

# Exegetical Brief: Psalm 68:19—He Received Gifts Among Men

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Most commentators agree that Psalm 68 is the most difficult of the psalms. The Hebrew text teems with hapaxes and cryptic constructions. As far as the Hebrew goes, the first line of verse 19 is one of the clearest lines in the whole psalm, yet even here there are interesting problems. Commentators raise questions concerning the appropriateness of Paul's application of this verse in Ephesians 4:8.

We will begin our study of this interesting verse by looking at it in its Hebrew context. We will then turn to Paul's application of the verse. Because of the difficulty of the Hebrew, readers will notice a considerable difference between the rather literal translation which follows and the NIV's more interpretive rendering.

## Psalm 68:16-19

16 הַר־אֱלֹהִים הַר־בָּשָׁן הַר גְּבֻנִים הַר־בָּשָׁן:  
17 לָמָּה תִרְצָדּוֹן הָרִים גְּבֻנִים הַהָר הַזֶּה חָמַד אֱלֹהִים לְשִׁבְתּוֹ  
אֶף־יִהְיֶה יוֹשֵׁב לְנֶצַח:  
18 רָכַב אֱלֹהִים רַבְתִּים אֶלְפֵי שְׁנָאָן אֲדֹנָי בָּם סִינֵי בִקְדָשׁ:  
19 עָלִיתָ לְמָרוֹם שְׁבִיתָ שְׁבִי לְקַחַת מִתְּנוּת בְּאָדָם  
וְאֶף סוֹרְרִים לְשִׁבְתָּ יְהֵ אֱלֹהִים:

## The Lord Makes His Dwelling in Zion

<sup>16</sup>The mountain of Bashan is a mountain of God;

the mountain of Bashan is a mountain of many peaks.

<sup>17</sup>Why do you gaze in envy, O mountains of many peaks,  
[at] the mountain God chose for his home?

Indeed the LORD will dwell [there] forever.

<sup>18</sup>The chariots of God are twice ten thousand,  
and thousands upon thousands;

the Lord [comes] among them [from] Sinai in[to] the holy.

<sup>19</sup>You ascended on high,

you led captivity captive;

you received gifts among mankind,

that even [among] the rebellious

the LORD God might dwell.

## The NIV

<sup>16</sup>The mountains of Bashan are majestic mountains;  
rugged are the mountains of Bashan.

<sup>17</sup>Why gaze in envy, O rugged mountains,  
at the mountain where God chooses to reign,  
where the LORD himself will dwell forever?

<sup>18</sup>The chariots of God are tens of thousands  
and thousands of thousands;

the Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary.

<sup>19</sup>When you ascended on high,

you led captives in your train;  
 you received gifts from men,  
 even from the rebellious—  
 that you, O LORD God, might dwell there.

### Translation Notes

The NIV translates הַר־אֱלֹהִים (v 16) as "majestic mountains," understanding the phrase "mountain of God" to be a sort of superlative. It seems best to keep the more literal rendering, since God's possession of all the mountains of the world is a key point in this section. The meaning and form of הַר־אֱלֹהִים is uncertain.

הַר־אֱלֹהִים is usually interpreted as a plural noun, "peaks," which is in apposition to "mountains" (GK 131c). Other translators regard it as an adjective, "rugged." Note that the word "mountain" is singular throughout verse 16 (15E), even though it is modified by a plural אֱלֹהִים. The NIV interprets this singular as a collective and translates הַר as a plural throughout this verse. The psalmist may use the singular הַר, however, because he is thinking of the whole Bashan range as one mountain. The shift to the plural הַר־אֱלֹהִים in verse 17 then may refer to all the great mountains of the world. Many are taller than Zion. None are greater.

הִרְאָדוֹן (v 17) is a hapax. There have been various guesses as to its meaning, but "look with envy" seems to be best.

Since the verb יָשַׁב may refer either to living somewhere or to sitting on a throne, the infinitive לְיִשְׁבֹתוֹ may mean "for his living place" or "for the place where he rules." The parallelism suggests the former, so the NIV's rendering, "reign," does not seem to reflect the main point.

The singular noun רֶכֶב in verse 18 is probably a collective, "chariotry." But it may be the author's intent to picture the whole cloud of angels accompanying God as one chariot on which God rides, just as he rides over the cherubs in Ezekiel 1 (see below).

רַבְתַּיִם (v 18) is a dual, "two times ten thousand." Some suggest that it is a dual of a plural form, "twice ten thousands" or that it is multiplicative, "ten thousand times ten thousand" (GK 97h, WO 15.4). In either case, it refers to countless thousands. אֲלֵפֵי שְׁנָאֵן is literally, "thousands of repetitions." שְׁנָאֵן is a hapax, but it appears to be derived from the root שָׁנָא/שָׁנָה, "change." On the basis of Ugaritic, however, "warriors" has been suggested as an alternate meaning of this word. Another proposal is "the bright ones," that is, the angels.

The last part of verse 18 (אֲדֹנָי בָּם סִינֵי בְּקִדְשׁ) is difficult. Literally it reads, "the Lord [is] among them, Sinai in holiness." The NIV rendering, "the Lord *has come* from Sinai into his sanctuary," changes בָּם into the verb בּוֹא. If we retain the Masoretic text, the phrase must mean "The Lord was among the angels as they came to Sinai in holiness." This apparently refers to the presence of angels at the giving of the law at Sinai (Galatians 3:19, Hebrews 2:2, Deuteronomy 33:2). Some understand the verse to mean, "The Lord is among angels at Zion *as* he was at Sinai." His throne has moved from Sinai to Zion, so Zion is now a Sinai in its holiness.

Coming now to the key point of our discussion: בְּאֲדָם (v 19) is literally "among men." The NIV rendering "from men" views the gifts received by the Lord as tribute which the defeated enemies pay to the conqueror. Others, interpreting the ב as a *Beth essentiae*, translate, "you received men as gifts." We can, however, remain with the more literal rendering, "among." "Among men" may simply mean "on earth" as opposed to "in heaven." God gave Jesus all the gifts he needed for his work on earth as our Savior. In the New Testament Paul paraphrases this verse to show how Christ shares the gifts that he has received with us, his people (see below). Interestingly, the Targum agrees with Paul's reading, so he may have been following a traditional rabbinic interpretation. This interpretation may simply be a paraphrase, but some commentators have suggested that Paul and the Targum may be reading חֲלַק, "share," instead of לָקַח, "receive."

The last part of verse 19 (וְאַף סוֹרְרִים לְשֹׁכְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים) is also difficult. Literally, it reads "and indeed /rebellious ones/ to dwell/ LORD God." It is not clear if וְאַף סוֹרְרִים goes with the preceding line as an

apposition to the words, "among men," or if it begins an independent phrase, "even among the rebellious Yah will dwell." In the translations above, the infinitive לְשֹׂנְאָיו is translated as equivalent to a finite verb. Another approach, which preserves the infinitive, is to render, "even those who rebel at the settling down of the Lord."

### Application

The mountains of Bashan are the high mountains northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The psalmist may be thinking of Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in the area. Although these mountains are much higher than Mount Zion in Judah, Mount Zion surpasses them in beauty and glory since the Temple and Ark of the true God are there.

The chariots of God represent the angels who always serve in his presence. They accompanied him to Mount Sinai (Dt 33:2). Statues of cherubim hovered over the Ark of the Covenant, and the Lord is thought of as appearing above the cherubim (Ex 25:20-22). Throughout the Old Testament the Lord is frequently spoken of as being enthroned above or between the cherubim. He is said to ride on the cherubim (Psalm 18:10E). The angels attended Jesus during his ministry and will accompany Christ when he returns in glory (Mt 25:31).

God "ascended on high" when the Ark was enshrined in the Temple in Jerusalem. This move completed the conquest of the Promised Land, which was now ruled by David, a king after God's own heart. God had received gifts from men, since his temple now occupied the center of the land that Israel had taken from its enemies. But there is nothing in the text of the psalm or in the parallel historical accounts to connect this psalm directly to that event.

The "ascension" of the Ark to Zion, great as it was, was just a pointer to a greater ascension. The text speaks of an ascent "on high," a term which regularly refers to heaven in the psalms (Ps 7:8/7, 18:17/16, 93:4, and 102:20/19). In Ephesians 4:7-13 Paul applies these words to Christ's ascension to heaven after his death and resurrection. Christ's ascension marks the completion of God's conquest of the earth. Christ has defeated and subjected sin, death, and Satan. Christ now has all power in heaven and in earth. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. This has practical results for us:

<sup>7</sup>But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. <sup>8</sup>This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." <sup>9</sup>(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? <sup>10</sup>He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) <sup>11</sup>It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup>until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Paul modifies the quotation somewhat from its Hebrew form. The Septuagint had followed the Hebrew very closely (ἔλαβες δόματα ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ). But instead of sticking with the Hebrew and the Septuagint and saying, "You *received* gifts *among* men," Paul says, "He *gave* gifts to men" (ἔδωκεν δόματα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις). Paul's approach agrees with that of the Targum, which interprets the verse in light of the whole context of the psalm, "You have ascended to the firmament. You have led captivity captive. You have taught them the words of the law. You have given gifts to the children of men." Both Paul and the Targum understand that the main thrust of the psalm is the blessings the Lord shares with his people. Paul, however, corrects the application of the Targum, which seems to be thinking of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai to receive the law that he might give it to Israel, by applying the psalm to Christ. Christ has not only received gifts, but he shares with us the gifts that he has received. He gives us gifts that enable us to join him in the work of bringing people into his kingdom by announcing Christ's victory to them. Christ, therefore, gives us his Word to proclaim. He also gives the church pastors, teachers, and missionaries to proclaim that Word publicly. By the faithful use of these gifts we lead people into God's kingdom of grace so that God dwells in their hearts through faith. Through the faithful

preaching of the gospel we prepare ourselves and others for the day when Christ will return to claim the kingdom that is already his. Then we and all who are his will ascend to his glorious kingdom and live there with him forever.

Who then are the captives Christ brings with him? To be sure, they are enemies he has subdued, but they include those former enemies whom he has freed from slavery to sin and made his friends. These former enemies now have become his servants, whom he gives back to his church, that they may serve the church on his behalf (Ephesians 4:8 leads to 4:11). These are men who have "become captive to the Word of God." Among them was Paul himself (2 Corinthians 2:14; 1 Corinthians 9:16-19; 1 Corinthians 3:5). Christ receives men as gifts. He gives some of those same men as gifts to his church. By his grace these men who were by nature rebels lead other rebels to submission and obedience to the King.