



Psalm 46: Translation, Structure, and Theology

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INTRODUCTION: STRUCTURE IN THE PSALMS¹

Many of the poems of the Psalter were intentionally composed with poetic structure as a key component. Although not all psalms display a readily discernible structure—some are more like free poems (such as Psalms 120, 131, and 133)—at least some of the psalms were so composed.

Perhaps this phenomenon is made most clear by the example of the alphabetic-acrostic psalms. The “acrostic units” (the number of lines dedicated to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet) in these poems vary from psalm to psalm, but within the various psalms the acrostic units are consistent—which establishes

¹ I am honored to offer this essay in honor of my teacher, friend, and colleague Mark Throntveit. Mark believes in exegesis and taught it to two generations of Luther Seminary students. Mark’s “secret sauce” as a teacher of exegesis consisted of three things—his viral sense of humor, his commitment to understanding the structure of a passage, and his passion for teaching Hebrew syntax. In this new translation and exegetical investigation of Psalm 46, I attend primarily to the structure of the psalm and also try to attend closely to the syntax. I have even tried a little humor—but my wit is no match for Mark’s. Just ask him, he’ll tell you.

Perhaps of all the books in the Bible, interpretation of the book of Psalms is most heavily dependent on unraveling the poetic and literary structure of the individual psalms themselves. The key is finding the structure in the psalm and not imposing one from the exterior.

that the psalmists were conscious of and intentional about the length of these units, or “stanzas.”

- In Psalms 111 and 112, the acrostic units are one poetic line (also called a verset, stich, or half verse).
- In Psalms 25, 34, and 145, the acrostic units are two lines long.
- In Psalms 37 and 9/10, the acrostic units are four lines long.²
- And in Psalm 119 the acrostic unit is sixteen lines (eight verses) long, with each of the eight verses starting with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The fact that the length of the acrostic units varies between psalms and yet is consistent within each psalm shows that the writers of these psalms were conscious of composing their poems with a consistent structure.

Evidence that some psalms were intentionally composed around a clear structure is also present in a few others—Psalms 42/43, 114, and 8. In Psalm 42/43, there are three stanza of approximately the same length, each of which is followed by the refrain:

Why are you upset, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,
my very present help³ and my God!

For the sake of length, I will not include the entire psalm here, but its structure can be laid out as follows:

Stanza 1 (42:1–4)
Refrain (42:5–6a)
Stanza 2 (42:6b–10)
Refrain (42:11)
Stanza 3 (43:1–4)
Refrain (43:4)

² Psalms 9 and 10 are treated as one psalm in the LXX and should be read as a unified poem (as should Psalms 42 and 43). It must be noted, however, that while the acrostic pattern is very consistent in Psalm 9 and in 10:6b–18, the text has apparently been corrupted and the pattern disturbed in 10:1–6. See my treatment of Psalm 9/10 in *The Book of Psalms*, with Nancy deClaisse-Walford and Beth Tanner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 129–44.

³ The refrain that occurs in 42:5–6a (where a scribal error has placed “my God” at the start of v. 6); 42:11; and 43:5 contains a confusing idiom: “שׁוּעָה פְּנֵי רַאֲלֹהִי” (so 42:11 and 43:5), literally “the help of my face and my God.” The matter is further confused by a variant in 42:5–6a, “שׁוּעָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי”, literally “the help of his faces my God.” Clearly, in 42:5–6a, the *waw* that is attached to “my God” has been incorrectly detached and suffixed to “my face” and is corrected (with manuscript support) to be harmonized with 42:11 and 43:5. The meaning of “שׁוּעָה פְּנֵי” is unclear. NRSV simply ignores it and reads “my help and my God,” NIV has “my Savior and my God,” while NJPS renders it “my ever-present help, my God.” Similar to NJPS, I take the phrase to be an idiom referring to intimate presence (“[before] my face”), in this case the intimate presence of God’s help.

The composition of a psalm that has been carefully structured is also demonstrated by the wonderful, chiasitic construction of Psalm 114. The following arrangement and translation highlight the stanzas and the A-B-B'-A' chiasitic structure of the psalm. Stanzas 2 and 3 are obviously chiasitic, with the phrases almost identical except that the verbs are perfect in stanza 2 and imperative in stanza 3. Stanzas 1 and 4 are also chiasitic; both refer to the exodus event and both to "Jacob."

- 1 When Israel left Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a foreign people,
- 2 Judah became his sanctuary,
and Israel his domain.
- 3 The sea saw and fled,
the Jordan turned back!
- 4 The mountains danced like rams,
the hills like young lambs!
- 5 Why, O Sea, do you flee,
O Jordan, do you turn back,
- 6 O mountains do you dance like rams,
O hills, like young lambs?
- 7 Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob—
- 8 Who turned the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.

A final example of a chiasitically structured poem is found in Psalm 8, which is bookended by a poetic *inclusio* and in between contains two main stanzas with a question in the middle. The two main stanzas pair chiasitically with one another. The first describes the heavens and their residents as "the work of your fingers"; the second describes the earth and its residents as "the work of your hands."

- 1 O Lord, our lord, how magnificent is your name in all the earth!
You have placed your glory above the heavens.
- 2 From the mouths of babies and infants,
You have founded strength on account of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
- 3 For I look at the heavens—the work of your fingers—
the moon and the stars that you have established.
- 4 What is a person, that you should take notice,
a mortal that you should care?
- 5 Yet you have made them almost divine,
with glory and honor you have crowned them.

- 6 You have given them dominion over the work of your hands,
you have put all things under their feet.
7 All sheep and oxen,
also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the air and the fish of the sea,
and whatever swims the paths of the seas.

9 O Lord, our lord, how magnificent is your name in all the earth!

The preceding examples could be multiplied many times, but this small sampling is offered to establish that the ancient psalmists were often intentional about the structure of their poetry. When I was first learning to exegete the psalms, I discovered that until I understood the structure and movement of a psalm, I would struggle to understand the psalm itself. To put this positively rather than negatively, I believe that in order to understand the meaning of a psalm, a reader first needs to understand the structure, movement, and development of a psalm. What are its chief divisions, where is the turning point, how does it build and resolve?

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PSALM 46—TRANSLATION AND ARRANGEMENT

Of the choir director.⁴ Of the Sons of Korah.⁵ To the high lonesome.⁶ A song.

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,
a clear help, found in troubles.

⁴ The meaning of the term הַשָּׂרִים is not precisely understood. It is a piel/D participle of נָצַח (“inspect”), occurring fifty-five times in the superscriptions of various psalms as well as at the end of the psalm in Hab 3:19. The term is traditionally translated as “leader” or “choir director”; perhaps here the phrase לַמְנַצֵּחַ carries the meaning “belonging to the collection of the choir director.”

⁵ The “sons of Korah” were a group of Levitical priests, described as “gatekeepers” (הַשָּׂרִים) in charge of the “work of the service, guardians of the threshold of the tent” (1 Chr 9:17–19) and later as musicians (2 Chr 20:19). The precise history of these Levites is not known, but it is clear that in the post-exilic community they were a group of Levitical musicians. Based on the so-called “royal” or “Zion” theology embedded in the psalms that bear the superscription “of the sons of Korah” (42, 44–49, 84–85, 87–88), it seems that they were active in the Second Temple, faithfully carrying on pre-exilic theological traditions. Here, the meaning is that the psalm belongs to a collection curated by or for the Korahite musicians.

⁶ The meaning of the phrase עַל־מִנְצֵחַ is unknown. It may refer to a melody or style of music (cf. 1 Chr 15:20–21: “Zechariah, Aziel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Unni, Eliab, Maaseiah, and Benaiah were to play harps according to Alamoth; but Mattithiah, Eliphelehu, Mikneiah, Obed-edom, Jeiel, and Azaziah were to lead with lyres according to the Sheminith”). Or, because one literal meaning of עַל־מִנְצֵחַ is “young women,” it may signal that the psalm was to be sung in a high musical range—what bluegrass musicians call “the high lonesome” (hence the not fully serious translation above). LXX has κρυφίω (“secret”).

- 2 Therefore, we do not fear when the earth⁷ quakes,
when mountains shake in the heart of the seas,⁸
- 3 when its waters⁹ rage and roil,
when mountains heave with its arrogance. *Selah*¹⁰
- 4 A river—its streams make glad the City of God,
The Most High makes his dwelling holy.¹¹
- 5 God is in its midst—it shall not be shaken,
God will help it when morning dawns.
- 6 Nations rage, kingdoms shake!
He raises his voice, earth melts.
- 7 The Lord of Hosts is with us,
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*
- 8 Come! See the deeds of the Lord,
the desolations that he has made on the earth!
- 9 He causes wars to cease to the end of the earth,
he shatters the bow, breaks the spear, and burns the shields with fire.
- 10 “Be silent and know that I am true God!
I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!”
- 11 The Lord of Hosts is with us,
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*¹²

THE STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF MARK THRONTVEIT

The structure of the poem is disputed by Mark Throntveit, who makes a compelling case against understanding the psalm as I have laid it out above.¹³ Throntveit’s exegetical approach is to be alert for recurring words, phrases, and motifs, and then study these repetitions in order to discern the structure of a passage or poem. Here, he identifies the following key words: מוט “shake/shaken” (vv. 2, 5, 6), ארץ “earth” (vv. 2, 6, 9), בארץ “on/in the earth” (vv. 8, 10), המה “rage” (vv. 3, 6), לנו “our” (vv. 1, 7, 9), and מחסח/משגב both meaning “refuge” according to Throntveit (vv. 1, 7, 9). After examining the placement of these terms in the psalm, Throntveit argues

⁷ LXX την γην may reflect הָאָרֶץ with no change in meaning.

⁸ NJPS has “though mountains topple into the sea,” understanding the כ as terminative rather than locative.

⁹ LXX ὑδάτα αὐτῶν may reflect מַיִמֵיהֶם or may simply be harmonizing.

¹⁰ The meaning of סִלְהָה is not known. LXX διαψαλμα (“during a psalm”?) may signal either a liturgical or musical action; similarly, the possible Persian cognate *salā* (“song” or musical “sound”) may indicate a musical action. Sticking with the above bluegrass joke, perhaps I should translate it “break,” indicating a lyre solo.

¹¹ Reading piel קִדְּשׁ מִשְׁכְּנֹו (“sanctify his dwelling place”) with LXX ἡγιασεν το σακηνομα αυτου; so also HALOT and thus correcting MT’s mp construct ending on feminine noun).

¹² LXX and Syriac omit the final *Selah*.

¹³ Mark Throntveit, “Commentary on Psalm 46,” Working Preacher, <https://tinyurl.com/ycjfx666>.

that Psalm 46 should not be divided into three stanzas with a refrain after the second and third stanzas. Rather, its structure should be understood as a sort of 3-shaped pattern. Using my translation above, Throntveit argues that the psalm should be understood as follows (with emphasis to show recurring vocabulary).

- A 1 **God is our refuge** and strength,
 a clear help, found in troubles.
- B 2 Therefore, we do not fear when the earth quakes,
 when mountains *shake* in the heart of the seas,
 3 when its waters *rage* and roil,
 when mountains heave with its arrogance. *Selah*
- C 4 A river—its streams make glad the City of God,
 The Most High makes his dwelling holy.
 5 God is in its midst—it shall not be *shaken*,
 God will help it when morning dawns.
- B* 6 Nations *rage*, kingdoms *shake*!
 He raises his voice, earth melts.
- A' 7 The Lord of Hosts is with us,
 the **God** of Jacob is **our refuge**. *Selah*
- D 8 **Come! See** [two imperatives] the deeds of the Lord,
 the desolations that he has made *on the earth*!
- E 9 He causes wars to cease to the end of the *earth*,
 he shatters the bow, breaks the spear, and burns the shields
 with fire.
- D 10 **“Be silent and know** [two imperatives] that I am true God!
 I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!”
- A" 11 The Lord of Hosts is with us,
 the **God** of Jacob is **our refuge**. *Selah*

Thus, in Throntveit’s proposal, the poem’s structural elements are marked by the repetition of signal vocabulary. The “A sections” provide a triptych for the start, middle, and end of the poem and are indicated by “God” and “our refuge.” The upper half of the poem is arranged according to the chiasmic progression of “earth” > “shake” > “rage” > “not shaken” > “rage” > “shake” > “earth.” The lower half of the poem is arranged according to the chiasmic progression of two imperatives + “on the earth” > “earth” > two imperatives + “in the earth.” Altogether, an impressive and plausible argument. What is most compelling about the proposal is that it sees parallel (yet different) chiasmic structures operating in the first and second halves of the psalm and accounts for the repetition of the key phrase “God is our refuge.”

As strong as it is, I prefer a different way of understanding the structure of the psalm. Several aspects of Throntveit’s treatment trouble me. First, the three A sections do not align very closely. The second two A sections are identical both in Hebrew and in English: “The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our

refuge.” But the first A section is actually significantly different: “God is our refuge and strength, a clear help, found in troubles.” In Hebrew, the differences are even more evident. Verses 7 and 11 have *ישקב לנו אלהי יעקב*—literally “a stronghold for us is the God of Jacob”—whereas verse 1 has *אלהים לנו מחסה ועז*—literally “God is for us a refuge.” Throntveit argues that *משבג* and *מחסה* are “a common word pair in poetic texts” and thus, one is left to conclude, near synonyms. It is true that the terms are a common word pair, but that does not make them synonyms or even near synonyms. Even more importantly, Throntveit simply does not account for the important phrase “The Lord of hosts is with us” in his structuring of the psalm! And that verse sounds the keynote and central message of the psalm, as Throntveit himself points out by quoting Luther’s summary of the psalm: God “is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends His church and His word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and sin.”¹⁴ Throntveit also does not account for the repetition of the terms “mountains,” “seas,” “nations,” or “*selah*.” Finally, and I may be too picky here, the two halves of the poem are imbalanced—the top half is noticeably longer than the bottom half. And within the upper half, the B and C sections are twice as long as the B* section. As I demonstrated in the first section of this essay, the Hebrew poets were usually (not always) careful about keeping the parallel units of their poems the same length (measured in terms of the number of lines; Hebrew poetry did not count meter). They were not normally wooden or strict about this, but in general (as in the examples given earlier in this essay) they were fairly consistent. (I do concede that Throntveit would be just in wondering if my foolish mind weren’t troubled by hobgoblins.)

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PSALM 46: THREE STANZAS, TWO CHORUSES, ONE PSALM

In the “Translation and Layout” section of this essay, I arranged the psalm as I understand it:

Six-line stanza (*Selah*)
 Six-line stanza
 Chorus (*Selah*)

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *A Manual of the Book of Psalms, or, the Subject-Contents of All the Psalms*; first translated into English by Henry Cole (London: R.B. Seeley & W. Burnside, 1837), 132. Cited in Throntveit.

Six-line stanza
Chorus (*Selah*)

There are several arguments supporting this structure of the psalm. First, note the placement of the three instances of *selah* after verses 3, 7, and 11. Second, if this structure is followed, each of the three stanzas consists of an even six lines. Third, each of the three stanzas has a coherent meaning that contributes to the overall development of the psalm. And fourth, this structure and arrangement highlights how the psalm builds to its theological and poetic culmination in verse 10.

Psalm 46 is a psalm of trust. Several elements are characteristic of the psalms of trust:¹⁵ first, expressions of trust, such as “I fear no evil” (23:4) or “whom shall I fear?” (27:1); second, confidence in the presence and protection of the Lord, such as “you are with me” (23:4) or “the Lord is the stronghold of my life” (27:1); and third, vivid metaphorical depictions of threat, such as “I walk through the darkest valley” (23:4) or “though an army encamp against me” (27:3) or “the snare of the fowler . . . the deadly pestilence” (91:3). All of these elements are present in Psalm 46.

The psalm’s opening line sings its song of trust in the key of Zion theology: “God is our refuge and strength, a clear help, found in troubles. Therefore, we do not fear.” Zion theology (also known as Davidic, Royal, or Judean theology) had several key tenets: First, the “double election of David and Zion”—God had chosen (elected) David and his line as king (messiah, son); God had also elected Zion (Jerusalem) as God’s dwelling place. Second, because of this election, God would preserve both David’s line and also Jerusalem. The initial expression of trust is similar to the opening lines of Psalms 23, 27, and 91. Here, the emphasis is on God as refuge. Jerome Creach has argued in several places that God as “refuge” is the central theological witness of the entire book of Psalms.¹⁶ To name just a few of the important occurrences of this concept, Psalm 2:12 says, “Happy are all who take refuge in him.” Psalm 16, the first psalm of trust in the Psalter, begins, “Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.” And Psalm 91 begins, “You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord . . . will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my rock in whom I trust.’” And indeed, the God of refuge certainly is the primary metaphor of trust in Psalm 46.

Stanza 1: God’s presence in and protection from “natural evil”

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,
a clear help, found in troubles.
- 2 Therefore, we do not fear when the earth quakes,

¹⁵ Rolf Jacobson and Karl Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

¹⁶ Jerome Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996); *The Destiny of the Righteous in the Psalms* (St Louis: Chalice, 2008).

when mountains shake in the heart of the seas,
 3 when its waters rage and roil,
 when mountains heave with its arrogance. Selah.

Each of the three stanzas in Psalm 46 exhibits its own internal structure, which delineates each section as a stanza. Another way of saying this is to note that the three stanzas do not share a common structure. This is the case in all stanza-based psalms, such as Psalms 42/43, 114, 119, and so on: in each of those psalms, each stanza is clear, yet each one bears its own shape. It is the same in Psalm 46. The first stanza of Psalm 46 is constructed with a chiasmic structure that pivots around two parallel phrases in verse 2, translated here as “when the earth quakes” and “when mountains shake”—these two phrases are the apex around which the two halves of the stanza pivot. In Hebrew, each phrase is marked by a temporal *bet* (ב) followed by an infinitive construct. The first half of the stanza expresses trust in God; the second half of the stanza names with vivid imagery the turbulent crisis in which the psalmist’s community finds itself.

The psalm of trust begins with the opening declaration of God as “refuge.” The common term “refuge” (מחסה) is paired with another common term, “strength” (עז). God’s strength and refuge are found “in troubles” (the same phrase occurs in Ps 31:8). Because God is refuge and strength, the psalmist declares, “Therefore” (על כן) “we do not fear” (or “we will not fear”). As noted above, the declaration of trust that “we do not fear” is a frequent feature of the psalms of trust. But the “therefore” connecting God’s providential “refuge” and the psalmist’s confidence is crucial. The psalmist is only able to remain confident because of God’s protecting agency in the midst of dire threats.

In stanza 1, the dire threats consist of what theologians name “natural evil”: “when the earth quakes,” “when mountains shake,” “when its waters rage,” “when mountains heave.” The picture here is of a creation—and specifically an ocean—that is not pacific. Far from it, creation and especially the ocean are in rebellion against the life-giving will of the Creator. In the Old Testament, not only are humans in rebellion against God, but creation itself is. The “heart of the seas” is a common phrase in Hebrew that refers to the very center of the raging, roiling, rebelling sea. In modern English, the phrase “heart of the seas” may connote a romantic sense and engender a sense of awe. But in biblical Hebrew, the phrase connoted the very dangerous, cold, and life-taking depths of the oceans, and engendered not awe but raw fear.

In short, stanza 1 declares confidence in God’s protective refuge in the context of dire threats from “natural evil.”

Stanza 2: God’s presence in and protection from “moral evil”

4 A river—its streams make glad the City of God,
 The Most High makes his dwelling holy.
 5 God is in its midst—it shall not be shaken,

God will help it when morning dawns.
 6 Nations rage, kingdoms shake!
 He raises his voice, earth melts.

The first stanza culminated with four cascading, oceanic phrases depicting the rebellious natural evil threatening the people—“when the earth quakes,” “when mountains shake,” “when its waters rage,” “when mountains heave.” Stanza 2 responds to this with a watery image of God’s protective presence—“A river!” The river symbolizes the life-giving will and presence of the Creator: “its streams make glad the City of God, the Most High makes his dwelling holy.” The “City of God,” of course, is Jerusalem—God’s chosen dwelling place, according to Royal theology (Zion theology). Noting that there is no proper physical river in Jerusalem, some earlier interpreters of Psalm 46 wondered if the psalm were not originally composed in or for a different city. But such an approach misses both the poetic and the theological point of the psalm. Psalm 46 is theological poetry! An artist (or theologian) can put a river wherever she wants one! The river here symbolizes the Temple on Mount Zion as the new Garden of Eden, about which Genesis says, “A river flows out of Eden to water the garden” (2:10). The river gives life. The symbolism of the garden was carved into the walls of Jerusalem’s temple throughout, where there were also carved “palm trees, and open flowers” (1 Kgs 6:29, 32, 35). Thus, opposing the rebelling waters of the seas, God placed a river to make glad the city of God.

The center of stanza 2 is verse 5, with its three phrases whose syntactical function may be illustrated by the following layout and more literal translation:

God is in her midst
 She shall not be shaken
 God will help her

The key verb “shaken” (מָרַט)—which occurred earlier in verse 2 to describe the natural evil “when mountains shake”—is reversed here to say that the City of God “shall not be shaken.” Again, note that the confidence of the psalmist is not self-generated from within the human aspects of the city, but rather is generated by the presence, providence, and protection of God.

Here, they describe the rebellious actions of nations and kingdoms—human communities that rebel against and defy the life-giving will of the Creator. The nations and kingdoms bring war, spread death, and seek to defy God.

In stanza 2, however, the evil from which God protects the chosen people is “moral evil”—that is, from human beings. The psalm says “nations rage, kingdoms shake!” The verbs “rage” (הִמָּדָה) and “shake” (מָרַט) are again significant. Earlier in the psalm those two verbs described the rebellious actions of nature, where

“mountains shake” and “waters rage.” Here, they describe the rebellious actions of nations and kingdoms—human communities that rebel against and defy the life-giving will of the Creator. The nations and kingdoms bring war, spread death, and seek to defy God.

The Chorus: The Lord of Hosts is with us

7 The Lord of Hosts is with us,
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

The psalm then moves to the first occurrence of what I understand as the “chorus” or “refrain.” Most likely, this phrase would have been chanted or sung by the congregation or community at worship. Psalms 115:9–11 and 118:2–4 describe three different groups within Israel’s worship as “Israel,” “the house of Aaron,” and “those who fear the Lord.” These groups most likely are the congregation, the priestly choir, and non-Israelite worshippers of the Lord. Psalm 136 includes a responsorial phrase: “for his steadfast love endures forever.” The liturgical directions in Psalms 124:1 and 129:1—“let Israel now say”—seem to indicate that certain psalms were sung with selected phrases voiced by the congregation as refrains. In Psalm 46, the refrain is “The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Because it is now very familiar to us, this refrain may strike the modern reader as rather dull. But do not sleep on the psalmist’s fastball! The phrase “Lord of hosts”—lovingly translated by Eugene Peterson throughout *The Message* as “God-of-Angel-Armies” is literally a combative image of God. God commands the armies of the heavens and deploys them to protect the fragile and vulnerable people. Peterson also nicely translated “God of Jacob” here as “Jacob-wrestling God,” recalling the story of Genesis 32 and Israel’s penchant to defy and struggle against her own God.¹⁷ One should also note again the repetition of the signal term “refuge” to describe God’s protective agency.

Stanza 3: God’s overcoming of both “natural and moral evil”

8 Come! See the deeds of the Lord,
the desolations that he has made on the earth!
9 He causes wars to cease to the end of the earth,
he shatters the bow, breaks the spear, and burns the shields with fire.
10 “Be silent and know that I am true God!
I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!”

¹⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003), 958.

The third stanza of the psalm brings together the threats of both natural evil and moral evil. The psalmist summons both community and reader: “Come! See the deeds of the Lord.” Whereas we are prone to fear the mighty deeds of both nature and the nations in rebellion against God, the psalmist invites us rather to consider “the desolations that he has made on the earth.” The term “desolations” is a surprising word in this context. The word denotes a “horror” or “wasteland.” As such, it may seem an odd term to describe the actions of the Creator God. But the point here is that where human beings wage war, God will wage peace with whatever devastating force God needs to do so. Because God “causes war to cease to the end of the earth,” to drive the point home (no pun intended), the psalm describes that God “shatters the bow, breaks the spear, and burns the shields.” The picture is of the silent, broken battlefield after the horrific clamor of battle. I am reminded here of the scene toward the end of the movie *Patton*, where the general visits a devastated and silent battlefield and witnesses the suffering of a common soldier.

The psalm culminates with the sudden sound of the voice of God. Into the clamor and commotion of battle, God shouts, “Be silent and know that I am God!” This verse is often translated as “be still and know that I am God,” and as such, it is whispered pietistically in prayer or printed in calming script amid pastoral scenes on posters and internet memes. While such “receptions” of the verse are legitimate, the phrase in the psalm itself is more like a shout than a whisper. God shouts, “Silence!” The meaning is that all creation should cease struggling against and defying the life-giving will of the Creator—“cease to do evil, learn to do good,” as the prophet Amos wrote. Put down your weapons, set aside your sinful will, and align yourself with the God of life.

And then comes the line: “I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!” To paraphrase what God is saying here: “At the end of the day (‘when morning dawns’ [see stanza 2]), my life-giving reign of love will be acknowledged where there is moral evil—‘among the nations’ [see stanza 2]—and also where there is natural evil—‘in the earth’ [see stanza 1].”

The Chorus: The Lord of Hosts is with us

11 The Lord of Hosts is with us,
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

The second occurrence of the refrain, or chorus, functions as a sort of poetic denouement to the poem. Psalm 46 having culminated with the shout of God to set aside our rebellion and acknowledge the inevitable reign of God over both moral and natural evil, the chorus gives us the words to claim the presence and power of God in our own lives and communities. By speaking or singing or simply saying the chorus, we join the congregation of Israel in pledging our trust in God’s reign of love and peace.

To put this another way, when we say, “The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge,” we are asking that God’s reign might also happen among

us. Or, as a famous interpreter of Psalm 46 said about another prayer, “God’s kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us.”¹⁸

Or to quote Mark Throntveit: “Yes, Luther was right. The psalm is best seen as a psalm about God and the divine presence, not Jerusalem. It functions as a declaration to God’s people concerning the unimaginable source of strength that is theirs, and ours, in God . . . or as Luther’s hymn makes clear, in Christ.”¹⁹ ⊕

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¹⁸ Martin Luther, “Small Catechism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 1163.

¹⁹ Throntveit, “Commentary on Psalm 46.”