

HOW WIDE ARE “THE GATES OF ZION” (שׁוֹרֵי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם)? - A TEXTUAL, TRANSLATIONAL, AND PERFORMATIVE STUDY OF PSALM 87

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 87, a joyous “Song of Zion,” presents us with a rather controversial religious poem that scholars and commentators roundly debate, with respect to the Hebrew text itself, its interpretation, and its overall strophic organisation. This study explores some of the salient hermeneutical issues, which revolve around an identification of the presumed divinely begotten inhabitants of “the City of Zion,” and comes to a new conclusion with regard to the structure of this psalm that relates in turn to its apparent intended meaning. These observations form the basis for evaluating several recent translations—first, a traditional “formal correspondence” liturgical version, and secondly, more “functionally equivalent” renditions, one in English, another one in Chichewa, a Bantu language of south-central Africa. The primary aim of these latter versions is to express the translated text in a more dynamic manner that highlights the psalm’s oral-aural features, as well as its potential for contemporary performance.

Keywords: Bible translation; Chewa; Hebrew poetry; poetic analysis, praise psalm

We have “a city that has foundations—whose architect and builder is God!” (Hebrews 11:10)

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 87 is obviously a song of praise directed at “Zion” (צִיּוֹן), a place-name that is mentioned four times within this compact song’s seven verses. On the surface of it, and in English translation, the psalm’s meaning seems to be rather easy to understand as “a celebration of Zion as the “City of God” (v. 3), the special object of his love and the



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royal city of his kingdom” (NIV Study Bible note). However, a closer examination of the text in the light of a selection of commentaries, both ancient and modern, reveals that the interpretation of Psalm 87, with regard to both structure and content, is not at all straightforward or transparent.¹ The main difference in understanding centers on the rather cryptic expression that occurs twice, at the end of verses 4 and 6 (similarly also in v. 5): “and this one was born there” (וְזֶה יוֹדֵלָהּ הִיא). In fact, we might even limit the focus of consideration and nub of the issue to the seemingly insignificant adverb “there” (שָׁם) (cf. v. 5: הִיא “in her”). Thus where, precisely, is “there”—furthermore, who are the people living in that location, and what is their relationship to the inhabitants of “the gates of Zion” (v. 3)?

As the psalm itself indicates, we are clearly dealing with two principal groups of peoples—namely the Jews, who are “the dwellers of [the land of] Jacob” (v. 1c) and, on the other hand, all Gentiles, as symbolised by the representation of peoples living in the lands surrounding Israel, including even the remotest region of “Cush” (שׁוּשַׁן) (v. 4). The key question then is foregrounded by the psalmist toward the end in v. 6: Does Yahweh’s “register of the peoples”—metonymically referred to as those who were “born in Zion”—include Jews only, or Gentiles as well? In other words, was the author of Psalm 87 expressing a parochial perspective, or had he adopted a less common, more broad-minded universalistic point of view? My personal (admittedly debatable) answers to these questions will be revealed in the following analytical overview of the Hebrew text, which is accompanied by the *New English Translation* (NET), along with a selection of expository study notes, including the observations of several commentators. A further structural discussion then follows the textual analysis. One’s exegetical conclusions will obviously be reflected in one’s translation of the biblical text, so in conclusion, first a more modern English, and then a poetic Chewa rendition will be offered. Both of these versions pay special attention to the prominent oral-aural—that is, oratorical and performance-sensitive—qualities of this delightfully articulated, theologically significant ancient Hebrew hymn.

1 According to A. A. Anderson, Psalm 87 is “one of the most problematic in the whole Psalter” (cited in Van Gemeren 1991, 561).

TEXT STUDY

ESV Translation	Hebrew Text (SBL)
<p>87:1 Written by the Korahites; a psalm, a song. 1 The Lord’s city is in the holy hills. 2 87:2 The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. 87:3 People say wonderful things about you, 3 O city of God. (Selah)</p>	<p>1 רִישׁ הַנְּמִזְמ חֲרָק־יִגְבֹּל שְׂדֵק־יִרְרֶהֱב וּתְדוּסִי 2 וַיֵּצֵא יְהוָה הַהָרִי בְּהָא בְּקִיעֵי תִנְקֶשֶׂם לְלָמָּה 3 הָב הַבְּדִמָּה תוֹדִבְכֶנָּה הַלֵּל מִיְהִלָּאָה רִיעֵ</p>
<p>1 Psalm 87. The psalmist celebrates Yahweh’s presence in Zion and the special status of its citizens. The question is: who is included among Zion’s blessed citizenry? Note that the superscript is included as the first line of the actual Hebrew text. Regarding this “song of Zion” psalm (Westermann 1987/19899, 283), H&Z comment: “In these texts Zion is proclaimed and celebrated as the beloved/ bride/wife of YHWH, and as mother of the (newborn) people of God, or of the world of the nations that worships YHWH as the only God. Psalm 87 is one of those texts that sings of Zion as YHWH’s beloved and mother of the nations. The theme achieves its special culmination here: it is no longer a question of the salvation of ‘Zion,’ or of the ‘children of Zion,’ from the nations, but of the rescue of the nations through Zion” (2005, 5). Verse 1b and 2 may be viewed as a tricolon, with הָהָרִי (2a) as the medial subject. 2 Lit. ‘his foundation [is] in the hills of holiness’. The NET is overly general here. The expression “his foundation” refers here by metonymy to the Lord’s dwelling place in Zion, or to his founding of Zion. “In verse 3 Jerusalem [Zion] is called city of God, which may be taken to mean the city that belongs to God, or the city in which God lives; in this case both are true (see 46.4; 48.1, 8)” (B&R 758)—I would say rather: “the city established by YHWH” (cf. v. 1b). In figurative terms, “Zion...symbolizes God’s kingdom presence,” for it was “founded” by him (VanGemeren 1991, 561–562).</p>	<p>“Zion is the city’s religious and theological name, Jerusalem more its political one” (Goldingay 2007, 633). “Jacob” would then appear to be an ethnic reference. The “gates of Zion” may be construed metonymically as a reference to the city’s inhabitants. The “hills” are the ones surrounding Zion (see Pss. 125:2; 133:3). A more dynamic translation that seems to express the intent more accurately is the New Living Translation (NLT): “On the holy mountain stands the city founded by the LORD.” 3 Lit. ‘glorious things are spoken in you’. The NET translation assumes that this is a general reference to compliments paid to Zion by those who live within her walls and by those who live in the surrounding areas and lands. A more likely option in the wider context of Ps. 87 (and 86:9 and Ps. 67 as a whole) is that this clause refers to a prophetic oracle about the city’s glorious, expanded future. In this case one could translate, “wonderful things are announced concerning you” (cf. Ps. 86:10)—the speakers being those from all nations in the world (cf. v. 7). Or, more dynamically still, the implicit passive could well refer to the following “glorious” proclamation made by YHWH himself (Goldingay 2007, 635), who speaks directly to the nations, and then also to Zion, in the next strophe—that is, in vv. 4–5.</p>

ESV Translation	Hebrew Text (SBL)
<p>87:4 I mention Rahab 4 and Babylon to my followers. 5 Here are 6 Philistia and Tyre, 7 along with Ethiopia. 8 It is said of them, “This one was born there.” 9</p>	<p>שִׁכְחֵם רַחַב וְבָבֶלֶת וְתִשְׁלֵף הַגֵּנָה מִשְׁכַּחְדֵּי הָאָרֶץ: רַמְמָתַי וְיִזְרְעֵל 5 הַבְּדֵלִי שִׂיאוֹ שִׂיאָ וְיִלְעֵה הַגְּנוּכִי אוֹהָו</p>
<p>87:5 But it is said of Zion’s residents, 10 “Each one of these 11 was born in her, and the sovereign One 12 makes her secure.” 13</p>	<p>רִישׁ הַנְּמֻזָּמ תִּרְקֵי יִגְבֵּל 1 שְׂדֵדֵק יִרְרֵהב וְתִדּוּסִי וְיִצַּע יִרְעֵשׁ הוֹהִי בְהֵא 2 בְּקַעִי תִּנְקֶשֶׂם לְלֶמֶךְ הַב הַבְּדֵם תּוֹדְבְכֵנּוּ 3 הַתִּלְס מִיְהִלְאָה רִיעַ</p>
<p>4 In the immediate and wider context (v. 6a), “I mention” is inadequate as a rendering for רִיכַזָּא. More to the point is NIV’s “I will record.” The participle of this verb refers “to a recorder or registrar” (Goldingay 2007, 635)—cf. v. 6a. “Rahab,” which means “proud one,” is used here as a pejorative reference to Egypt (see Isa. 30:7) (Harmon 2011, 646). “The middle section (vv. 4–6) is entirely imbued with the image that YHWH grants citizenship in his divine city to people of many nations by entering them in his ‘citizens list’ ... the registration of the names of members in connection with the institution of a</p>	<p>Those advocating the universalistic interpretation understand “there” as referring to Zion, but others claim that the adverb simply refers to the nations just mentioned, where such foreigners are identified by their native lands. 10 Lit. ‘and of Zion it is said’ (front-shifted constituent focus); another option is to translate somewhat emphatically, “even to Zion it is said” (Tate 1990, 386). In collocation with the Niphal of רַמַּא, the preposition lamed (-ל) can: (a) introduce the recipient of the statement (see Josh. 2:2; Jer. 4:11; Hos 1:10; Zeph. 3:16); (b) carries the nuance “concerning, of” (see Num. 23:23); or</p>
<p>1 Psalm 87. The psalmist celebrates Yahweh’s presence in Zion and the special status of its citizens. The question is: who is included</p>	<p>“Zion is the city’s religious and theological name, Jerusalem more its political one” (Goldingay 2007, 633). “Jacob” would then</p>

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<p>among Zion’s blessed citizenry? Note that the superscript is included as the first line of the actual Hebrew text. Regarding this “song of Zion” psalm (Westermann 1987/19899, 283), H&Z comment: “In these texts Zion is proclaimed and celebrated as the beloved/bride/wife of YHWH, and as mother of the (newborn) people of God, or of the world of the nations that worships YHWH as the only God. Psalm 87 is one of those texts that sings of Zion as YHWH’s beloved and mother of the nations. The theme achieves its special culmination here: it is no</p>	<p>(c) means “be named” (see Isa. 4:3; 62:4). In any case the initial waw (ו) is conjunctive, not disjunctive (“But”, NET) and serves as a structural link that connects v. 5 with v. 4 (similarly, v. 7 with v. 6). As H&Z (2005, 3) observe: “The waw here is emphatic/deictic: “yes/indeed” (cf. Booij, “Observations,” 20: ‘The conjunction is more or less emphatic here, functioning as a transition to a statement, which underlines and varies the preceding one. A similar use is found in e.g. Gen. xlix 13; Isa. xxiv 16; Zech. iii 2; Ps. xxiv 7, 9; Neh. vi 10”).”</p> <p>11 Lit. ‘a man and a man’; this idiom also appears in Est. 1:8. The NET translation assumes that the phrase refers to each of Zion’s residents, in contrast to the foreigners mentioned in v. 4. In contrast, a universalistic, inclusive interpretation would understand this rather as a reference to “each and every one” of those chosen by God from among “the nations,” as symbolised by the Gentile regions mentioned in v. 4—hence, “everyone” (cf. Tate 1990, 386).</p> <p>12 Traditionally “Most High” (on מְלִיךָ, see VanGemeren 1991, 123–124).</p> <p>13 Lit. ‘and he makes her secure, the Most High.’ The concept of “establishing” (בָּנָה) parallels that of “founding” the City of Zion in v. 1b—thus, being a partial inclusio before the final concluding strophe of the psalm (vv.</p>

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<p>longer a question of the salvation of ‘Zion,’ or of the ‘children of Zion,’ from the nations, but of the rescue of the nations through Zion” (2005, 5). Verse 1b and 2 may be viewed as a tricolon, with הוֹרֵי (2a) as the medial subject.</p> <p>2 Lit. ‘his foundation [is] in the hills of holiness’. The NET is overly general here. The expression “his foundation” refers here by metonymy to the Lord’s dwelling place in Zion, or to his founding of Zion. “In verse 3 Jerusalem [Zion] is called city of God, which may be taken to mean the city that belongs to God, or the city in which God lives; in this case both are true (see 46.4; 48.1, 8)” (B&R 758)—I would say rather: “the city established by YHWH” (cf. v. 1b). In figurative terms, “Zion...symbolizes God’s kingdom presence,” for it was “founded” by</p> <p>87:4 I mention Rahab 4 and Babylon to my followers. 5</p> <p>Here are 6 Philistia and Tyre, 7 along with Ethiopia. 8</p> <p>It is said of them, “This one was born there.” 9</p> <p>87:5 But it is said of Zion’s residents, 10</p> <p>“Each one of these 11 was born in her,</p> <p>and the sovereign One 12 makes her secure.” 13</p>	<p>4 יַעֲדִיל לְבָבוֹ בְּהַר אֲרִי־קִזָּא שׁוֹכְמֵע רַחֲבֹו תִשְׁלַפ הַגֵּה מִשְׁדֵּי הָיָז 5 רַמְמָא וְנִי־צִלוֹ הַבְּדִלִי שִׁיאָו שִׁיאָו וְנִי־לַע הַגְּנוּכִי אֹהֶוּ</p>
<p>4 In the immediate and wider context (v. 6a), “I mention” is inadequate as a rendering for אֲרִי־קִזָּא. More to the point is NIV’s “I will record.” The participle of this verb refers “to a recorder or registrar” (Goldingay 2007, 635)—cf. v. 6a. “Rahab,” which means “proud one,” is used here as a pejorative reference to Egypt (see Isa. 30:7) (Harmon 2011, 646). “The middle section (vv. 4–6) is entirely imbued with the image that YHWH grants citizenship in his divine city to people of many nations by entering them in his ‘citizens list’ ... the registration of the names of members in connection with the institution of a congregation of temple citizens (cf. Exod. 32:32; Isa. 4:3; Ezek. 13:9)” (H&Z 2005, 17).</p> <p>5 Lit. ‘to those who know me’ (see Ps. 36:10). Clearly YHWH speaks declaratively here.</p>	<p>Those advocating the universalistic interpretation understand “there” as referring to Zion, but others claim that the adverb simply refers to the nations just mentioned, where such foreigners are identified by their native lands.</p> <p>10 Lit. ‘and of Zion it is said’ (front-shifted constituent focus); another option is to translate somewhat emphatically, “even to Zion it is said” (Tate 1990, 386). In collocation with the Niphal of רַמְמָא, the preposition lamed (-ל) can: (a) introduce the recipient of the statement (see Josh. 2:2; Jer. 4:11; Hos 1:10; Zeph. 3:16); (b) carries the nuance “concerning, of” (see Num. 23:23); or</p>

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<p>The verbal construction (the Hiphil of זָכַר, zakhar, “remember”, followed by the preposition -לְ, with a substantive) is rare, but the prepositional phrase is best understood as indicating the recipient of the announcement (see Jer. 4:16). Some take the preposition in the sense of “among” and translate, “among those who know me” (cf. NEB, NIV, NRSV). In this case these foreigners are viewed as the Lord’s people, and the psalm is interpreted as anticipating a time when all nations will worship the Lord (see Ps. 86:9) and be considered full citizens of Zion—as if they had been actually born within the city (Goldingay 2007, 637).</p> <p>6 Lit. “Look” (הִנֵּה)—a Hebrew focusing device.</p> <p>7 The four points of the compass symbolically suggest complete inclusiveness: Rahab/Egypt (S); Babylon (E); Philistia (W); Tyre (N)—note further that all of the places mentioned were at one time or another the enemies of Israel.</p> <p>8 Lit. “Cush”, with reference to a faraway land located in large portions of today’s Ethiopia and Sudan—but perhaps figuring “the remotest imaginable region” in the (known) world (Broyles 1999, 350).</p> <p>9 Lit. “and this one was born there”—perhaps here also metaphorically in the sense of being “adopted” into the family. The words “It is said of them” are not in the Hebrew text, but are supplied for clarification and stylistic purposes (NET, v. 5).</p>	
<p>87:6 The Lord writes in the census book of the nations, 14 “This one was born there.” 15 (Selah)</p> <p>87:7 As for the singers, as well as the pipers – all of them sing within your walls. 16</p>	<p>6 מִיָּמֶע בִּנְתֻכְבּ רִפְסֵי הַזֹּהֲרִי 6 הַלֵּלִם מִשִּׁדְלֵי הַזֶּז 7 מִלְלַחֲכ מִיְהִשׁוּ 7 הָרֵב יְגִיעַמ־לְכֵךְ</p>

ESV Translation	Hebrew Text (SBL)
<p>14 Lit. ‘the Lord records in the writing of the nations’; v. 6 in effect summarily restates what has been pronounced in vv. 4-5. “Yhwh’s declaration that these peoples were fathered in Zion is put into writing in a metaphorical citizen list. It is as if Yhwh is the registrar, the <i>mazkîr</i> (see v. 4)” (Goldingay 2007, 639).</p> <p>15 As noted in v. 4, the NET assumes a contrast (“But...”) between “there” (the various foreign lands) and “in her” (Zion). However, I view this as a conjunctive <i>waw</i>, thus including all peoples “within Zion’s walls”—Gentiles as well as Jews—and they are all rejoicing together in song, perhaps singing this very psalm! As H&Z note: “This is the eschatological vision that the brief third section (v. 7) presents in the image of a feast. [v. 7 is better viewed as a response to v. 6, thus linking the two verses within a single strophe.] The song the nations dance and sing is in a sense their joyful acceptance of Jerusalem and the peaceful order imposed on them by YHWH in granting them ‘rights of citizenship’ in Jerusalem. The motif of the springs looks back to the beginning of the psalm. The fountain of living and eternally flowing waters (cf. Psalm 87) as real symbol of life is part of the imagery of the world—mountain, the mount of paradise, but also belongs to the world of ideas of the city and temple of God set on the world–mountain” (2005, 22).</p> <p>16 Lit. ‘and singers, like pipers, all my springs [are] in you’. The participial form <i>חֹלְלִים</i> (<i>kholÿlim</i>) appears to be from a denominative verb meaning “play the pipe,” although some derive the form from <i>חול</i> (<i>khul</i>, “dance”) (Goldingay 2007, 632).</p>	<p>In this case, the duplicated lamed (ל) requires an emendation to <i>mÿkholÿlim</i>, a Polel form. In either case, the implied sense is the same with reference to general rejoicing in Zion and, arguably, in the very presence of YHWH. The words are addressed to Zion—and all nations (v. 6; cf. Ps. 46:6). <i>כָּל־מַיְקָיִךְ</i> is perhaps better rendered more literally “all my springs/ fountains” (cf. Ps. 36:8-9), or as a metaphor for “sources”, with possible back reference to the “foundation” of v. 1b. “The individualising ‘my springs’ adopts the perspective of v. 5b” (H&Z 2005, 4). HOTTP gives the following translation of this verse: ‘and singing as well as dancing (they say) “all my springs (are) in you.”’ In this context ... “springs’ refers to origin” (B&R 1991, 760; cf. Harmon 2011, 648). “The song celebrates the glory (v. 3) of Zion” (VanGemeren 1991, 564). Note the enclosure that is formed by the repetition of “in you” (<i>בָּךְ</i>)—cf. v. 3a; but rather than an “inclusio,” I view this as an instance of structural “closure,” with the significant reiteration occurring at the respective endings of distinct poetic units; that is strophes 1 and 3. The pronoun “in you” (<i>בָּךְ</i>) is seemingly feminine, although Goldingay points out that “in pause” the ending could be either “f. or m.” (2007, 639). The corresponding form in v. 3 is clearly referring to Zion, “the city of God,” but the context favours this as an instance of “semantic density”—that is a case of deliberate ambiguity, with reference to both YHWH and the holy, inclusive “city of Zion” that he founded (vv. 1–2) and font of all nations on earth (vv. 6-7).</p>

STRUCTURAL STROPHIC ORGANISATION

Based on the preceding interpretation of the text (which is admittedly just one of several viable possibilities), the following structural-thematic outline of Psalm 87 may be proposed, with accompanying “structural markers” (SM) being supplied in support of this arrangement. Such a post-exegetical exercise is essential because it is preliminary to a translation that takes an oral performance of the text seriously—for one’s articulation (rhythm, pausing, intonation, etc.) of a passage will vary considerably—depending on the basic strophic (poetic-paragraph) units that have been established as a visual guide, or “script.”

Divinely-begotten People from Every Nation Inhabit the LORD’s “city of Zion”

- a. *Introductory praise*: Yahweh has founded the city of Zion and blessed it (1–3);
SM: Virtually every line of this initial strophe diversely, yet cohesively references the location as well as the resident holy community that is foregrounded in the concluding vocative phrase “O City of God” (v. 3b).
- b. *Main body*: Yahweh identifies the inhabitants of his holy city as comprising of both Gentiles from every nation (4), and also ethnic Jews (5);
SM: These two verses express the surprising, perhaps shocking revelation that Gentiles, as well as Jews, are included among those divinely chosen individuals who are “born in Zion/her.” The strophe begins in v. 4a with YHWH (“I”) speaking performatively in direct address to the nations, and concludes (v. 5c) with a praise name referring to him, the City’s sovereign Founder and Generator—God “the Most High” (וַיִּלֶּךְ) (v. 5c).
- c. *Concluding summary*: People of all nations are divinely “registered” as being “born” in Zion (6) and they rejoice together in that fact (7).
SM: It is subtly implied that the so-called “register of the peoples” (מִיֵּמֶע בּוֹתֵקֵב רַפְּטֵי) (v. 6a; cf. 4a—structural *aperture*) incorporates by decree of YHWH each generic group that was mentioned in the preceding strophe. Thus, members of the communities of both Jews and Gentiles are listed in God’s “book of life” (Pss. 40:7; 56:8; 69:28) as being inhabitants “born in Zion” (v. 6b), who join together in joyous communal worship and praise of the LORD—with possible reference² also to the “glorious things” spoken about Zion in v. 3 (structural *closure*).
- I could not find one commentary that agrees with the preceding poetic arrangement of Psalm 87. Most scholars who undertake a thorough “discourse analysis” of the biblical text view the strophic structure as follows: vv. 1–3, 4–6, and then v. 7 alone as sort of an isolated add-on (e.g., deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner 2014, 664–665; Bratcher and Reyburn 1991, 757). This perspective appears to be strongly influenced by the apparent verbal “inclusio” that is formed by the crucial assertion: “This one was born there” found in v. 4c and v. 6b (note also the parallel in v. 5b). Hossfeld and Zenger (2005, 12–13) argue as follows (reformatted for legibility and with points of contention indicated by: *a-b-c-d):

2 This understanding is supported by Tate (1990, 392).

Thus vv. 4–6 emerge as the central section of the psalm. It is concentrically arranged, as two structural forms indicate: (1) The sequence of the three birth proclamations is arranged according to the scheme ABA. Verse 4: *this one was born there* (A); v. 5: *every individual is born in her* (B); v. 6: *this one was born there* (A). (*a) (2) Verses 4 and 6, through their motifs, form a frame (*inclusio*); in both verses the image of YHWH, who is writing down the names of the nations, stands in the background. (*b)

The two external sections, vv. 1b–3b and v. 7, are laid around this middle part. They are related to one another by the indicator “in you” (vv. 3a and 7b); the same indicator links them to the center of the psalm in v. 5b as well. (*c) This three-part structure of Psalm 87 is also indicated and confirmed by the signal word *Selah*, which stands at the end of vv. 3 and 6. (*d) One may consider whether, within the first section, vv. 1b–2c should also be structurally separated from v. 3a–b, because v. 3 addresses the city of God in the second person while vv. 1b–2 speak of Zion in the third person. (*e) In that case, vv. 1b–2 would provide the theme of the psalm that is then carried out in the body of the psalm proper, in vv. 3–7.

My responses, then, in favour of the prior arrangement of Psalm 87 are as follows:

- d. Instead of an *inclusio*, I view the central expression “This one was born in Zion” (vv. 4c and 6b), in both cases following a reference to the Gentile nations (*specifically* in 4ab, *generally* in 6a), as a paired instance of structural “aperture,” that is, each verse (4 and 6) initiating a new strophic unit (i.e. vv. 4–5 and 6–7).³
- e. The paralleled “frame” of Yahweh “recording” the “register of the nations”, referred to in vv. 4a and 6a represent aspects of the initial strophic markers of “aperture” as noted above. Furthermore, being references to Yahweh’s crucial generative action—the first, 4a, being emphasised in direct speech—these assertions are not part of the thematic “background” (as suggested above), but rather foreground the LORD spiritual “begetting” of all of these peoples.
- f. The lexical indicator “in you” (vv. 3a and 7b) is also found in v. 5b—“in her” (Zion)—situated, as in the case of the two preceding occurrences, toward the *end* of a strophic unit, that is 1–3, 4–5, 6–7—all instances thus, marking a poetic structural “closure” within the text of Psalm 87.
- g. In contrast to the discourse organisational “communicative clues” mentioned above,⁴ I have not found the alleged “signal word *Selah*” to be a consistent structural marker in psalmic discourse. At times it does happen to conclude (usually) a poetic section, but at other times, as here, not at all in relation to other more prominent and reliable signals.
- h. If “vv. 1b–2c [is] structurally separated from v. 3a–b,” that would leave v. 3 alone as a structural orphan within the text, unless it is to be rather linked to v. 4, which H&Z have already argued against. The shift of reference (*enallage*), here from 3rd (vv. 1b-2) to 2nd person (v. 3) is a common feature of biblical Hebrew poetry and is therefore, not a diagnostic indicator of a structural break in the discourse.

3 For a description of the structural markers, strophic/stanzaic “aperture” (anaphora), “closure” (epiphora), “juncture” (anadiplosis), and “enclosure” (*inclusio*), see Wendland 2004, 125–127.

4 On the structural notion of “communicative clue” in literary discourse, see Hatim 2013, 111–118.

Terrien, on the other hand, posits a very disjunctive arrangement for Psalm 87, which reflects his opinion that “the text and the form of this short poem are uncertain” (2003, 620–621):

Prelude: God’s Foundation (v. 2a, sic)

Strophe I: The Love of Zion (vv. 2bc-3)

Strophe II: The Neighboring Nations (v. 4)

Strophe III: Every Man and Zion (v. 5)

Strophe IV: All Nations Born in Zion (v. 6)

Postlude: God’s Home to All (v. 7)

I have not yet discovered a psalm with such a disjointed strophic structure. Normally, we see much more integrated combination of form and content in psalmic discourse. In any case, one’s interpretation of the text’s meaning will inevitably affect how one organises the text in terms of its strophic and larger (stanzaic) units—and vice-versa.

There are thus, two major opinions in respect to who are included “there” within Zion’s walls: a) only Jews, including the diaspora;⁵ or b) peoples from every nation on earth. Speaking in favour of interpretation (b), Hossfeld and Zenger (2005, 5) summarise:

In these texts Zion is proclaimed and celebrated as the beloved/bride/wife of YHWH *and* as mother of the (newborn) people of God, or of the world of the nations that worships YHWH as the only God. Psalm 87 is one of those texts that sings of Zion as YHWH’s beloved and as mother of the nations. The theme achieves its special culmination here: it is no longer a question of the salvation of “Zion,” or of the “children of Zion” from the nations, but of the rescue of the nations through Zion. ... Certainly, this [universalist] perspective on the interpretation of the psalm is by no means generally accepted among scholars. In addition to the opinion that Psalm 87 attributes a ‘theological’ citizenship on Zion to the nations, or individual members of the nations, there is also the view that Psalm 87 is ‘only’ about the relationship of Diaspora Jews or proselytes from the nations to Zion.”⁶

However, rather than seeing the mythic “mother” imagery underlying this psalm, I feel that Brueggemann and Bellinger offer a more cogent and contextually appropriate explanation (2014, 376; cf. also Goldingay 2007, 638 – contra deClaisse-Walford et al. 2014, 665):

5 For example: “By examining Psalm 87 from a social-scientific perspective, focusing on ANE social values...it seems that this psalm deals with the special relationship that YHWH has with Zion. ... Furthermore, the other peoples named are not included in the relationship of YHWH with Zion. They remain separate from God’s city, rather serving to emphasize Zion’s elevated status” (Rautenbach 2008, 432; cf. also NET note on Ps. 87).

6 In their commentary, H&Z subsequently provide an extended sample of the diversity of opinion that exists among scholars regarding this issue of a broad referential scope in relation to “Zion.”

The universal horizon of Psalm 87 is remarkable. It is part of an emphasis in various texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. The ancestors were called to bring blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1–3), and the universal dimensions of Isaiah 40–55 are well known. Psalm 87 proclaims that these nations were born in Zion. It could be that Zion is here pictured as a mother, but the scene appears to be more of a roll call of those included among the citizens of Zion. The poetic image becomes the proclamation of the liturgy that God’s purposes are universal and include other peoples. That reading is preferable to understanding the psalm in terms of the Jewish Diaspora.

Indeed, the explicit reference to “recording” (‘to cause to be remembered’, רִיכָן) in v. 4a and “writing in the register of the peoples” (סִימַע בּוֹתֵבֵב רַפְסִי) in v. 6a would strongly support the latter perspective on the essentially integrated underlying imagery of Psalm 87. Thus, Psalm 87 reveals that “there are citizens of the city of God resident in all nations”, and includes “a prophetic report of the vision of the LORD as he keeps the register of the peoples (v. 6)... [declaring] that they were ‘born there’, [hence making] it official by writing them in the book (69:28)” (Mays 1994, 281).

FROM TEXT TO TRANSLATION TO PERFORMANCE

Thus far we have completed a substantial overview of the content and structure of the Hebrew text of Psalm 87. It is time to transform the preceding textual analysis into a contemporary rendering that accurately, yet idiomatically captures the sense and style of the original. But before that, it may be helpful to use the following, more formally correspondent translation in English, the recently published *Evangelical Heritage Version*,⁷ as a basis for comparison.

Psalm 87

The Glorious City

Heading

BY THE SONS OF KORAH. A PSALM. A SONG.

The Holy City

¹The city he founded is on the holy mountains.

²The LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the other dwellings of Jacob.

³Glorious things are spoken about you, O City of God. *Interlude*

Its Citizens

⁷ The *Evangelical Heritage Version* (EHV), New Testament & Psalms ©2017 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017). Accessed January 10, 2018 (I have retained the original typeface and formatting): <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+87&version=EHV>.

⁴ I will register Rahab^[a] and Babylon among those who know me.

Look! Philistia and Tyre are there, along with Cush!

Of them I say, “This one was born there in Zion.”^[b]

⁵ And about Zion it will be said,

“This one and that one were born in her,
and the Most High himself will establish her.”

⁶ When he registers the peoples,

the LORD will write:

“This one was born there.” *Interlude*

⁷ Then the singers, as they dance, will sing,

“All my springs are in you.”

Footnotes:

Psalm 87:4 *Rahab* here is a name for Egypt, which is pictured as a sea monster.

Psalm 87:4 The words *of them I say* and *in Zion* are added to clarify the antecedents.

The following then is my own tentative effort to express the intended sense of the Hebrew text in such a way as to give it a more “poetic” sound in liturgical English. This is a version that might also lend itself more readily to an oral “performance” (recited, chanted, dramatically articulated, etc.), and would in addition, be amenable to a modified transposition, aimed at a musical-sung rendition (footnotes and sectional headings are not needed for this comparative purpose):

¹ The LORD founded Zion on his holy hill.

² This is the very city he loves most dearly,
yes, more than all others in Jacob’s land.

³ What wonderful things God says to his city:

⁴ “I will include among your inhabitants—

From Egypt, Babylon, Philistia and Tyre.

Look, even faraway Cush is also present!—

Of each I say, ‘He and she were born there!’”

⁵ Indeed, about the city of Zion, it will be said,
“This person, that one too was born in her!”

Thus, God Most High himself will people her.

⁶ And when he registers the world’s nations,
The LORD writes: “This one was born there.”

⁷ So then all these clans will dance and sing:
“Our lives spring like fountains from you!”

We might take the translation exercise a step further now by rendering the Hebrew text in Chichewa, a widely-spoken Bantu language in south-central Africa. The text below adopts

some of the features of the popular oral and written *ndakatulo* style of “lyric poetry,” which is particularly suited for public vocal proclamation.⁸ Between the lines of the Chewa poem a “medial” English back-translation (not too literal nor too free in composition) has been inserted, and footnotes are added to point out and explain a sampling of the vernacular text’s chief poetic, oratorical devices:

*Suuyu*⁹ *mzinda*¹⁰ *wofunika kwa 'Mbuye Chauta*¹¹—

(“Just look at that city so desirable to the Lord ‘Yahweh’)—

*Mzinda wa Ziyoni umene M'lungu adamangitsa,*¹²

(“The city of Zion which God caused to be built”),

*Kukhazikitsa maziko ake nji*¹³ *pa phiri loyera lija.*¹⁴

“Establishing its foundation solid! on that holy hill.”

Ndiwo mzinda umene amaukonda kwambiri,

(“That is the city that he loves most dearly”),

Koposa midzi ndi malo ena onse a mu Israyeli.

(“More that all the villages and other places in Israel.”)¹⁵

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- 8 For some of the principal stylistic characteristics of *ndakatulo* poetry, see Wendland 2004, 330–334, 433–443. This translation was composed with the editorial assistance of my seminary class of exegetical students, most of whom are mother-tongue speakers of Chichewa.
- 9 This is a referential demonstrative pronoun that audibly focuses the perspective of the audience to the envisioned “city” that is about to be described.
- 10 Instead of the metonym “gates,” which for the intended audience would be an unknown feature of a “city,” the translation uses its literal referent, but the qualifier “desirable” is added to suggest the positive connotation of the original.
- 11 *Chauta* is the functional equivalent of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, יהוה —“Yahweh” in the cultural setting of the Chewa people in Malawi. An apostrophe indicates an elided syllable.
- 12 The Chewa poetic lines are rhythmic, but not metrical, and often feature the assonance made possible by the open syllables and the pure, five-vowel phonological sound-system of the language, which generates frequent end-rhymes.
- 13 *Nji* is an example of an “ideophone,” a distinctive Bantu part of speech and rhetorical function word that can evoke an event, a graphic image, a descriptive feature, and/or some human emotion or personal sensation.
- 14 There is a certain amount of conceptual reordering in the Chewa version, with the notion of “foundation” being situated after its original Hebrew textual location.
- 15 Here and elsewhere the translation selects one possible interpretation of a difficult Hebrew text.

Inutu,¹⁶ *mzinda wa Chauta, anthu akutamanda*,
 (“As for you, city of Zion, people praise you”),
kuyamika za ulemerero zako, Mulungu akuti:
 (“Lauding¹⁷ the glorious things about you, God says”):¹⁸
Mwa anthu amene amandidziwa moonadi,
 (“Among the people who truly¹⁹ know me”),
Alipo aku Egipto, Babulo, Filistiya, n’Tiro,
 “There are those from Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, n’Tyre”,
Ee, ngakhale akutali muAfrika nawonso alipo.²⁰
 (“Yes, even those from faraway in Africa,²¹ they too are there.”)
*Onsewo ndawaona ngati obadwira kumeneko!*²²
 (“I’ve reckoned²³ them all as if they were born there!”)
Ambuye, kunena za mzinda wa Ziyoni, adzati:
 (The Lord, when speaking about the city of Zion, will say”):²⁴
Anthu onse amene ndidawabadwitsa alimo,
 (“All the people whom I have given birth to are here [inside]”),²⁵
Ndipo Ine ndekha ndidzaulimbisa mzindawo,
 (“And I myself will strengthen that city”),
Ine Chauta mwini Wopambanazonse ndimatero.²⁶
 (“I, “Yahweh” myself, the All-Surpassing One, says so”).
Polembetsamo m’buku maina a anthu a mitundu,
 “By writing in a book the names of people of [all] tribes”,²⁷
Ine nditi: “Ndithu, wakutiwakuti wabadwiramo!”
 (“I am stating: “For sure, so-and-so was born there [inside]!”)²⁸
Motero anthu oliza ndi ovina pamodzi adzayimba:
 (“Therefore, the [instrument] blowers and dancers together will sing”),

16 *Inutu* is an explicit vocative pronoun plus an emphasising suffix that highlights its referent, “city of God”, thus orally preparing for the direct speech to follow.

17 The simple “saying” of the Hebrew is poetically enhanced by the Chewa verbs “praise,” and “laud.”

18 The “glorious things” spoken about Zion are merged into the direct discourse of Yahweh that follows in v. 4.

19 The adverbial intensifier “truly” (*moonadi*) is needed to fully express the sense of the Hebrew relational verb “know.”

20 The verb-demonstrative suffix *alipo* at the beginning and end of these two lines helps create an all-inclusive verbal frame that supports the text’s universal content.

21 “Africa” properly brings out the wider significance and relevance of “Cush” for an African audience.

22 This is an example of a Chewa line where the vowel assonance underscores the lyric nature of the text.

23 The Chewa verb “see” (*-ona*) is used idiomatically here to capture the idea of “remembering” from the first line of the Hebrew text.

24 The direct speech that follows in the next line needs to be introduced more explicitly in translation.

25 The order of the direct quotes in vv. 5-6 are reversed, and here the reference is made communal rather than individualised as in the Hebrew text, while the divine agent of the passive verb is made explicit.

26 This expanded line foregrounds the central performative speech act of this verse and adds the divine praise name, the “All-Surpassing One.”

27 The crucial notion of a “register” of people is stated more explicitly in the translation.

28 Again, the concept of the Lord’s direct decree is emphasised by repetition; the reference to “Zion” is left implicit, while the notion of inclusive “belonging” is made explicit by the enclitic “inside” (*-mo*).

*Ziyoni, ndiwe kasupe wa madalitso kwa onsewa!*²⁹
 (“Zion, you are a fountain of blessings for them all!”)

CONCLUSION

Naturally, a more idiomatic and interpretive translation, as exemplified in the two preceding versions renders the Hebrew text in a particular manner that may arguably be deemed explicitly or implicitly “possible”—but at the same time also “debatable” in certain specific exegetical respects. Therefore, the exercise that remains for readers themselves to carry out is to critically and comparatively evaluate these texts—the contemporary creations in relation to the original source text—then seek to improve either one the former versions in view of some envisioned context of use and receptive audience group, especially in a live recital setting. Surely all translator-singers (v. 7) would want to try their best to duplicate the primal beauty and lyric potency of this universal song of praise, whereby they verbalise for another people-group among the inhabitants of today’s “Zion” a personal performance that lauds the LORD for their own divine “birth”—that is on behalf of “each and every one” (הַבְּרִדָּה לְכָל־אֶחָד מֵאֵין שִׁיָּאָן, v. 5b)!

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²⁹ The rendering of v. 7 is interpretive from a contextualised perspective—that is, in a manner that would be especially meaningful for a Chewa-speaking audience.

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ENDNOTES

1. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: with Westminster Hebrew Morphology*. (2001). (electronic ed., Ps. 87:1–7). Stuttgart; Glenside PA: German Bible Society; Westminster Seminary. In the opinion of many commentators, the MT as transmitted presents “great difficulties and is certainly badly damaged” (Gunkel, 378, cited in Hossfeld and Zenger (H&Z), who seem to agree with this negative assessment, as does deClaisse-Walford et al. 2014, 664). Generally in support of the NET readings and the MT is Tate 1990, 385–387; cf. Bratcher and Reyburn (B&R), *Handbook on Psalms*, 1990, 757.