PSALM 46: A STUDY IN IMAGERY

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PSALM 46 has, as a rule, been understood in the light of its Zion motif. Gunkel typed it a song of Zion.[1] Rohland found embodied in it a Jebusite tradition which was borrowed by Israel to signify the election of Zion.[2] Kraus accepted the presence of a Jebusite tradition but claimed that the tradition was used in the psalm simply to celebrate the glory, not the election, of Zion.[3]

The outstanding exception to this rule has been Mowinckel who found in the psalm an expression of the New Year's cultic battle by which Yahweh gained kingship over the nations; Zion was the place of battle simply because it was the cultic site where the cultic battle took place.[4] In a word, Mowinckel emphasized the motif of universalism — i.e., Yahweh's universal victory and exaltation over the nations of the earth — whereas others have emphasized the particularistic motif of Zion, the dwelling place of Israel's God.

The two motifs are obviously connected in the psalm. However, the nature of their organic relationship has not been clearly grasped. After briefly summing up the mythological tradition embodied in the psalm, Harrelson indicates what appears to this writer to be the key to an understanding of this relationship:

> *Yahweh is Lord of the universe, but the seat of His rule is Zion, the holy hill.* The poets of Israel have also drawn upon ancient Near Eastern mythology in their description of Zion and of Yahweh's rule there. In Psalm 46, Zion is the mountain-city from which the waters flow out to water the earth (see Genesis 2:10–14; Ezekiel 28, and so on). Psalm 48 is an even more mythological hymn, representing Zion to be the meeting place of heaven and earth. The nations sought to storm the city but Yahweh scattered them in His wrath. . . . For these psalmists, Zion is already *the center of the universe*, the fount of blessing for both Israel and the foreign nations.[5]

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[1] *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, p. 80.

[2] E. Rohland, *Die Bedeutung der Erwählungstraditionen Israel für die Eschatologie der alttestamentlichen Propheten* (diss. Heidelberg, 1956), pp. 119 ff.

[3] H. J. Kraus, *Psalmen* (BK 15/1, 1960), pp. 342–47.

[4] *Psalmenstudien*, I, pp. 57 ff. Contrariwise, Gunkel and Kraus, emphasizing the Zion motif, have related the psalm to a Zion festival.

[5] Harrelson, *Interpreting the Old Testament*, p. 414 (italics added). Others have found in Ps 46 the image of the center of the universe — e.g., Kraus, *Psalmen*, pp. 342 ff. — but they tend to emphasize either the particularistic Zion motif (the

This essay will elaborate upon the image of Zion as the creative center or navel of the universe as that image is developed in Ps 46.

Rather than view the psalm from the perspective of its Zion motif, we shall approach Ps 46 in light of its אֶרֶץ ("earth") motif. The prominence of אֶרֶץ suggests that it, rather than Zion, might be considered the *leitmotiv*: it occurs in an emphatic position, as the final word, in vss. 3a, 7, 9, 10a, 11. This motif gives expression to the psalm's universalism. From the perspective of the *'ereṣ* motif, the relationship between it and the Zion motif will be clarified. It will be argued that, on the one hand, in vss. 2–6 *'ereṣ* along with the mountains and waters is presented as participating in a chaotic tumult which is contrasted with the peaceful stability of the city of God; on the other hand, in vs. 11 (or vss. 9–11) *'ereṣ* is presented as corresponding in nature to the city. The transition from the tumult of *'ereṣ* to her peace is accomplished in vs. 7.

That Ps 46 makes use of the mythic imagery of the primeval, chaotic waters in presenting a battle between Yahweh and his adversaries has been generally accepted by commentators since Gunkel's *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit.* However, the relationship of these waters in vs. 4 to *'ereṣ* and the mountains in vss. 3–4 has been largely ignored. Kraus, e.g., suggests simply that an earthquake image has been mixed with the mythic metaphor of the primeval flood.[6] Elsewhere in the OT the shaking, trembling, or melting of *'ereṣ* and the mountains appear to be caused by a theophany, whereas in Ps 46 their tumult is more naturally associated with the chaotic antagonism of the waters.[7] This more natural association will be advocated in the following exposition.

Commentators have commonly pointed to the synonymous parallelism between vss. 3–4 and vs. 7: the shaking (וּבְמוֹט) of the mountains in vs. 3b and the roaring (יֶהֱמוּ) of the waters in vs. 4a parallel the shaking (מָטוּ) of the kingdoms and the roaring (הָמוּ) of the nations in vs. 7a. As the actions of the nations and kingdoms may be understood as synonymous expressions for political disorder, so the actions of the mountains and waters may be understood as synonymous expressions for cosmic disorder; this is supported by their apparent parallel use in vs. 4. In turn, the activity of *'ereṣ* in vs. 3a appears to parallel the tumult of

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center) or the universalistic motif (the universe), whereas Harrelson recognizes the polar unity of the two motifs in the image. Thus one might also write: "Yahweh is the Lord of the universe, *therefore* the seat of His rule is Zion, the holy hill." For a recent exposition of this mythological image, see B. Anderson, *Creation Versus Chaos,* especially pp. 116 ff.

[6] *Psalmen,* p. 342.

[7] For a recent consideration of the first alternative, see J. Schreiner, *Sion-Jerusalem, Yahwes Königssitz* (1963), pp. 220–25; however, it is not clear whether Schreiner prefers this alternative.

the mountains in vs. 3b, and this suggests that the activity of *'ereṣ* is also to be understood as paralleling the disorder of the nations/kingdoms. This conclusion is supported by the parallelism in vs. 11b where Yahweh declares his victorious exaltation with respect to (בְּ) the nations and *'ereṣ*. In turn, the parallelism of vs. 11b suggests that *'ereṣ* in 7b is a cosmic image for the nations/kingdoms of 7a; thus, the political disorder is overcome and quieted in terms of the melting (תָּמוּג) of *'ereṣ*.[8] Indeed, vs. 11 may be considered an explication of the theophanic rebuke in vs. 7b. Finally, whatever the meaning of the verb used with *'ereṣ* in vs. 3a, clearly it expresses a threatening activity which is normally to be feared; vs. 3 (or vss. 3–4) draw(s) a conclusion from vs. 2; "we will *not* fear" the threatening activity of *'ereṣ* and the mountains (and the waters) because God is a refuge in such troubles.[9]

The foregoing paragraph accords well with Mowinckel's interpretation of the psalm: Yahweh's exaltation of himself over a defeated cosmic-political tumult and therein his establishment of his universal kingship over a now peaceful and ordered universe.[10] But what is the relationship between Yahweh's universal exaltation over *'ereṣ*/nations and the Zion motif which is emphasized by most commentators? The question may be asked in other terms: what is the relationship between the allusion to creation mythology — i.e., the chaotic waters of vs. 4 — and the allusion to paradise mythology — i.e., the life-giving waters

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[8] Cf. Ps 76 9. Pss 48 and 76 are closely associated with Ps 46.

[9] Emendations have often been offered for הָמִיר, the most common being הָמוֹג. This is the only use of מוּר in a description of a natural or cosmic phenomenon and thus may suggest something unusual about the activity here ascribed to *'ereṣ*; cf. P. L. Krinetzki, "Der anthologische Stil des 46. Psalms und seine Bedeutung für die Datierungsfrage," *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift*, 12 (1961), p. 57. H. Schmidt understood *'ereṣ* in vs. 3 to refer to the nether world, the chaotic deep, and he emended הָמִיר to הָמְרוּת, meaning "be rebellious, become a tumult." He also referred the masculine suffixes in vs. 4 to *'ereṣ*, suggesting that the gender was determined by the preceding בְּלֵב יַמִּים. Schmidt further argued that the psalm reflects a tradition that the holy rock at the peak of Mount Zion locked out the waters of the underworld and thus was precisely the point at which the underworld would attack the upperworld; cf. *Die Psalmen* (HAT, 1934), pp. 87 ff. Schmidt set forth this thesis in detail in *Der Heilige Fels in Jerusalem* (Tübingen, 1933). Jerusalem and its holy rock as the center of the cosmos is a common idea in rabbinic Judaism. Recently, M. Dahood has also identified *'ereṣ* in vs. 3 with the nether world and has supported his case by interpreting *hmr* as a reference to Mot's city, *hmry*, in the Ugaritic texts; cf. *Psalms*, I (Anchor Bible, 1966), pp. 278 f. The common conclusion of Krinetzki, Schmidt, and Dahood is that בְּהָמִיר אָרֶץ describes a self-initiating, active tumult on the part of *'ereṣ*, rather than *'ereṣ* as a passive no-man's-land over which the waters and Yahweh do battle as in Ps 104 5–9.

[10] The destruction of the weapons in vs. 10b is expressive of the peace motif; the same is found in Ps 76 and elsewhere, cf. Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 526.

which fertilize the earth from the garden-mountain-city of God presented
in vs. 5?[11] The answer obviously is that Yahweh who wins victory over
chaos is concretely the God of Zion; however, this generalization calls
for elaboration in accordance with the specific terms and images of
the psalm.

In spite of the fact that vs. 2 refers simply to God as a refuge and
strength, a help in trouble, the language suggests more specifically that
it is the city of God that is the divine refuge; thus, the divine help
(עֶזְרָה) in vs. 2 anticipates the concrete reference to such divine help
of the city (יַעְזְרֶהָ) in vs. 6. This is to say that the opposition or con-
trast presented in the psalm is not simply between Yahweh and chaos
but more specifically between the city of God and the surrounding
tumult.[12] Commentators have commonly pointed to the contrast between
the chaotic waters of vs. 4 and the river whose streams make glad the
city of God in vs. 5. This contrast may be extended to include 'ereṣ
and the mountains. In vs. 6 it is said that the city "shall not be shaken"
(בַּל־תִּמּוֹט). This is the same verb used of the shaking mountains,
vs. 3b, and kingdoms, vs. 7a; thus a contrast is indicated between the
turbulence of the mountains and the stability of the mountain-garden-
city of God. Concerning 'ereṣ, it is said that God, the Most High of
vs. 5, is in the midst of the city (בְּקִרְבָּהּ), vs. 6, and similarly in vs. 11
that God is exalted (cf. "the Most High") with respect to the nations
and 'ereṣ (בַּגּוֹיִם and בָּאָרֶץ).[13] This suggests that by virtue of Yahweh's

[11] It was Gunkel who found both mythologies in the psalm; for the paradise
mythology, cf. Genesis (HK, 1917), pp. 35 f. For a confirmation concerning the paradise
mythology from Ugaritic texts, see Herbert Schmid, "Yahwe und die Kulttraditionen
von Jerusalem," ZAW, 67 (1955), pp. 168 ff.

[12] There is a confusing ambivalence on the part of many commentators at this
point; e.g., Kraus, Psalmen, pp. 341 f., and A. Weiser, The Psalms, pp. 368–74. On the
one hand it is emphasized: "Nicht Jerusalem ist 'Zuflucht und Schutz' in Nöten und
Katastrophen, sondern Jahwe" (Kraus); on the other hand, it is recognized that the
imagery of the psalm points to the city of God or its temple as the refuge: ". . . the
phrase about the 'safe stronghold' receives its specific colouring from the prospect of
the deliverance of the city of God — the holy city, the visible pledge of divine protec-
tion" (Weiser, p. 372). The point at issue is that a proper grasp of the imagery of the
psalm indicates that the contrast or "dualism" in the psalm is not between Yahweh
and "what is only finite" (Weiser) but between the city of God and all that threatens
it. Clearly, the city of vss. 5–6 is an exception to the tumult and melting of the 'ereṣ
in vss. 3 and 7. Compare Luther's re-mythologizing of the psalm in "Ein' Feste Burg"
where "Christ Jesus" as "the Man of God's own choosing" functions in the place of
the city of God's choosing; the Man, like the city, is the mediator of the victory over
"our ancient foe."

[13] The בְּ is also used with 'ereṣ in vs. 9; compare the similar sounding בָּאֵשׁ at the
conclusion of vs. 10; note the reiteration of בְּ in vss. 3–4. The initial use of the "b"
phoneme occurs so frequently in the psalm that it clearly appears to be a poetic device.
Muilenburg has written that repetition "serves . . . to center the thought . . ., to give

victorious establishment of cosmic and political peace, presented in
vss. 7, 9–11 — note the use of *'ereṣ* in each verse — his relationship with
'ereṣ has come to correspond to his relationship with his city, the city
of peace.[14]

The elaboration of the psalm's imagery may now be summarized
and made explicit. Earth (*'ereṣ*) and the mountains have been firmly
established as a result of Yahweh's victory, and thus, like his city,
they shall not be shaken; similarly, the waters which threatened destruc-
tion have been subdued and thus transformed into the river of life which
flows out from the city. In a word, the cosmos has come into being ac-
cording 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 in vs. 10.[15] 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;[16] horizontally, this is the point
where the nations of the earth are overcome and peace is established to
"the end of the earth," vs. 10. Thus, the Zion motif, concerning the
center, and the *'ereṣ* motif, concerning the universe, are organically
related, and the use of the same term, *'ereṣ*, throughout the psalm,
especially in vss. 3a, 7, and 11, makes particularly vivid the central theme:
the transition from chaos to cosmos at the microcosmic center of the
universe.

The image of the center or navel of the world is one that Mircea
Eliade has often discussed, and his presentation of the general morphology
of the image both confirms its presence in Ps 46 and gives a clue to the
psalm's significance.[17] Eliade begins with man's problem concerning

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continuity to the writer's thought; the repeated word or phrase is often strategically
located, thus providing a clue to the movement and stress of the poem"; J. Muilenburg,
"A Study in Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style," *Suppl. VetT*, 1 (1953), p. 99.
In Ps 46 this applies both to the phoneme "b" and the word *'ereṣ*.

[14] Note the destruction of weapons as a sign of peace in connection with the use of
Salem (cf. שָׁלֵם) in Ps 76 3–4. G. von Rad has emphasized the importance of the peace
motif in the Zion pilgrimage tradition; cf. "The City on the Hill," *The Problems of
the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, pp. 232 ff. For the common tradition behind the Zion
psalms, including Ps 46, and the Zion pilgrimage tradition, see H. Wildberger, "Die
Völkerwallfahrt zum Zion, Jes II:1–5," *VetT*, 7 (1957), pp. 62 ff.

[15] This political "cosmicization" finds expression in Ps 76 12 through a pilgrimage
motif: the kings of the earth are commanded to bring gifts to Yahweh who dwells at
Salem/Zion, vs. 3.

[16] Cf. Eissfeldt's discussion of יַרְכְּתֵי צָפוֹן, found at Ps 48 3 and Isa 14 13, in *Baal
Zaphon, Zeus Kasios und der Durchzug der Israeliten durchs Meer* (Halle, 1932; Beiträge
zur Religionsgeschichte des Altertums, 1), pp. 16 ff.

[17] Summary in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), pp. 20–65.

orientation in space. If the world of ancient man was to be lived in meaningfully, it had to be spatially founded or oriented; such an establishment was equivalent to the creation of the world, "our world." In the homogeneity and thus relativity of space, an absolute center is established by a hierophany (cf. Ps 46 7, 11, a theophany by the God of/at the city). This center is considered the *axis mundi* where the three cosmic levels — earth, heaven, and the underworld — are in communication (cf. the meeting of the Most High and the waters of the underworld at Zion), as well as the center of the habitable world (cf. the nations/ kingdoms). The center is also considered the *imago mundi* (cf. the city as the model for *'ereṣ*) and as such is the point at which the universe comes to birth or is enlivened as from a navel (cf. the paradisiacal waters that flow out from the city). The establishment and/or defense of the center reiterates the primeval victory of the gods over the dragon or chaotic waters; for the preservation or re-creation of "our world" this victory must be symbolically re-presented each year in the cult. Thus, the establishment and/or preservation of a sacred center is the inseparable correlate to the establishment and/or preservation of a meaningful world. This may be taken as a clue to the existential sitz im leben of Ps 46.

There are two additional points where Eliade is suggestive for an understanding of the psalm. First, as in the psalm, Eliade presents the center in an ambivalent relationship to that which is round about. On the one hand, the center is the *imago mundi* and thus in harmony with "our world" which lies round about; however, on the other hand, beyond and around "our world" is an other world, a chaotic, foreign space which is always threatening "our world" at its center. Thus around the center is an inner ring of harmony and an outer ring of hostility. Interestingly, when this ambivalence is compared with that in Ps 46, the symbolism of rings partially breaks down, i.e., becomes paradoxical, and this is due to the radical universalism of the psalm. There can be no distinction between inner and outer rings; all that is around the city is presented both in threatening tumult and then in peaceful submission.[18] This is made clear by the ambivalent nature of *'ereṣ*. The *'ereṣ* of vs. 3 is the chaotic antagonist of the city, whereas in vs. 11 it is the cosmic correlate to the peaceful city.

Secondly, Eliade claims a cultic use for the mythical drama of the establishment of the center and thus of the world, referring to the Babylonian New Year's festival. Mowinckel found the cultic sitz im leben of Ps 46 in an Israelite equivalent of such a festival. However,

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[18] To some extent, at least, this seems also to be the case in Eliade's presentation; Eliade is not altogether clear to this writer at this point, and the imagery of the two rings is this writer's effort to interpret Eliade.

Mowinckel did not find the imagery of the center of the universe in the psalm but rather simply a creation myth which had been partially historicized through the influence of the exodus tradition. Thus, Zion was the place to which had been transferred the victory originally won at the Reed Sea. However, the only concrete evidence that Mowinckel offers for this thesis with respect to Ps 46 is that in Ps 66 5–7 he finds the motifs of creation and the exodus combined and he finds Ps 46 9 comparable to Ps 66 5.[19] In a word, Mowinckel is able to make very little of the Zion motif in the psalm. Mowinckel's problem may be solved quite simply, by recognizing that, according to the cult's myth, the protological battle of creation and/or against the nations was fought at the *axis/imago mundi*, i.e., at Zion, where it was annually reenacted in the cult.[20]

Finally, the frequent criticism voiced against Mowinckel concerns his claim that in the New Year's festival Yahweh *became* king. Though Mowinckel disavowed the conclusion that Yahweh annually lost his kingship as the prelude to regaining it, this is the logical implication of his position that men like Kraus have continued to press home.[21] The logic cannot be denied; however, it can be more or less successfully evaded. The mythico-cultic drama presented in Ps 46 makes room for this possibility by focusing attention on the opposition between the city of God and chaos rather than simply between God and chaos. The result is that Yahweh is presented as the long-standing king of his long-standing city.[22] Thus, the rigorous logic of Yahweh's not being king and then becoming king through the cultic reenactment of creation is softened by positing Yahweh's long-standing kingship over his city which is the

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[19] *Psalmenstudien*, I, p. 63.

[20] Understanding the mythological allusion to creation in the context of a mythology of the creative center, one is able to give added substance to Mowinckel's claim (*ibid.*, p. 64) that if the setting for the battle of Ps 46 is Jerusalem, "then that is only what was originally believed and 'acted' in the cult." Rohland (cited above, n. 2), p. 130, has understood the psalm as a song of trust and found three reasons in the psalm for the worshippers' trust: trust in Yahweh as a refuge from the attack of the chaotic flood, the description of Zion as the dwelling place of Yahweh, and Yahweh's help of the city in the face of the attack by the nations. These three reasons are grasped in their organic unity when the psalm is understood in the light of the image of Zion as the creative center of the (nations of the) earth.

[21] See S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, I, pp. 136 ff., and H. J. Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, pp. 206 f., where Kraus argues for Yahweh's eternally being king against H. Schmidt who did accept the logic of Mowinckel's position.

[22] Thus, Rohland (cited above, note 2), pp. 204 f., is justified in questioning Mowinckel's translations of Pss 46 5a and 48 2b–3a: "In both cases Mowinckel paraphrases *nominal sentences* in an ingressive sense which is grammatically excluded. . . . It is quite clear that a long-standing condition is described with the nominal sentence. . . ." That is, Yahweh's being king over Zion is assumed in the psalm as a long-standing, i.e., eternal, condition.

proleptic model of his kingship over the cosmos. Of course, according to the logic of the imagery, the establishment of the city-center and the creation of the universe are one and the same event; i.e., Yahweh becomes king over the city and the earth, the center and the universe, simultaneously.[23] However, the value of the special status of the city is precisely that it allows one to evade this logic, or better, break it down: on the one hand, to assume Yahweh's long-standing, i.e., eternal, kingship over the microcosmic center, and on the other hand, to focus attention on his becoming king over the cosmos. Thus, Israel was able in her cult both to glorify Yahweh's *being* king (Kraus) and to re-present in cultic drama Ywhweh's *becoming* king (Mowinckel). The conclusion is, then, at hand that, through such "illogic," Israel succeeded ontologically in articulating her dynamic sense of reality whereby Being is the proleptic model for Becoming.

[23] This simultaneity appears to find paradoxical expression in Ps 48 where it is said in vs. 9 that God establishes the city through a victorious battle with the kings. Thus, Zion as the established center is both the presupposition, presented in the first stanza, and the consequence, presented in the third stanza, of the victorious battle which is presented in the second stanza.