

Psalm 46

The Chaos-Conquering God in the City of God

Type

Van Gemeren regards verses 1-3 and 4-7 as constituting two hymns and sees verses 8-11 as written in prophetic style.¹ The central focus of this psalm upon Jerusalem, the city of God, fully entitles the classification of this psalm as a *Zion Song*. Simultaneously, it is a *Hymn Celebrating Yahweh's Lordship over Peoples*.

Position within the Psalter

Psalm 46 is linked to Psalm 48 by Psalm 47. Both Psalms 46 and 48 present parallel Zion-centred perspectives:

	<i>Psalm 46</i>	<i>Psalm 48</i>
God, the Protector of Zion	God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble (1); God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day (5); The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress (7, 11)	God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress (3); God makes her secure forever (8b); Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation (12-13)
The Beauty of Zion	There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God (4a)	It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth (2a)
Zion, the Dwelling Place and Capital of God the King	the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells (4b); God is within her (5a); The Lord Almighty is with us (7a, 11a)	in the city of our God, his holy mountain (1b); Like the utmost heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King (2b)
The Rebellious Nations Terrified and Destroyed	Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts (6); Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations he has brought on the earth (8)	When the kings joined forces, when they advanced together, they saw her and were astounded; they fled in terror. Trembling seized them there, pain like that of a woman in labour. You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish, shattered by an east wind (4-7)
The Exaltation of God on Earth	Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth (10)	Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth (10a)

Psalm 47 bridges the two psalms with its emphases upon God as the King of the nations; as the one who subdues the nations; and as the one exalted among the nations.

Setting

The text of the psalm makes identification of the *sitz im leben* impossible though various settings nevertheless have been proposed including the miraculous deliverance

of Jerusalem from the army of Sennacherib in the reign of Hezekiah (701 BC)², victory after battle, the celebration of God's kingship at the autumnal festival, and the establishment of David's royal cult in Jerusalem.³

Structure

Craigie⁴ points out that "earth" is the common feature shared by all three sections of the psalm:

- vv1-3 The prospect of the earth giving way,
- vv4-7 The image of the earth melting when Yahweh lifts up his voice
- vv8-11 A threefold stress on the earth: (1) the prospect of God devastating the earth so as (2) to make all wars cease upon the earth, and thus (3), having rebuked the chaos and silenced it, being exalted in the earth.

Van Gemen suggests the following outline⁵:

- The Presence of God in Cosmic Troubles (vv1-3)
- The Presence of God in Judgment (vv4-7)
- The Presence of God on Earth (vv8-11)

He also proposes the following pattern⁶:

- A Confession (v1)
- B Theophany (vv2-6)
- A` Confession (v7)
- B` Prophetic Oracle (vv8-10)
- A`` Confession (v11)

Arden proposes the following chiastic structure⁷:

- A God is refuge (1)
- B No fear (2)
- C God rules over natural calamities (3-4)
- D God in here (5)
- E Nations rage (6a)
- E God speaks (6b)
- D God in here (7)
- C God rules over political calamities (8-9)
- B Be still (10)
- A God is refuge (11)

Jerusalem and the threat of Chaos

Verses 4-7 correspond to verses 1-3 as indicated by the repetition of terms - "earth" (vv2, 6), "fall" (vv2, 5), "[up]roar" (vv3, 6) - and the shared imagery of water - "sea" (v2), "waters" (v3), "river" (v4).⁸

This psalm begins with words of reassurance (verses 1-3). Even if the whole of creation returns to chaos, God's people will not fear because their refuge is in God, not in this world. It seems likely, from such words, that this psalm is written at a time when international chaos threatens to engulf God's people. The language of the psalmist suggests "the thought of the upheaval and commotion of the nations, and... the flood of invasion beating against Mount Zion and threatening to overwhelm it."⁹ Perhaps invading armies, such as the Assyrian armies in Hezekiah's day, have Jerusalem in their

sights, so that the continued existence of the kingdom of God is in jeopardy. The imagery used by the psalmist is probably that of a terrifying earthquake of cosmic proportions. Evidently, the state of world politics is sending out ominous shockwaves which indicate that disaster is looming.

At first sight verses 4-7 seem to switch to another thought. Now the focus is upon Zion. Yet these verses involve an application of verses 1-3. "Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall" (v6). These words correspond to verse 2 and employ the same language. The world is in chaos. Jerusalem herself may be attacked. For in verse 5 we read "God will help her at break of day". These words have rich significance:

- The immediate context has in mind the fact that Jerusalem is surrounded by hostile forces. Dawn was often the time when attacks against cities were launched. The psalmist is thus saying that when the attack comes it will prove futile because God will defend his city.
- But as Kidner¹⁰ points out, the phrase "at break of day" also alludes to Exodus 14:27, and so brings to mind the vicious Egyptian soldiers, passing between the divided waters of the Red Sea in hot pursuit of Israel, with full intent to destroy them. Indeed it was at "break of day" that Moses stretched out his arm over the sea and the divided waters rapidly swirled back to their original course, drowning the entire Egyptian army in the process. In Exodus 15 the Red Sea is likened to the waters of primeval chaos. Thus the promise "God will help her at break of day" is also an assurance that God controls the forces of chaos and will immerse his enemies in chaos.

God and the control of chaos

Jerusalem kept from chaos

But amidst this chaos which threatens to swallow up Zion God's people do not fear. "God *will help*" Zion, because amidst chaos he is "an ever-present help in trouble" (v1). The mountains may *fall* into the sea, but Zion will not *fall* - the use of the same Hebrew word for "fall" indicates an intended contrast here. Zion will not be part of that chaos. In sharp contrast to such a notion Zion is to be compared with paradise, with Eden, the garden where the streams watered the ground and channelled God's blessings.¹¹ It is a common ancient Near Eastern notion that the earth's water originates on the mountain of the gods.¹² For example, Ugaritic texts represent the Canaanite deity El's throne to lie as the "head of two streams."¹³ Insofar as Jerusalem was formerly a Jebusite, that is, Canaanite city, it may be that the application of this imagery to Jerusalem from Genesis 2 interacts with Canaanite thinking. In the Bible flowing water is often used as a symbol for the blessings of eschatological salvation (see too Isa 33:20f; 55:1; Ezek 47:1-12; Joel 3:18). In this context the implication is that God's presence blesses and gladdens the city.¹⁴

Further, in this particular context there is a deliberate contrast between the water of the holy river which flows from the Temple and the chaotic sea beneath the mountain (vv2-3). Notably, the same basic theology recurs in Psalm 65.¹⁵ This psalm celebrates the blessedness of "life" in the Temple; of deriving blessing from the Sanctuary (v4). Immediately David recalls God's work of creation, stressing that it was Yahweh "who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of the waves, and the turmoil of the nations" (v7). Note here again that the turmoil of the nations is a species of chaos.

However, even more to the point is the fact that straight after this talk of God stilling the chaos waters David thinks of the way God cares for "the land" with "the streams of God" (v9). Blessing flows from the streams of God (vv9-13) and this portrait stands in direct and deliberate parallel with the opening conception of the psalm that blessing emanates from the Temple.

Nations enveloped by chaos

God will cause the attacking nations which are already representative of the forces of chaos to be fully immersed in chaos. For he will lift up his voice - speak like thunder - and the earth will melt, so that just as the 'giving way' of the earth would result in the mountains falling into the heart of the sea (the ultimate symbol of chaos - Genesis 1:2), so the nations will be swept into chaos. It is as "the Lord of hosts" that God will so act, a name which in this context may suggest that God is "the Lord of armies."¹⁶

The temple amid chaos

In verse 4 language evocative of Genesis 2:10-14 is used¹⁷ to describe the significance of the temple in Jerusalem. It is in God himself that God's people find their refuge in a world of chaos. For those who live in Jerusalem and feel under threat from invading armies, the temple is the place where the presence of God their refuge is to be found. The temple means God is with his people and will provide for them a fortress which is far more impregnable than the walls making up the citadel of Jerusalem.

There are many psalms which are not ostensibly about Zion, but in which God is described as being the stronghold, citadel, fortress or refuge of his people. We can be confident that the citadel of Zion is not far from the thoughts of the psalmist whenever he employs such imagery.

The stilling of chaos

In verse 8 the psalmist invites God's people, "Come and see the works of the Lord", that is, asking them to recall all of the acts of God in the history of salvation.¹⁸ It is this God alone who is able to end the chaos of war and of the military threat which menaces Jerusalem.

In 46:10 we meet familiar but oft misunderstood words: "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." There are a number of ways of interpreting this:

- Usually the words be still are taken to be an encouraging exhortation: "Calm your hearts, be at peace, relax...." But the context tells against this and in favour of one of the following alternative constructions:
- Dahood¹⁹ proposes the meaning is "Do nothing", that is, "do not enter into military alliances with other nations, since Yahweh controls history", "leave all in God's hands"²⁰. So Isaiah 30:15 - "By sitting still and keeping quiet will you be saved." Similarly, van Gemeren²¹ reasons, "Throughout the history of Israel and Judah, severe national distress brought the temptation to abandon true religion for the ephemeral security of political alliances, (and) military strength", which inevitably brought with it paganism. The exhortation "Know that I am God" is understood to be a call to pursue godliness and to eschew negative options.

- But, Kidner²² believes the context favours construing this as a word of “rebuke to a restless and turbulent world”, a word which orders the cessation of war and violence. Since this psalm begins with the threat posed by the waters of chaos and since the uproar of the nations is portrayed as an expression of this chaos, it is perhaps appropriate to apply the full force of verse 10 to Jesus’ rebuke of the wind and the waves. He effectively was saying, “Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

Earlier we noted that in each of the three sections of the psalm there is a common interest in “the earth”, with a threefold stress upon the earth in verses 8-10. I have argued that each of the three notions concerning the earth here lead on to each other. God desolates the earth to abolish war on earth, and thus is exalted. Since the entire preceding context has persisted with the motif of chaos, I believe it probable that verse 10 is new creation language evocative of Genesis 1:1-2, implying that just as God was glorified in creation when he “conquered” the forces of chaos so he will be exalted in all the earth when he conquers all the forces of chaos as represented by war and violence. Contextually then Kidner’s interpretation of verse 10 fits better than Dahood’s.

Another contextual factor reinforces the above conclusion. That is, “Be still” corresponds to the words of verse 6 - “he lifts up his voice, the earth melts.” That is, God deals with the uproar of nations and the falling of kingdoms - with the reality of war and violence - by lifting up his voice, by uttering his thunderous word. Since “be still” belongs to the same context - the cessation of war and violence - it is likely that the correspondence extends to these words. They are the words God utters as he lifts up his voice to effect the cessation of war and violence. Yet they are not just words uttered in a vacuum. For as verse 8 indicates, on the earthly stage, God brings about the end through his works which are acts of desolation. Hence his words “Be still” are not words of peace at all but indeed the very opposite. They effect the cessation of war and violence but in association with divine acts of desolating the earth.

Looking at the psalm as a whole it seems likely that Psalm 46 especially involves reflection upon Exodus 15²³:

<i>PSALM 46</i>	<i>EXODUS 15</i>
"God is our refuge and strength" (v1)	"The Lord is my strength" (v2)
"God will help her <i>at break of day</i> " (v5)	"Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and <i>at daybreak</i> the sea went back to its place" (14:27)
God's subjugation of the waters of chaos (vv1- 3)	God's subjugation of the waters of chaos (v8)
The Lord's dwelling as a consequence of his victory over chaos (v4)	The Lord's dwelling as a consequence of his victory over chaos (v13, 17)

¹ "Psalms", 350.

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- ² A.F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms: With Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge University Press, 1902) 253.
- ³ Willem A. Van Gemeren, "Psalms" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (vol 5; ed. Frank E. Gaebelein et al.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1991) 350.
- ⁴ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Word BC 19; Waco, Texas; Word, 1983) 343.
- ⁵ "Psalms", 350.
- ⁶ "Psalms", 350.
- ⁷ R.L. Arden, "Chiastic Psalms" in *JETS* 17/1 (Winter 1974).
- ⁸ Van Gemeren, 350.
- ⁹ Kirkpatrick, 256; R.E.O. White, *A Christian Handbook to the Psalms* (Exeter: Paternoster Press / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 78.
- ¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Tyndale OTC; ed. D.J. Wiseman; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1978) 175.
- ¹¹ C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (trans. Francis Bolton; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1949) 94.
- ¹² Jerome F.D. Creach, "Like a Tree Planted by the Temple Stream: The Portrait of the Righteous in Psalm 1:3" in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1999) 42.
- ¹³ Craigie, 343.
- ¹⁴ Kirkpatrick, 256.
- ¹⁵ See Creach, 42.
- ¹⁶ Craigie, 345.
- ¹⁷ Van Gemeren, 352.
- ¹⁸ Van Gemeren, 353.
- ¹⁹ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I, 1-50: introduction, translation and notes* (Anchor Bible 16; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966) 282.
- ²⁰ White, *Christian Handbook*, 78.
- ²¹ "Psalms", 354.
- ²² *Psalms 1-72*, 176; Similarly, Kirkpatrick, 258.
- ²³ This is argued by Craigie, 343ff.