PSALMS 45–100

A Theological Commentary for Preachers

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PSALM 46:1–11

Psalm of Orientation

Chaos to Cosmos

LABELING IT A PSALM of orientation indicates that Psalm 46 sings of how things are/should be: despite trouble and turmoil, God is the one who can be trusted, and whose presence therefore precludes all fear. So this composition does not have a thanksgiving or testimony, a lament or complaint. It is, essentially, a psalm of confidence in the might of Yahweh, thus a psalm of orientation.[1]

Translation

46:1	God [is] to us a refuge and strength,
	a help in distress, He is present always.
46:2	Therefore we will not fear when the earth quakes
	and when the mountains totter into the heart of the seas,
46:3	when its waters roar [and] roil,
	when the mountains shake at its surging.
46:4	A river—its streams make the city of God joyful,
	the holy abodes of the Most High.
46:5	God [is] in her midst, she will not totter;
	God will help her at the turning of dawn.
46:6	The nations made a[n up]roar, the kingdoms tottered;
	He gave His voice, the earth melts.
46:7	Yahweh of Armies [is] with us;
	a stronghold to us [is] the God of Jacob.
46:8	Come, behold the deeds of Yahweh,
	who has wrought desolations in the earth.

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1. Along with Psalms 48; 76; 84; 87; and 122, this psalm is considered one of the Songs of Zion, with a reference to the "city of God" (46:4).

> 46:9   He terminates wars unto the end of the earth:
>
>   the bow He breaks and He snaps the spear;
>
>   shields He burns with fire.
>
> 46:10 "Stop and know that I am God;
>
>   I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."
>
> 46:11 Yahweh of Armies [is] with us;
>
>   a stronghold to us [is] the God of Jacob.

Structure

Psalm 46 describes God as refuge in natural chaos (46:1–3), in national/political chaos (46:4–7), and closes with a reaffirmation of the divine refuge (46:7–11):[2]

A	"God"; "to us"; "refuge" (**46:1**)			*God as Refuge:*
	B	"earth"; "totter"; "roar" (**46:2–3**)		*Chaos Natural* (**46:1–3**)
		C	"will not totter" (**46:4–5**)	*God as Refuge:*
	B'	"[up]roar"; "tottered"; "earth" (**46:6**)		*Chaos National* (**46:4–7**)
A'	"stronghold"; "to us"; "God" (**46:7**)			
		D	"come," "behold"; "in the earth" nature/nations subdued (**46:8–9**)	*God as Refuge:*
		D'	"stop," "know"; "in the earth" nature/nations exalt (**46:10**)	*Cosmos Universal* (**46:7–11**)
A"	"stronghold"; "to us"; "God" (**46:11**)			

The hinge verse, 46:7 (*A'*), is shareable between the sections 46:4–7 and 46:7–11: it forms the end of the chiasm of 46:1–7 (*A, B, C, B', A'*) and the beginning of the chiasm of 46:7–11 (*A', D, D', A"*; hence the ill-defined gradation of shading at that verse in the figure above[3]). Craigie asserts that the thrust of the psalm concerns divine protection (46:1, 7, 11) on the "earth" (46:2a, 6b, 8b, 9a, 10b), "when chaos attempts to reassert its primacy over order, both in the natural world and in the world of nations and human affairs."[4]

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2. See Jacobson, Rolf A., "Psalm 46," 313.

3. In the third section of the psalm, by "cosmos," I mean the antithesis of "chaos," divine order that subjugates doomed disorder; and by "universal" I intend to show the extent of God's order.

4. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50,* 343, 344. "Earth" is the last word in those lines in the Hebrew.

Theological Focus

> Despite the chaos of nature and of nations, the people of God, ensconced in a divine space with God their stronghold in their midst, remain safe, fearless and joyful, for God subdues the chaos of both nature and nations, transforming it into cosmos, rendering nature and nations as orderly entities that exalt him, as all the earth becomes the city of God!

Commentary

God as Refuge: Chaos Natural; Chaos National (46:1–7)

The first section of the psalm is carefully structured:[5]

46:1a	"God [is] to us a refuge"
46:2a	"the earth"
46:2b	"totter"
46:3a	"roar"
46:5a	"not totter"
46:6aα	"[up]roar"
46:6aβ	"tottered"
46:6b	"the earth"
46:7b	"stronghold to us [is] the God of Jacob"

There is also rhyme and alliteration: בְּמוֹט הָרִים בְּלֵב יַמִּים, *bmot harim blev yammim* ("when the mountains totter into the heart of the seas," 46:2b), as well as a chiasm in 46:2b–3 with collapsing earthly eminences serving as crumbling bookends:

"mountains totter" (46:2bα)
"seas" (46:2bβ)
"waters" (46:3a)
"mountains shake" (46:3b)

Indeed, 46:1a and 46:7b (within the parallel elements *A* and *A'*, respectively; see the psalm structure above, and see below) are even more intricately matched.[6]

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5. See Auffret, "La Ville de Dieu," 328, 331.
6. Tsumura, "Literary Structure," 44.

Initials

א, ʾ	"God [אֱלֹהִים, *'elohim*]	
ל, *l*	[is] to us [לָנוּ, *lanu*]	**46:1a**
מ, *m*	a refuge and strength [מַחֲסֶה וָעֹז, *machaseh wa'oz*]."	

מ	"A stronghold [מִשְׂגָּב, *misgav*]	
ל	to us [is] [־לָנוּ, *–lanu*]	**46:7b**
א	the God of Jacob [אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב, *'elohe ya'aqov*]."	

The sequence of the first letters of each of the elements is: א, ל, מ (46:1a) and מ, ל, א (46:7b), a masterful piece of chiastic alliteration. The centering upon God as refuge, strength, and stronghold tells it all!

The psalm commences by describing God with two single words, "refuge" and "strength" (46:1a), and then with two double words in Hebrew, "help in-distress" (עֶזְרָה בְצָרוֹת, *'ezrah btsarot*) and "He-is-present always" (נִמְצָא מְאֹד, *nimtsa' m'od*) (46:1b)—thus accentuating aid from deity. The earth and its major constituent parts, the mountains and the seas, may undergo turbulence, but another location, the "city of God" (46:4), remains unshaken, a source of joy to the people of God, its inhabitants. Indeed, God himself has his "holy abodes" there—he is in its midst (46:4b–5a).[7]

In light of the central placement of the "untottering" city of God (*C;* 46:4–5; see psalm structure above), in between the quaking, tottering, roaring, roiling chaos of nature (*B;* 46:2–3) and of nations (*B';* 46:6)—both marked as being on "earth" (46:2a, 6b)—it is very likely that the refuge and strength is the "city of God" itself.[8] Of course, behind this bastion is God himself, bookending 46:1–7 (*A* and *A';* 46:1, 7). Thus the "contrast presented in the psalm is not simply between Yahweh and chaos but more specifically between the city of God and the surrounding tumult" on the rest of the planet.[9] There is also the pointed opposition between the chaotic waters of the earth ("seas"; 46:2b–3a) and the joyous waters of the city of God ("river," "streams," 46:4a).[10] The chaotic waters may "roar" (המה, *hmh;* 46:3b[11]) and the unruly nations may create an "[up]roar" (also המה; 46:6a),[12] but God's abode only rejoices (46:4a). And, while "totter" describes both the mountains in 46:2b and the kingdoms in 46:6a, the city of God—it does *not* "totter" (46:5a), because of the very presence of God "in her midst"—she constitutes the "holy abodes of the Most High" (46:4b)!

> While other celebrated cities owe their significance, power, and splendor pre-eminently to natural conditions for example, to their commanding situation on streams or seas, to their position in the midst of the paths of commerce, or to the fruitfulness and productivity of the surrounding country, Jerusalem, the most significant and celebrated of all the cities in the world, is distinguished precisely

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7. The plural "holy abodes" likely indicates the majesty of the location wherein dwells deity.

8. The repeat of "help" (noun in 46:1b anticipating the verb in 46:5b) also indicates that divine help is directed to the city, rendering it unshakable.

9. Kelly, "Psalm 46," 308.

10. The rivers and streams of the city of God are reminiscent of the waters of Eden (Gen 2:10–14).

11. The "its" in 46:3a could be read as "his," i.e., "God's," thus placing the waters completely under divine control.

12. The phrase יֶהֱמוּ יֶחְמְרוּ, *yehemu yechmru* (46:3a, "roar [and] roil") even sounds like a ruckus out of control.

by the absence of these natural advantages. Standing lonely in the wilderness, built upon hard and rocky soil, with no rich pastures, with hardly a field, without a river, indeed with hardly a spring, far from the great paths of commerce, she owes her unique significance and fame to quite other causes than those of the other great cities of the world. She is what she is without a peer, only through the divine world-conquering revelation of which she was the scene, and which, proceeding from her, has penetrated the whole world. She plays no manner of rôle in any other direction whatever. He who has no eye for these facts will be very much disappointed in a journey to Jerusalem.[13]

The preeminence of God's city is simply because it was the dwelling of the divine revealer—and it will be so again, one day!

This notion of God overcoming chaos is, of course, grounded in prior the language of creation (Gen 1:1–2).[14] But the moment of divine intervention in this psalm, "at the turning of dawn" (לִפְנוֹת בֹּקֶר, *lipnot boqer;* Ps 46:5b) is also when God interjected himself into the fracas to finish off the Egyptians at the exodus (Exod 14:27; also employing לִפְנוֹת בֹּקֶר, the only other occurrence of the phrase in the OT)—another subduing of chaotic waters. Thus, in the sequence of Psalm 46, a turn from the chaos of nature (46:1–3) to the chaos of nations (46:4–7) is deftly accomplished. Now it is these human organizations that pose a threat to the wellbeing of God's people, but they are no match for God: he raises his voice and all opposition melts away (46:6b). How can they not, when it is the "Yahweh of Armies" who is with his people and in his city (46:7a)?

God as Refuge: Cosmos Universal (46:7–11)

With the *inclusio* of the refrain in 46:7, 11 (*A′* and *A″*; see structure of psalm above), the final section of the psalm reaffirms God as refuge and strength, with chaos finally neutralized and "cosmos" (order) universally established.

Centering upon the divine "stronghold," 46:7 is itself cleverly created:[15]

"Yahweh	*Personal noun*
of Armies [is]	
with us;	*Prepositional phrase*
a stronghold	
to us	*Prepositional phrase*
[is] the God	
of Jacob."	*Personal noun*

Both "Yahweh" and "of Jacob" emphasize the personal nature of deity and his intimacy with his people—they are blessed by his protective presence.

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13. Ninck, *Auf biblischen Pfaden*, 90–91 (translated by McFayden, "Messages of the Psalms," 101).

14. God's conquest of the chaos of the sea is not only protological, pertaining to creation (Job 38:8–11; Pss 33:6; 65:7; 104:5–9; Prov 8:22–31; Jer 5:22), but also eschatological, pertaining to consummation (Pss 18:16–18; 93:3; 77:17; Isa 17:12–14; 59:15–20; Hab 3:8; Nah 1:4).

15. From Auffret, "La Ville de Dieu," 327.

"Come" and "behold," bids the psalmist, what God has done (46:8a): blustering nature ("earth"), has been rebuked with desolation (46:8b), and cantankerous nations have been rebuffed with a decisive termination of their wars (46:9). The very instruments of battle are destroyed (46:9bc), attesting to God's sovereignty over history and his dominion over every human power. Notice the echoing of "earth" in 46:8–10 describing the work of God in this final section of the psalm:[16]

46:8b	Desolation "in the *earth*"
46:9aα	"terminates wars"
46:9aβ	"unto the end of the *earth*"
46:9bc	"bow," "spear," "shields" destroyed
46:10b	Exaltation "in the *earth*"

Despite the rambunctious rioting of the "earth" (46:2a), God gives voice and the "earth" melts (46:6b) as he wreaks desolations in the "earth" (46:8b) and as wars are terminated unto the end of the "earth" (46:9a). Instead of the explosive ferment of nature and nations on "earth," it is the exaltation of God by the faithful that will encompass all the "earth" (46:10b). What is remarkable is that the peace and stability of the city of God appears to be spreading to the entirety of the globe: God who is in the midst of the former (46:5a) will soon be exalted all over the latter (46:10b). What was characteristic of the city of God is becoming the norm in the earth of God. And so, the planet, like God's city, will never totter again (46:5a), and the chaotic waters of the earth will acquire the characteristics of the joyful waters of the city of God (46:5b)—perhaps as these fluids flow out into the rest of creation.

> In a word, the cosmos has come into being according to the microcosmic model of the city of God. Likewise, as the proleptic model of peace, the city is the substantive source from which political peace flows, at which and through which political peace takes place, a point signified particularly by the destruction of the weapons of war . . . [46:9]. The city is the mythico-geographical creative center or navel of the universe: here is the vertical point of contact where the Most High God overcomes the chaotic deep; horizontally, this is the point where the nations of the earth are overcome and peace is established to "the end of the earth."[17]

In sum, creation has transitioned "from chaos to cosmos," as a result of divine activity.[18] All of the "earth," has become the "city of God"!

Following the psalmist's dual invitation to "come" and "behold" (46:8), out of nowhere and unannounced, Yahweh speaks, himself endorsing another pair of imperatives: "stop" and "know" (46:10a). He is likely addressing his own people, perhaps stricken with fear at the chaos of 46:1–3. There is no need for panic, avers deity. He is in control.[19] The community of God can stop fretting and know with confidence that the God of the hosts of the universe ("Yahweh of Armies") is with them, a stronghold to his people (46:11). Amen!

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16. Auffret, "La Ville de Dieu," 329. In 46:9c, עֲגָלוֹת, *'analot* ("wagons/carts") is revocalized as עֲגִלוֹת, *'anilot* ("shields").

17. Kelly, "Psalm 46," 309.

18. Kelly, "Psalm 46," 309.

19. And so Craigie, *Psalms 1–50,* 342, translates 46:10a "relax, and know that I am God."

Sermon Map

I. Chaos against God

    The turbulence of nature and of nations (46:1–3, 6a)

    Move-to-relevance: chaos in our world today

II. City of God

    The joyous safe-space for the people of God (46:4–5)

    Move-to-relevance: God as a refuge

II. Campaign of God

    Subduing of nature and nations (46:8–9)

III. *Come, See, Stop, Know!*

    Trusting God amidst the turmoil of nature and nations