

UNDERSTANDING PSALM 46

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Psalm 46 is extremely difficult to understand as a unified whole. It seems to be made up of disparate elements, unrelated to one another. In this article I will present a way to understand this psalm as a cohesive unit, based on its unique structure.¹

1 *For the Leader; [a Psalm] of the sons of Korah; upon Alamoth. A Song.*

2 *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

3 *Therefore will we not fear, though the earth does change, and though the mountains be moved into the heart of the seas;*

4 *Though the waters thereof roar and foam, though the mountains shake at the swelling thereof. Selah.*

5 *There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God, the holiest dwelling-place of the Most High.*

6 *God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, at the approach of morning.*

7 *Nations were in tumult, kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted.*

8 *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our high tower. Selah.*

9 *Come, behold the works of the Lord, who hath made desolations in the earth.*

10 *He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; He breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; He burneth the chariots in the fire.*

11 *Let be, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.*

12 *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our high tower. Selah.*

STRUCTURE

The psalm is marked by three delimiters, the word *selah*, each coming after four verses. This suggests that the psalm has three stanzas. A refrain (*The Lord of hosts is with us . . .*) occurs after the second and third stanzas. The Rabbi Arie Folger is the Director of Publications for the Rabbinical Council of America and in that capacity the junior editor of the forthcoming new revised edition of the RCA Siddur. Previously, he was the senior rabbi of the Jewish Community of Basel, Switzerland.

first verse is a superscription, and should be seen as outside the structure of the psalm. Graphically, we may draw the psalm as follows:

Superscription (v. 1)

first stanza: 3 verses (vv. 2-4)

Selah (v. 4)

second stanza: 3 verses (vv. 5-7)

refrain + *selah* (v. 8)

third stanza: 3 verses (vv. 9-11)

refrain + *selah* (v. 12)

Another way to determine the structure of the psalm is through an analysis of the subject matter. Dividing the psalm along thematic lines yields a different structure than the one delineated above by the word *selah*. In this division, verse 2 sets the tone, expressing the psalm's dominant theme: trust and even certitude in God's protection. Thus, in verses 3 and 4 the psalmist does not fear natural disasters. Thematically, verses 2-4 clearly form a single stanza. Verses 5 and 6 form a second stanza, which describes a strong and lush City of God, surrounded by water, protected by God. While the first stanza evokes awful natural forces and these two verses evoke an idyllic stronghold, verses 2-6 are nonetheless united through the use of natural imagery.

In contrast, verses 7, 10 and 11 explicitly evoke martial imagery. Even the refrain in verses 8 and 12 evokes that imagery through use of the Divine Name, "Lord of Hosts." In this context, the destruction the audience is urged to behold should be understood as God's victory over Israel's enemies.

Thematically, we can further subdivide this section. In verses 7 and 11, the audience is directly confronted with a report, a statement of God's supreme power, and both these verses are followed by the refrain, which describes God in martial terms (Lord of Hosts). Thus, the pairs of verses 7 & 8 and 11 & 12 each form a stanza. In between these two stanzas, verses 9 and 10 urge the audience to go out and observe the destruction God brought on Israel's enemies. These verses each provide a kind of commentary or elaboration on the previous stanza. Verses 7-12 thus form a second motif, which may be subdivided into three stanzas, two of which include the refrain:

Superscription (v. 1)

begin first motif

- first stanza: 3 verses + *selah* (vv. 2-4)
- second stanza: 2 verses (vv. 5-6)
- end first motif / begin second motif
- third stanza: one verse + refrain + *selah* (vv. 7-8)
- fourth stanza : two verses (vv. 9-10)
- fifth stanza: one verse + refrain + *selah* (vv. 11-12)
- end second motif

In this second structure, *selah* no longer delimits all stanzas, but rather (a) splits the first motif into two stanzas and (b) emphasizes the two leading stanzas of the second motif.

The first structure is more aesthetic, creating three stanzas of equal length (three verses each), with the refrain carefully interspersed, standing outside the stanzas. Thematically, the first stanza is about trust in Divine protection from forces of nature, the second about Divine protection of the City of God, and the third about Divine protection from enemies. However, in this first structure, the middle stanza is not entirely unified thematically, as it segues from an idyllic City of God (vv. 5-6) into the destruction of enemy nations (v. 7). In the second structure we proposed this difficulty is resolved, since v. 7 belongs to the second motif, with its martial themes.

It seems that the psalmist superimposed two structures one upon the other. When we read the psalm, aware of both structures, we discover that the psalmist was likely using these structures to convey this psalm's real unifying theme. In light of this, verses 5-7 stand out, since in one scheme they form a single stanza, while in the other they are part of two separate motifs. The psalmist seems to hint that both motifs, and both overarching themes, the natural and the martial, are united in the City of God. This city is idyllic because it is Divinely protected from enemies. The pleasant natural phenomena, the flowing rivers bringing her joy, seem to be the antithesis of the enemies waging war. We would be justified in concluding that the awful natural forces of the first stanza, which the psalmist does not fear, are nothing but metaphors for the well-armed host which God destroys in the second motif. Having identified the City of God as the place where the metaphor of the natural theme of the first stanza meets the martial imagery of the second half of the psalm, we may also understand why the psalmist is so confident that God will protect us from the awful natural forces: after all, don't disasters

happen? The answer is that God's protection does not necessarily extend everywhere all the time. It is the special protection of the city in which God dwells that is the subject of this psalm.

Some classical commentators, in their own way, support our conclusions.

THE PSALM IN THE CLASSICAL AND NEOCLASSICAL COMMENTARIES

THE MESSIANIC APPROACH

Rashi sees the psalm as prophetic, relating to the Final Redemption. He understood this unleashing of natural forces quite literally, as he considers the authors of this psalm, the Sons of Korah, to be the sons of the Korah who had rebelled against Moses and who was subsequently engulfed in the bowels of the earth – along with his sons, the purported authors of this psalm, who nevertheless survived. Having emerged from this ordeal, they understood that all of Israel will also survive a similar, much more terrible experience, and so committed their prophecy to writing in the form of the present psalm.

Like Rashi, Radak places the psalm entirely in the Messianic context of the war of Gog and Magog. However, unlike Rashi, Radak clearly understands the quaking mountains and raging sea metaphorically, representing the terrible wars that will precede the Messianic era.

According to Rashi, the river in the second stanza, which brings joy to the City of God, Jerusalem, is one of the rivers flowing from the Garden of Eden. Radak broadens the concept of the City of God to include within it the entire Land of Israel ("the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High").

Radak understands the final stanza not merely as an affirmation of trust in the Lord's protection of those who dwell in Zion and Israel, but rather as a universalist prophecy that with the terrible wars heralding the Messianic era, warfare will once and for all cease among all societies and armed assault will be banished entirely from civilization. The final stanza thus embraces – but also extends – the theme of the two preceding stanzas.

THE HISTORICAL APPROACH

Ibn Ezra sees this as a historical psalm, one of meditation and thanksgiving after Jerusalem (the City of God in the psalm) was spared from the Assyrian army during the reign of Hezekiah. However, Ibn Ezra's contextualization may stand in tension with a literal reading of the natural events described in

the psalm, since we have no record of massive earthquakes during Sennacherib's campaign in ancient Israel, nor does the sea rage in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

Ibn Ezra identifies the river in the second stanza with the Gihon, which wells up at the foot of ancient Jerusalem. The Gihon also featured prominently in the Judeo-Assyrian conflict, as Hezekiah had the Gihon Spring covered up so as to deprive the besieging Assyrian army of an otherwise readily available source of fresh water. Thus, Ibn Ezra strengthens the geographical contextualization of the psalm, confirming its setting both geographically and chronologically in ancient Jerusalem.

While Ibn Ezra sees the first two stanzas as solidly historical, he expresses a willingness to see in the third stanza a prophetic reference to a similar Divine protection at the dawn of the Messianic era, during the war of Gog and Magog that Ezekiel prophesied.

Malbim offers a totally different historical interpretation. For him, the psalm is a reflection of a massive flood that brought destruction to surrounding areas, while the rain-swollen rivers, instead of spreading destruction over Israel, actually brought blessing to the Land. The martial victory to which the second motif refers is nothing other than the destruction of Israel's enemies through the forces of nature, which act as God's agents. It is the survivors of that destruction who are summoned to consider the destruction the Lord has brought upon their lands.

THE METAPHORIC APPROACH

In his introduction to this psalm, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch² suggests that the psalm's theme, which he gleans from its superscription, is "hiddenness" (from *alamot*, understood as *ne'elamot*) or, more precisely, the hidden purpose of history. The psalm is intended to make Israel aware that its success and protection stem from its loyalty to God, and also to prompt Israel to share this message with the world, so that the other nations may also benefit from the same success and protection. The underlying secret that the psalm purports to reveal is the ultimate unity of man, which will be achieved through its united worship of the one God. Mankind's trials and tribulations throughout history, the natural disasters, as well as wars and conflicts, are all experiences through which man will come to recognize God's greatness and

unite in piety, peace and prosperity. While Rabbi Hirsch introduces this understanding of the psalm in his comment to the superscription, he clearly arrived at his understanding by considering the third stanza, which challenges the audience to *come, behold the works of the Lord, namely, the destruction He has visited upon the earth.*³

Hirsch regards the quaking mountains and the raging sea as metaphors for human trials and tribulations, particularly those which the Jewish people faces. Unlike the simple reading of the psalm, Hirsch understands the first stanza not as a statement of Divine protection (God saves from disaster), but rather as a statement of confidence and strength in the face of disaster, which stems from the realization that even disasters are merely God's rod to chastise mankind, hence Israel need not fear impending disasters. His reading of this stanza does not preclude reading it literally, since earthquakes and storms can represent many other kinds of tribulations.

He likewise interprets the second stanza metaphorically. In the midst of the trials and tribulations of Israel, strength is found in a spiritual Jerusalem, a spiritual Temple, which, like the earthly Temple, consists of a courtyard, a sanctuary, and a holy of holies. The last of these symbolizes God's Word, the Torah, and that Word progresses through the "sanctuary" to the "courtyard" when it is applied in Jewish national, communal and individual life. It is the applied Torah that gives Israel the strength to survive the disasters of the first stanza.⁴

The tension between Hirsch's approach and the simple reading of the psalm is so great that his comments are best seen as sound Jewish theology rather than real psalm commentary. For him, the first stanza – which describes not Israel's certainty of being saved from tragedy but an affirmation of its faith in the face of a tragedy suffered – is most important. By contrast, the psalmist quite clearly emphasizes in the second stanza, as Hirsch himself recognizes, that God does not allow Jerusalem to be destroyed. In other words, the psalm's optimism stems from a belief that God will not allow the psalmist's fortress to fall.

A SYNTHESIS APPROACH

In the *Da'at Mikra* commentary to this psalm, Amos Hakham⁵ shows through his analysis of key verses in the prophecies of Isaiah 17:12, Ezekiel

38:20 and 39:3-9, Joel 4:16 and Zechariah 14:6-8, as well as key phrases in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:4) and the prophecy of Micah 1:3-4 and Nahum 1:1-6, that the themes of natural disasters, particularly earthquakes, and of the destruction of Israel's enemies, are often conjoined in the Bible. Furthermore, the apocalyptic prophecies of the war against Gog and Magog are patterned after the defeat of the Assyrian army under Sennacherib, which suddenly disappeared after besieging Jerusalem. Thus, Hakham concludes, our present psalm firmly belongs to the genre of the above-mentioned prophecies of both Isaiah, who was interpreting the past, and Ezekiel, Joel and Zechariah, who were prophesying about the future. Consequently, he sees the psalm as reflecting both the historical past (Ibn Ezra's and, to a lesser extent, Malbim's view) and the future Final Redemption (the view of Rashi and Radak).

Hakham thus shows that all the classical commentaries mentioned are correct in a way, as the psalm was written in a manner evoking all their interpretations, and probably intentionally so. S. R. Hirsch is the exception. On the one hand, he ultimately agrees with the other commentators that the psalm is prophetic and that the disasters in it are punishments and reproofs. On the other hand, his psychological reading of maintaining faith in the face of disaster is indeed unique and, as we have argued above, not all that close to the text.

JERUSALEM THE INVINCIBLE

A simple reading of the psalm suggests that the psalmist's confidence, his lack of fear in the face of possible disaster, his great trust in God – all stem from the belief that God dwells in Jerusalem and won't let His city fall. The obvious problem for post-exilic Jews was that Jerusalem *did* fall. If we are to accept Ibn Ezra's suggestion that Psalm 46 is a psalm of thanksgiving in the aftermath of Sennacherib's aborted siege of Jerusalem, it is tempting to compare its attitude with the one the prophet Jeremiah condemned, the attitude of those who did not fear the Babylonians. Jeremiah rebuked them, saying, *Trust ye not in lying words, saying: "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these." Nay, but if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; . . . Then [only] will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and*

ever (Jer. 7:4-7).

This problem, however, is solved by positing that the City of God which is saved in the psalm is not the historical Jerusalem, but the Jerusalem of the end of days. Only then, through the dawn of the Messianic era, will Jerusalem remain under solid Divine protection. Alternatively, by spiritualizing Jerusalem as Rabbi Hirsch does, this difficulty is also overcome for while the physical Jerusalem was repeatedly destroyed, the spiritual haven of Torah has survived throughout all the generations.

The theological difficulty would remain for Ibn Ezra. However, the psalmist anticipated this problem by stressing that Jerusalem's protection stems from God dwelling in her. Jeremiah was warning the people that if they continued to sin, God would no longer dwell in His Temple; and, indeed, Ezekiel was informed that the Divine Presence had left the Temple prior to its destruction, appearing instead on the banks of the River Chebar (Ezek. 1:3-28).

If, as most commentaries suggest, this psalm relates to the dawn of the Messianic era, what message did the psalmist wish to convey to worshipers throughout history? It would seem that his aim was to instill confidence in the worshiper that Israel will ultimately prevail, and that the nations will have to recognize this by force of circumstance.

NOTES

1. In the wake of the dreadful calamity that befell Japan, an educator asked for suggestions as to which psalms might be fitting prayers and meditations on the terror of the earthquake, the tsunami, the great number of men, women and children suddenly swept away by the gigantic wave, and the many more survivors who were left homeless and destitute. One colleague suggested Psalm 46, which indeed evokes the terror of quaking mountains and raging seas (verses 3 and 4). It is the present writer's contention, however, that this psalm is not a fitting statement of empathy with the victims of a disaster. It is, rather, a statement of faith in Divine Providence which will save and protect one from misfortune; it would therefore be unseemly to recite it with reference to other peoples that have suffered and lost numerous lives in a disaster. While it is true that, historically, the matching of a psalm with an event was often based on a particularly suitable phrase or a relevant midrashic allusion, the psalms that became the mainstay of regular Jewish prayer were not chosen on the strength of one or two pertinent verses, but because their subject matter is intricately woven into a greater whole – the prayer service. A psalm's suitability for a particular occasion should be based on the theme of the entire psalm, not just a single phrase.

2. S. R. Hirsch, the *Die Psalmen / übersetzt und erläutert von Samson Raphael Hirsch* (Frankfurt am Main: 1924) in the original German; *Psalms with Commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch*

[in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1961).

3. The present writer's own translation; for the sake of clarity, it differs slightly from the JPS.

4. In light of the above fairly radical rereading of the psalm, his comment to verse 6 is surprising and stands in tension with the rest of his comments: suddenly, the psalm is about the earthly Jerusalem, and she is indeed spared from earthly disasters. In the morning (meaning in the aftermath of disasters), Jerusalem again and again emerges unharmed and, at the end of days, men will recognize that only Jerusalem survived it all unscathed. Such tension within his commentary leads this writer to believe that Hirsch intended these comments to be read on two different levels, as two different layers within the text.

5. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra - Sefer Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990).

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