

Psalm 46

Evening Prayer Friday Week 1

The beautifully refined poetry of this psalm establishes it as one of the masterpieces of the psalter. It is a psalm of trust in YHWH whose presence in the city has saved it from foreign aggression. Does it celebrate the lifting of the siege and the withdrawal of the army of Sennacherib in 701BC? The title reads: ‘To the leader. Of the Korahites.* According to Alamothe. A Song’. ‘Alamothe’ may refer to the instruments to be used – perhaps treble flutes. Others suggest that it derives from the word for a maiden [Hebrew ‘almâ, עַלְמָה] and may refer to the tune to be used.

These opening words announce the theme. God is compared to a citadel that is inaccessible to invaders, and so provides certain protection to the people of the fortified city.

¹God is our refuge and strength, a helper close at hand in time of trouble.

Stanza One

An invading army is threatening to reduce the land to chaos. The creator God is present in the city, so the psalmist is not afraid. Compare the following warning from Isaiah:

Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently ... therefore, YHWH is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks.

– Isaiah 8:6-7

The tumultuous rumbling of the waters is heard in the Hebrew of ‘though its waters roar and foam’:

yeh^emû yehm^erû mēymāyw

יְהִימוּ יְהִימוּ יְהִימוּ מִיַּמַּיִם

The absence here of the refrain is due to an error in the transmission of the text. The God of the cosmos, the God of the starry sky, is the sovereign Lord and protector of Israel.

²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should shudder, though the mountains collapse into the depths of the sea, ³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

[Selah*]

One expects here the refrain that is found at the end of Stanzas Two and Three:

‘YHWH of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.’

Stanza Two

⁴There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved. God will be its help when the morning dawns.

⁶Peoples revolt. Kings mobilise their armies. God thunders and the earth shudders.

⁷YHWH of hosts* is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

[Selah*]

⁸Come, behold the works of YHWH, the formidable things he has brought about on the earth:

⁹he makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bows and shatters the spears; he burns the chariots in a pyre.

¹⁰'Be still, and know that I am God, exalted above the nations, exalted on the earth.'

¹¹YHWH of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. [Selah*]*

In a remarkable engineering feat Hezekiah constructed a tunnel from the Gihon spring to the pool of Siloam inside the city's defences (2Kings 20:20). The psalmist sings of God, the defender of the city. Compare the prophets:

YHWH in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams.

– Isaiah 33:21

A fountain shall come forth from the house of YHWH.

– Joel 3:18

Ezekiel 47 speaks water flowing from the right side of the temple. As Christians we think of Jesus:

Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.

– John 7:38

One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

– John 19:34

Verse seven functions as a refrain.

Stanza Three

YHWH does more than defeat the enemy. He causes war itself to cease:

They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

– Isaiah 2:4

The yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken.

– Isaiah 9:4

YHWH responds in an oracle. We are to leave the fighting to God as at the Exodus:

Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that YHWH will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. YHWH will fight for you. You have only to keep still.

– Exodus 14:13-14

The psalm concludes with the refrain.