

Psalm 47

Yahweh Ascends to World Rule

Type

This psalm is a hymn which celebrates Yahweh's lordship over all peoples. It is a psalm which with Psalm 81 was used in synagogues to celebrate the New Year. Muilenburg observes that more than any other poem in the Old Testament it has a claim to be an enthronement hymn.¹

Connection with Psalm 46

(For comments on the Korah Psalms and a wider consideration of inter-relationships between Psalms 46, 47 and 48 see *Korah Psalms*, Vol 1)

Psalm 47 continues the thought of the previous psalm, namely that amid the turmoil of the nations, mirroring the threatening chaos waters, Yahweh reigns over all nations from his secure throne in Jerusalem. The blessing that ensues from this reign is there symbolized by the "river whose streams make glad the city of God" (46:4). The Lord lifts up his voice to rebuke the raging chaos of warring nations and to demands that he be acknowledged as the King of all the earth (46:6, 10). In Psalm 47 we see it is intended that the Abrahamic blessings enjoyed by God's people should flow to all nations. Consequently, it should be cause for great joy on the part of all non-Jewish peoples to recognize that the God of Abraham rules over them. In particular, in 46:10 God insists that he will be exalted among the nations and exalted in the earth. Fittingly, Psalm 47 concludes with the recognition that all human rule, wherever it be found upon the face of the globe, is subject to Yahweh's rule. Truly, "he is greatly exalted".²

Setting

The close relationships between Psalms 46, 47 and 48 invite us to posit a similar occasion for them all. These psalms all presuppose a strong and secure Jerusalem (46:4-5; 47:8; 48 {the entire psalm}). However, it is not easy to determine whether a particular event gave rise to these psalms or not.

A key phrase in Psalm 47 is "God has ascended". But what does this mean? Kirkpatrick (259) suggests that Psalms 46 and 47 have the same setting; that Yahweh 'descended' to effect a great victory (cf. Isa 31:4) so that his 'ascending' back to heaven marks his triumph. He points out (261) how a number of references speak of God 'coming down' to actively intervene in the affairs of this world (e.g. Gen 11:5, 7; Isa 31:4; 64:1, 3), but 'goes up' when his work is accomplished (Ps 68:18). In support of this Psalm 47 celebrates how Yahweh has "subdued nations under us" (v3). Again, both Psalms 46 and 48 involve a scenario where kings and nations threaten Jerusalem and yet flee in terror. Fitzpatrick evidently favours the humiliation of Sennacherib whereas Keil and Delitzsch (1234) are confident that both Psalms 46 and 47 celebrate Jehoshaphat's victory over the allied neighbouring nations, though they also associate this with "the conducting of the Ark back to the temple". Here, contra Keil and Delitzsch, the reference they cite - 2 Chronicles 20:28 - does not in fact speak of a fresh procession

involving the carrying of the ark, but only of going to the temple with musical instruments.

Alternatively, given that the context emphasizes God's status as "King of all the earth" it may be reasoned that some event has taken place that concerns God assuming his throne in the Jerusalem temple. This interpretation is supported by the opening words of the psalm which call upon the nations to clap their hands and shout to God. The force of this is captured by the cross-reference provided by 2 Kings 11. When Jehoiada brought Joash out of hiding and proclaimed him king we read that "the people clapped their hands and shouted, 'Long live the king!'" (v12). Similarly, when Samuel first brought Saul out of hiding and proclaimed him to be the king chosen by God the people again shouted "Long live the king!" (1 Sam 10:23). Consequently, the opening call to clap hands and shout to God indeed indicates that a decisive event has just taken place which *commences* Yahweh's universal rule from Jerusalem. Indeed, Muilenburg understands verse 8a to be saying that "Elohim has become King over the nations."³

If this reading of the psalm is correct what was this decisive event? It is not impossible that a decisive victory over Israel's enemies is being celebrated. However, such an event would warrant confirmation of Yahweh's already established universal rule rather than its commencement. As we have seen, the language of clapping and shouting and the words "God has ascended" seem to imply commencement of Jerusalem-based world rule. Consequently, it is more probable that one of two other major events is being celebrated.⁴ Presumably, then, the psalm was composed on the occasion of the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem or to celebrate the dedication of the temple under Solomon. It should be further noted that both of these events were traditionally associated with Yahweh's victory over the nations, so that an allusion to a particular historical triumph is not required. Given the strong possibility that verse 5 involves an allusion to 2 Samuel 6:15 it would seem that David's bringing of the ark to Jerusalem provides the most likely setting for this psalm.⁵

Structure

Arden proposes the following chiastic structure⁶:

- A People clap (1)
- B God is king (2-4)
- C God with a shout (5)
- C Praise God (6)
- B God is king (7-8)
- A People gather (9)

Acknowledgment of Yahweh as King

The psalmist calls on all nations to joyfully praise God in acknowledgment of his beneficent rule over them as "the great King over all the earth". This epithet, "the great King", was presumptuously claimed by the king of Assyria (Isa 36:4). Consequently, the application of this title to Yahweh may also be polemical.

Yahweh's Subjugation of Nations to Israel

But why should the nations worship God joyfully, since the very next verses speak of how God subdued the nations under Israel's feet? Here it would appear that the

psalmist has in mind the conquest of Canaan, hence the coordination of this statement with "He chose our inheritance for us..." That is, God displaced the nations occupying Canaan, giving the land as an inheritance to his elect nation, Israel. At this point in the psalm, therefore, it is not apparent why all peoples of the world should joyfully celebrate God's rule. Indeed, it might appear that they have every reason to cower before him. After all, in calling for their subjection, the psalmist emphasizes that God is "awesome", that is, "terrifying". Yet, as Roberts (130A) appreciates:

The foreign peoples are called upon to worship God, not simply because he is awesome, but because he is Elyon, the Most High, the *legitimate* ruler of the divine world⁷, and hence of the human as well.

The phrase "the pride of Jacob" is generally understood to refer to the land on which Israel prided itself.⁸ Contra Ratschow, it is not the title of an early nomadic deity, as the parallelism with our inheritance shows.⁹ Supportive of this is the depiction of the temple as "the pride of [Israel's] power" (Ezek 24:21). Here "Jacob" stands for "Israel", though in speaking of God's elective love for Jacob there is an underlying allusion to the foundational way in which God directed his love towards Jacob rather than Esau. Since Jacob was not depicted as one worthy of this love it is perhaps implicit that the basis of God's gift of the land to Israel is rooted in his love, not their merit.

Yahweh's Ascension

Next we have God's people shouting with joy and an exuberant, triumphant sounding of trumpets. Why? Because their "God has ascended". That is, all nations are invited to worship God recognizing that the King of Israel has now demonstrated that he rules over all nations, with Jerusalem as his capital and the centre of his world rule. The fact that he is now seated on his holy throne evidences the reality of his global sway.

Sibinga has pointed out that the psalm contains 77 words arranged as follows: 37 + 3 ("God has ascended") = 37.¹⁰ These words "God is ascended" constitute the heart and hinge of the psalm.

The language of verse 5 is actually evocative of 2 Samuel 6:15. There we are told that when David brought the ark to Jerusalem "he and the entire house of Israel" did so "with shouts and the sound of trumpets".

Once again all peoples of the world are called upon to sing praises to Yahweh as King of all the earth. In Scripture emphasis is achieved not by boldfacing, italicizing, underlining, circling, asterisking or colour highlighting but by repetition. The fivefold call to all peoples of the world to sing praises to Yahweh as King of all the earth serves to emphasise and re-emphasise that the appropriate response of all peoples to the reality of God's universal reign is to burst into joyful singing and praise.

Yahweh's Abrahamic Rule

At last, in the final verse of the psalm, the explanation we have awaited is now given. Why should the nations joyfully praise Yahweh and not rather shrink in terror from him? Because he is "the God of Abraham". God's rule may be described as Abrahamic rule (cf. Mt 1:1, 17; 2:1-2) since it is aimed at realizing the promises made to Abraham to extend his blessings to all nations. All nations have every reason to exuberantly

worship Yahweh because his universal reign offers them unspeakably wonderful blessings.

The closure of the psalm is doubly remarkable for it speaks of “the nobles of the nations” assembling “as the people of the God of Abraham” (NIV) or perhaps as per the majority of scholars: “together with the people of the God of Abraham”.¹¹ However, the next clause states that “the kings of the earth belong to God”, which may favour the NIV rendering and Muilenburg¹² rightly points out that the logic of the entire psalm strongly suggests that the leaders are now to regard themselves as subjects of Yahweh. Literally, these rulers are the “shields of the earth” because when they exercise Godlike rule they function as the protectors of their people just as Yahweh is the shield of his people (Ps 18:2). Given that Yahweh has just been called the God of Abraham it is possible that this depiction of human rulers as shields especially alludes to Yahweh’s presentation of himself to Abraham as his Shield (Gen 15:1).¹³ Thus the psalm closes with an eschatological vision of all human rule being subordinated to God’s own rule - a full return to the creation mandate (Gen 1:26-28). Muilenburg is justified in noting that “there is no passage of more genuine universalism in the whole of the Old Testament, not even Mal 1 11.”¹⁴

Given this eschatological thrust it is legitimate to see the substance of this psalm supremely fulfilled in the ascension of Christ. This is in keeping with a long tradition of associating this psalm with Christ’s ascension.

¹ James Muilenburg, “Psalm 47” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63/3 (September, 1944) 235.

² See Kirkpatrick, *The Psalms*. Book Two, 259.

³ “Psalm 47”, 250.

⁴ It is highly improbable, as some have proposed, that the event presupposed is the rebuilding of the temple following the exile. See J.J.M. Roberts, “The Religio-Political Setting of Psalm 47” in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 221, Memorial Issue: Essays in Honor of George Ernest Wright (February, 1976) 129.

⁵ So Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1-72* (Collegeville Bible Commentary; Old Testament 22; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986) 52. Clifford rightly associates the psalm with the carrying of the ark in procession. However, he speaks of it being brought into the temple, which, of course, was not built during David’s lifetime. It must be noted here, notwithstanding contesting scholarly opinion, that there is not one shred of evidence in the Old Testament to indicate that there was an annual ritual involving a fresh procession involving the conveyance of the ark to the temple.

⁶ R.L. Arden, “Chiastic Psalms” in *JETS* 17/1 (Winter 1974).

⁷ Roberts (130A) cites Deuteronomy 32:8 and Psalm 82:6 in support, both of which also use the name Elyon (cf. Ps 97:9), though the mere title “Most High” is enough to establish God as supreme among all heavenly beings. Roberts also notes that the force of Psalm 89:28 is that just as Elyon is supreme over the gods so David is supreme over all human monarchs.

⁸ Fitzpatrick, 260; Keil & Delitzsch, 1235.

⁹ See Muilenburg, “Psalm 47”, 240.

¹⁰ Joost Smit Sibinga, “Some Observations on the Composition of Psalm XLVII” in *Vetus Testamentum* 38/4 (October, 1988) 474-5.

¹¹ Muilenburg, “Psalm 47”, 242-3.

¹² “Psalm 47”, 243, 248-9.

¹³ Muilenburg, “Psalm 47”, 240.

¹⁴ “Psalm 47”, 237. It should be noted that Roberts (132B) regards verse 9 as indicating a religio-historical setting for the psalm by which the rulers of other nations came to Jerusalem while David was king to bring tribute. However, the depiction of these leaders as God’s people tells against this construction.