

Psalm 48

Morning Prayer Thursday Week 1

This is a psalm of praise and thanks to God for the beauty and power of Jerusalem ['Zion'], the city chosen by God to bring about God's justice on the earth. The title reads: 'A Song. A Psalm* of the Korahites*'. If, as has been suggested, the Korahites were members of a guild of singers attached to the sanctuary of Dan, this would point to 'Zion' being a later substitute when the psalm was used in the Jerusalem liturgy. Note the verbal links with Psalm 47 and especially Psalm 46.

Stanza One

'Mount Zaphon' is located near the mouth of the Orontes River in Northern Syria. It was the sacred mountain of the storm god Baal-Hadad in ancient Canaanite mythology, the Canaanite equivalent of Mount Olympus for the Greeks. For the psalmist Jerusalem is of greater significance because it is the abode of YHWH, the High God. In calling Jerusalem 'Mount Zion' he is underlining the fact that it is the city of God's temple and the seat of the dynasty of David. It is 'holy' ('consecrated to God') because that is where the Holy One has chosen to dwell.

I myself have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.

– Psalm 2:6

He has set it up on a holy mountain. YHWH prefers the gates of Zion to all the dwellings of Jacob.

– Psalm 87:1-2

Thus says YHWH: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of YHWH of hosts shall be called the holy mountain.

– Zechariah 8:3

Why do you look with envy, O many-peaked mountain, at the mountain that God selected for his abode? YHWH will reside there forever?

– Psalm 68:16

Zion is 'beautiful' [Hebrew: *yāpēh*, יָפֵה] – a name given to Jaffa (Joppa) on the Mediterranean coast near modern Tel Aviv.

You are beautiful as Jerusalem, my love, terrible as an army in battle array.

– Song of Songs 6:4

¹Great is YHWH and most worthy of praise in the city of our God. His holy mountain, ²beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth: Mount Zion, pinnacle of Zaphon, the city of the great King.

['Mount Zion, The joy of all the earth']

This theme is traditional:

Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?

– Lamentations 2:15

I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age.

– Isaiah 60:15

Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

– Isaiah 65:18

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her.

– Isaiah 66:10

Their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their heart's affection.

– Ezekiel 24:25

³Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defence.

We find this theme, too, recurring throughout the psalter.

YHWH is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of danger.

– Psalm 9:9

YHWH my rock, my fortress, and my escape! My God, my rock in whom I take refuge. My shield, my horn of deliverance, my bulwark.

– Psalm 18:2

The God of Jacob is our refuge.

– Psalm 46:7 and 11

You, O God, are my fortress.

– Psalm 59:9 and 17

God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

– Psalm 62:2, 6

YHWH has become my stronghold, my God the rock of refuge for me.

– Psalm 94:22

My ally and my fortress, my stronghold my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge.

– Psalm 144:2

Stanza Two

Peoples revolt. Kings mobilize their armies;
God thunders and the earth shudders.

– Psalm 46:6

At the rumble of your thunder they take to flight.

– Psalm 104:7

YHWH of hosts has a day against all that is proud
and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high ...
against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the
beautiful craft.

– Isaiah 2:12,16

The Anchor Bible Dictionary explains the term
‘Tarshish’:

According to the Table of Nations (Genesis 10:4),
Tarshish is one of the four sons of Javan, the son
of Japheth, and thus a great-grandson of Noah.
The descendants of the siblings of Tarshish are
associated with maritime countries in the Mediter-
ranean and Aegean (Elishah, Kittim, Rodanim), so
the descendants of Tarshish could well be found
in this same area. In spite of over 30 references to
Tarshish in the Old Testament, its exact location is
still a matter of debate.

‘Ships of Tarshish’ refers to larger seafaring ves-
sels. Various suggestions are given for the name.
One is that these ships were so called after the port
of Tartessus in Spain, on the western edge of the
Mediterranean.

Stanza Three

As the article ‘Just’ in the Introduction indicates,
‘justice’ [Hebrew *šedeq*, שֶׁדֶק] is that quality of
God whereby God always acts according to God’s
being. ‘Judgments’ [Hebrew *mišpāt*, מִשְׁפָּט] refers
to particular decisions made according to God’s
justice. See the article ‘Judgment’ in the Introduc-
tion.

**⁴Look, the kings are assem-
bling, they advance together.**

**⁵As soon as they see it, they
are astounded; they panic,
and take to flight;**

**⁶trembling takes hold of
them, pangs as of a woman in
labour,**

**⁷as when an east wind causes
shipwreck to the ships of
Tarshish.**

**⁸As we have heard, so have
we seen in the city of YHWH
of hosts*, in the city of our
God. God has established it
forever.**

[Selah*]

**⁹We ponder your kindness*,
O God, in the midst of your
temple.**

**¹⁰Your praise, O God, like
your reputation, reaches to
the ends of the earth. Your
right hand is filled with jus-
tice*.**

**¹¹Let Mount Zion be glad, let
the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments*.**

Stanza Four

¹²Walk about Zion, go all
around it, count its towers,
¹³admire its ramparts;
consider its citadels,
that you may tell the next gen-
eration:

¹⁴This is God, our eternal God,
forever our guide.

It is the presence in the temple of YHWH that
makes Jerusalem so special.

YHWH is there.

– Ezekiel 48:35

He led out his people like sheep, and guided
them in the wilderness like a flock.

– Psalm 78:52

He who has pity on them will lead them, and by
springs of water will guide them.

– Isaiah 49:10

In the New Testament, Jerusalem becomes a symbol of the Church, the Body of Christ, the temple of the living God. Psalm 48 can be prayed with the Church in mind.

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

– Ephesians 5:25-27

On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

– Matthew 16:18

The city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven.

– Revelation 3:12

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

– Revelation 21:2

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

– Revelation 21:22