Singing this psalm should enable the faithful, many of whom were socially weak and lowly in Israel, as was often the case with the early Christians as well: **<<Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God>>** (1 Corinthians 1:26-29), to take courage in the face of unjust rule, so that they do not yield to the ever-present temptation to cooperate with the injustices of their wicked rulers. Even the most powerful rulers must die and face God's final judgement. The song should also help those who hold social and political power to use that power in service to others, especially to protect those who are easiest to exploit. The people of God are called to aspire to be an ideal society, with their justice visible to all peoples, that all nations might come to know the true God: **<<See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' For what other great nation has a god so near to it**

as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?>> (Deuteronomy 4:5-8); Christians are called to the same aspiration for their own present society. They must also testify about God's justice to their wider culture, since, as Proverbs 31:1-9 shows, this kind of justice is applicable to all mankind; this is what properly functioning human nature looks like everywhere.

Psalm 82:1-4 - The Task of the "Gods."

The first section gives the job description of human rulers referred to as the gods, especially those who rule God's covenant people: they are to give justice to the weak and the fatherless, and rescue the weak and the needy from the hand of the wicked (vv.3-4). Far too often, however, they judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked, i.e. people who take the lead in opposing God's purpose and oppressing others. The words of the psalm do not specify whether the rulers are Israelites, or Gentiles ruling Israel as a subject state as in the Babylonian or Persian Empires. Both the ideal Davidic king in Psalm 72 and the ideal Gentile ruler in Proverbs 31:1-9 are called to protect the powerless from those who would oppress them. Certainly the people of God should aim to embody this most clearly.

- 1 God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgement:
- 2 'How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked? Selah

Psalm 82:1-2

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgement. Many would take these terms in v.1 and v.6 as describing the assembly of angelic beings who surround God's throne as a divine court; refer to 1 Kings 22:19, and Job 1:6 and 2:1. This finds support in the way that the title 'sons of the Most High' matches the label 'sons of God' in Job; also the 'heavenly beings' or 'gods' in Psalm 8:5; refer to the comment made there. On the other hand, these 'gods' are said to judge among men (vv.2-4) and to die like men (v.7); God is to judge the earth and to inherit the nations where mankind lives (v.8). This makes it better to see these as human rulers, who hold their authority as representatives of the true God and therefore deserve respect; refer to Psalm 58:1, Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Of course this does not require ultimate loyalty that overrides faithfulness to God, or that silences testimony about God's justice, as this very psalm makes clear. Jesus seems to have read the psalm in this way, since in John 10:34-35 he cites v.6, describing the 'gods' as those to whom the Word of God came, which means they were human.

How long will you judge unjustly? As God calls together this assembly of judges, he did not do it to compliment them or pay them honour. He did it to confront them for judging unjustly and for showing partiality to the wicked. This confrontation shows that God himself is judge at the ultimate Supreme Court.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect. The idea of God calling the judges of the earth into special judgement is worthy of sober reflection.

- 3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
- 4 Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.'

Psalm 82:3-4

Give justice to the weak and the orphan is God's instruction to the judges of this earth to do their duty in defending those who are often treated unjustly. In Asaph's day the weak and the orphan were often the targets of unfair treatment. It was the job of the judges to defend them and to provide justice for the afflicted and needy.

Deliver them from the hand of the wicked. One characteristic of the wicked is that they prey upon the poor and needy. It was the divinely directed duty of judges to free the vulnerable from those who may oppress them. King Jehoshaphat of Judah gave similar and wise instruction to judges: *<<Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings but on the Lord's behalf; he is with you in giving judgement. Now, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes>>* (2 Chronicles 19:6-7).

Psalm 82:5-7 - The "Gods" Who Fail in Their Task.

The next section describes God's verdict on those rulers who refuse to carry out their divinely given assignment. In saying that they have neither knowledge nor understanding (v.5), the psalm is speaking of the moral perception necessary for promoting justice, a quality that King Solomon knew he would need: *<<Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?>>* (1 Kings 3:9). When such people rule, the foundations of the earth, i.e. the moral principles that God instilled in the creation order, are shaken; refer to the comment made on Psalm 11:3. There is only one true God Most High, however; as

for these unjust ‘gods,’ like (other) men they shall die and fall like any prince. The Lord will have the last word, vindicating his justice.

- ⁵ They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

Psalm 82:5

They have neither knowledge nor understanding. This should best be understood as a reference to the unjust judges themselves. Despite their high standing and higher opinion of themselves, they are often ignorant and easily overestimate their own understanding: <<*Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord?*>> (Psalm 14:4).

Adam Clarke understood the application to the judges in Asaph’s day, but had a much better opinion of the judges of his own time (1822): “They are ignorant and do not wish to be instructed. They will not learn; they cannot teach. Happy England! How different from Judæa, even in the days of Jehoshaphat! All thy judges are learned, righteous, and impartial. Never did greater men in their profession dignify any land or country.”

All the foundations of the earth are shaken. When judges walk in the darkness of their arrogant pride, the lives of everyday people are uncertain and unstable, as if the ground that should be firm under their feet was shaking.

- ⁶ I say, ‘You are gods,
children of the Most High, all of you;
⁷ nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince.’

Psalm 82:6-7

You are gods. These human judges stood in the place of the gods above other people. They had the opportunity and the authority to change people’s lives with a word, or sometimes even to end a life.

John 10:34-35 tells how Jesus cited this text in a debate to deflect criticism for calling himself the Son of God. Since the title ‘Son of God’ is sometimes a designation of David’s heir (as commented on in Psalm 2:7), Jesus is probably inviting his audience to reflect more deeply on its implications.

Children of the Most High. In still speaking to Israel’s earthly judges, God reminded them that they - and all of humanity - are children of the Most High. This

is true in the sense that every human being is made in the image of God and can be thought of the offspring of God: <<*For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals*>> (Acts 17:28-29).

If these are Gentile rulers, they serve the purposes of God, who is the highest of all powers. This may suggest that Israelite rulers are especially in view, since Deuteronomy 14:1 calls God’s people his children, i.e. the whole people is God’s children, that is: <<*the stock that your right hand planted*>> (Psalm 80:15), and the members are each children. In this latter case, the injustice is even more reprehensible since it defies the gracious covenant of God.

When these unjust judges denied protection and justice to the poor, the orphans, the afflicted and the needy, they essentially treated them as less than fully human made in the image of God and to be regarded as God’s creation, his offspring. The judges needed to remember this. There is another sense in which it cannot be said that all people are children of God. In this other sense, some are children of God and others are children of their father the devil, as stated by Jesus in John 8:44.

You shall die like mortals. The unjust judges of Israel needed to remember that others were greater than the judges thought and they themselves were less than they thought. They were like gods only in a symbolic sense; they themselves would die like mortals and face judgement before the Judge of all the earth: <<*For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil*>> (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Psalm 82:8 - Prayer that the True God Would Judge the Earth.

The psalm closes with prayer that God will judge the earth. Since ‘judging’ is the activity of rulers in this psalm (vv.2-3), and since when God judges he rebukes the unjust rulers (v.1), this prayer is for God to rebuke the present unjust rulers and raise up good ones.

⁸ Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for all the nations belong to you!

Psalm 82:8

Rise up, O God, judge the earth. Asaph closed the Psalm with a plea to God to take his place as the ultimate Judge. The unjust judges of Israel had their own area of authority but God’s authority is over all the earth.

For all the nations belong to you! This is the greatness of the Great Judge. Earthly judges have their own greatness but it is nothing compared to the Great Judge. This inheritance ultimately belongs to Jesus the Messiah. Charles Spurgeon commented, “The last days shall see him enthroned, and all unrighteous potentates broken like potter’s vessels by his potent sceptre. The Second Advent is still earth’s brightest hope. Come quickly, even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

The grounds of the request is that all nations belong to God already; perhaps this also alludes to Psalm 2:8, where the messianic king will have the nations as his heritage or inheritance. The OT looks forward to a Messiah who will bring all nations under his sway, shedding God’s light into their hearts and yielding a world dominated by true justice; refer to Isaiah 2:1-5, 11:1-10 and 42:4.