

Who Are the Enemies of God? – Reading Psalm 68

*Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered.*¹

Almost everyone who knows Psalm 68 knows that line. It has been carved on things. It has been shouted at the head of armies. It is the sort of sentence that gets used.

Very little of what follows it is known at all. The psalm runs thirty-five verses and most readers have never gone past the first two, because the first two seem to say plainly enough what the psalm is for.

They do not.

The first thing to notice is that the psalmist did not write his own opening line.

Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him.

That is Numbers 10:35, and in Numbers it is not a psalm at all. It is what Moses said whenever the ark set out. The people were on the move; the ark went ahead of them; and each time it was lifted, Moses said those words. They are a travelling formula – the thing you say when the box gets picked up.

So Psalm 68 begins in Moses's mouth, not the psalmist's, and it begins with the ark going somewhere. A reader who takes verse 1 as a war cry has taken the right words from the wrong occasion. It is a departure formula. It means we are leaving.

The same verse is still in use. When the Torah scroll is taken out of the ark in a synagogue, that is what the congregation says. The psalm opens where the service opens: God on the move, and the scroll going out among the people.

And Moses had a second saying, for when the ark stopped.

Return, O LORD, to the ten thousands of thousands of Israel.

You would expect a psalm that opens with the first to close with the second. It does not. The psalm never asks God to return, and never sets him down. Verse 17 counts in the same way Moses counted – thousands and myriads, the Hebrew way of saying more than anyone can number – and the counting has changed hands. In Numbers the multitude is the people. Here it is God's own chariotry, and the dual form of the word is one that occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible.

The psalm that does quote Moses plainly is a different one. Psalm 132 welds both halves into a single line: *Arise, O LORD, to your resting place*. Arising and resting in the same breath. Psalm 68 does the same work with narrative instead: its ark stops moving because it gets where it was going.

Three times the psalm stops and puts a word in the margin: *selah*.

Nobody knows what it means. The guesses are a musical rest, a swell of instruments, or a lifting of voices, and they rest on a root that means to lift up – or possibly on a different root that means to pause. Every commentary has a preference and none has a proof. So what follows is about where the three marks fall, not what the word says. Placement is observable. Meaning is not.

The first is at verse 7. *O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness*. Then the mark. Then Sinai shaking, and the rain falling on the land God had claimed. The pause sits at the moment the column starts moving – the same moment Moses’s formula belongs to. The ark has set out.

The second is at verse 19, and it is the one I would not have predicted. Verse 18 is the top of the psalm: the ascent on high, captives led, gifts received. A poem heading for a triumph goes on from there. This one stops.

What it says instead is that God carries us, every day. And the verb is *ya’amos* – the word for loading a pack animal. It is the word used of the burdens strapped to donkeys. Directly after the highest verse in the psalm, God is described as the one who takes the load.

Then the mark. And then, in the next verse, death: *to God, the Lord, belong deliverances from death*. So the second pause sits between the daily carrying and the last enemy.

The third is at verse 32. *O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God*. The pause has left Israel. The first stop was the people coming out of Egypt; the last is the kingdoms of the earth, addressed directly and told to sing.

Look at what the psalm has just said each time it stops. The wilderness. Then the daily carrying, and death. Then the kingdoms of the earth. The first pause is about Israel coming out of Egypt. The last one is about everybody else.

Four things get lost in translation, and they change what the psalm looks like.

At verse 4 the name is *Yah* – the short form, rare in the Psalms outside *hallelujah*. It is the form Moses uses in the Song of the Sea. A psalm that opens by quoting Moses at the ark also calls God by the name Moses used at the Red Sea.

At verse 6 the people God provides for are the *yechidim*. English usually gives “the solitary” or “the lonely”, which sounds like a mood. The word is from *yachid*, one-and-alone, and it means the unattached – the person with no household, nobody to belong to and nobody obliged to them. The second half of the verse pairs them with prisoners brought out. No family, no freedom: those are the

two conditions named, and both of them are addressed in a single verse, immediately before Sinai shakes.

At verse 11 the announcers are women. *The women who announce the news are a great host* – the participle is feminine plural, and most English versions flatten it to “those who publish” or “the company of those who bore the tidings”. The root is *basar*, which gives *besorah*: good news. The word the New Testament translates as *gospel*. The heralds in this psalm are women, and the verb is the gospel verb.

At verse 13 there is a dove with silver-plated wings and gold pinions, and nobody knows what it is doing there. Plunder, possibly. An image of Israel, possibly. A fragment of a song we no longer have, possibly. Anyone who explains verse 13 with confidence is guessing, and the honest thing is to say so and leave it standing.

Now the thing that reorders the psalm.

Read the psalm for its military language and there is plenty: chariots, scattering, kings fleeing, the hill of Bashan, feet in blood. Read it for a different word and something else shows up.

Verse 6: *God settles the solitary in a home – moshiv yechidim baitah.*

Verse 16: *the mountain that God desired for his abode – le-shivto.*

Verse 18: *that the LORD God may dwell there – li-shkon.*²

Sitting, settling, dwelling. Three times, at three of the psalm’s hinges – the verse about the unattached, the verse about the chosen mountain, and the verse at the top of the ascent. All three about somebody getting somewhere to live.

Which tells you what all the marching is for. The chariots are twice ten thousand, and the psalm counts them, and then it focuses in on a man without a home and a prisoner behind a door.

This is where the psalm stops being a war poem. It is a moving day. God gets up, and God goes somewhere, and the point of the journey is an address – his own, and other people’s.

Verses 5 and 6 are usually read as a soft passage tucked in beside the hard ones. Father of the fatherless. Judge of the widow. The solitary put in a house, the prisoners brought out. They are not a change of subject from the chariots. They are what the chariots are for.

Now the question the psalm is usually assumed to have answered before it starts.

Whose enemies are these?

The obvious answer is Israel’s. A psalm about God arising and scattering, sung by a nation with hostile neighbours on every side, is a psalm about those neighbours. Read verse 1 that way and everything follows.

Except the psalm never names one of them. Not once in thirty-five verses. There is no Egypt fighting, no Philistia, no Assyria, no Moab, no Amalek. Egypt appears – nobles coming up to God. Cush appears – stretching out her hands. Kings appear, bearing gifts, and the kingdoms of the earth appear and are told to sing. For a psalm this violent, that is a remarkable silence, and it is not an accident of length. Thirty-five verses is plenty of room to name an enemy.

What the psalm gives instead is a description.

Verse 2 answers its own question. The verse says the same thing twice, which is how Hebrew poetry works – *let his enemies be scattered*, and then *so the wicked shall perish before God*. The second line tells you who the first line meant. *Resha'im*: the wicked. It is a moral category, not a national one.

Verse 6 is sharper. Set against the solitary being housed and the prisoners walking out is a third group: *but the rebellious dwell in a parched land*. *Sorerim* – the stubborn, the ones who will not be led. And note where the sentence puts them. Not in a foreign country. In a dry place, in the same verse as the house and the open door, as the alternative to being brought in. They are not dry because God withheld the water. They are dry because they would not come to it.

Verse 21 describes rather than names again: *the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways*. The Hebrew is a participle of continuing action. Not a man who did wrong. A man still walking.

And verse 30 gets closest to a category, and it is still a behaviour: *scatter the peoples who delight in war*.

Wicked. Stubborn. Still walking. Delighting in war. Four descriptions, no addresses. Israel's neighbours often fitted the description, and the psalm knows it – but it has declined to say that the description and the neighbours are the same list.

The clearest evidence that this is deliberate is Egypt. Egypt is the enemy of verse 7, the nation the exodus came out of, the whole reason there is an ark to carry. And at verse 31 Egypt is coming up to God. Same nation, both sides of the ledger, one psalm. The nations are not a fixed enemy list. They are a field that can change hands.

The word *rebellious* is in this psalm twice, and the second time it is in a strange place.

Verse 6: *but the rebellious dwell in a parched land*.

Verse 18: *You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there*.

The same word, at the two ends of the psalm's argument. At verse 6 the rebellious are the ones outside – the house is for the solitary, the door is opened for the prisoner, and the rebellious are in the dry place. At verse 18 they are the people he is standing among when he receives what he came for, and the sentence does not stop there. It gives a reason. *That the LORD God may dwell there*.

There. Among the rebellious.

That is the same dwelling word as the mountain God desired for his abode. He picks a place to live, and the place has the rebellious in it.

Sorerim, the word behind both, was not a word Israel used only about other people. It is what Deuteronomy calls a son who will not be corrected. It is what the prophets call Israel. So a congregation singing this psalm is singing a word that has been used against them – and singing it twice, once about the people in the parched land and once about the address God chose.

The psalm decides who the enemy is by how he behaves, not by where he lives, and behaviour is not something citizenship protects you from. Describe your enemy instead of naming him and the description fits whoever fits it, including the man singing.

By the first century the psalm had an answer to its own question, and the answer was Rome.

A people under occupation, singing about God arising and enemies scattering, with foreign kings in the psalm bearing gifts to Zion – and outside the synagogue door, the tribute going the other way, to Caesar. The psalm described the reverse of everything they could see.

So the gap got filled in. Enemies of God and enemies of Israel became one category, and it was not a subtle theological move; it is what happens to any occupied people. You do not need a scholar to make the identification. You need a tax collector and a garrison.

The clearest case is in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the sons of light are drawn up against the sons of darkness and the darkness has an address, an army and a uniform.³ And the psalm's own first line is a war saying to begin with – Moses said it when the ark went out ahead of the column. Verse 23, with its feet in blood, is a recruitable text. Anyone wanting to read Psalm 68 as a call to arms had the material.

That is the country Jesus is speaking into when he says *love your enemies*. Not a seminar on ethics. A place where the word *enemy* had a face, a language and a legal right to make you carry his pack for a mile.

Love your enemies is usually heard as a cancellation. I interpret it as though *enemy* is the wrong word, and what is being asked of me is to feel differently about them. Heard that way the command asks me to change my mind about someone, which is not a thing a person can do to order.

Jesus does not do that. He leaves the word standing, and does three things with it.

The first is that he keeps the category. *Love your enemies* only makes sense if you have some. He does not say they have been misjudged, or that the word belongs to an older and harder religion.

Everything Psalm 68 says about the wicked and the stubborn and the man still walking in his guilty ways stands exactly where it stood. So does verse 21. Jesus never says God will not strike the heads of his enemies.

The second is that he takes the judgement out of your hands without taking it off the table. This is what the psalm was already doing and almost nobody notices. Read it through and every violent verb in it has God as its subject. God arises. God scatters. God strikes. God drives them away like smoke. The man singing does not lift a hand anywhere in thirty-five verses – he asks, and then he waits. It is a prayer, not a permission. Paul makes the same move and puts the two halves next to each other: *Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord*, and then, a verse later, *if your enemy is hungry, feed him*.

The third is that he puts you among them. This is the one that changes the psalm, and it is the psalm's own logic finished. If the enemy is the stubborn one, the one who will not come, the one still walking – then you were that. *While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*. Not while we were confused. While we were enemies. The word is Paul's and he means it. And I still recognise myself in it.

Which is where the two halves of the psalm meet. God arose against his enemies, and what he did with them was give them somewhere to live.

The psalm has one more move, and it is at the third pause.

— *O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God.*

That is where the last *selah* falls. Not on a scattering. On an instruction to the kingdoms of the earth, and the instruction is to sing.

Look at what has happened across the three pauses. The first was Israel coming out of Egypt. The last is everybody else, addressed directly and told to join in. The psalm that opens by asking God to scatter his enemies closes by handing them the hymn.

And it does not close by naming them either. The last verses are about a God who rides in the heavens, whose power is in the skies, who is awesome from his sanctuary, who gives power and strength to his people. Kings bear gifts. Nobles come from Egypt. Cush stretches out her hands. No enemy is named anywhere in the psalm and none is counted. The enemies of verse 1 are never accounted for, and the reason is that the psalm was never counting them.

SELAH

So how do I explain this to an eight-year-old?

This is a song about God going on a journey.

A long time ago, when God's people were walking through the desert, they carried a special box, and every morning when they picked it up they said the same thing: "Up you get, God – off we go." That is how this song starts. Up you get, God.

So God gets up. And when God gets up, big things happen. Mountains shake. Rain comes down. There is a parade with more chariots than anyone could count, and the noise of it goes all through the song.

Now – here is the question. Where is he going? All that noise, all those chariots. What is it for?

He is going to move people into houses.

The song says so right near the start. God finds the children with no mum or dad, and he becomes their dad. He finds the person nobody listens to, and he listens. He finds the ones who are all on their own, with nobody at all, and he puts them in a family. He opens locked doors and lets people walk out.

That is what the chariots were for. Not to smash things. To move in.

And the strangest part is the last part. All the people who were on the other side – the ones who were fighting God – he does not tell them to run away.

He tells them to sing.

¹ Verse 1 is quoted here in the older wording. ESV has *God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered* – a statement rather than a request. The Hebrew allows both, and the older rendering is the one that matches Numbers 10:35, where Moses is asking rather than predicting. Scripture elsewhere in this article is ESV.

² *Moshiv* (v. 6) and *le-shivto* (v. 16) are both from the root *y-sh-b*, to sit or settle. *Li-shkon* (v. 18) is from *sh-k-n*, to dwell – a different root, and the one behind *mishkan*, the tabernacle. The three are grouped here for their sense, not their morphology.

³ The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in caves at Qumran, near the north-west shore of the Dead Sea, from 1947 onward. They are the library of a Jewish community of roughly the period between the second century BC and AD 68 – Scripture, commentary, and their own writings, including a document setting out a coming war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this article, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.