

A Missional Reading of Psalm 47

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Literary Structure and Setting – A Response to the Action of God

The psalm appears to have been composed as a response to a specific salvific action by YHWH on behalf of the nation of Israel. Commentators are divided as to the *sitz im leben* ('setting in life'), suggesting the need for balance between historic, cultic and eschatological interpretations. In post-exilic times the psalm was incorporated into the autumn celebration of *Rosh ha-Shanah*, [1] and today in the celebration of Christ's ascension.

"From the first word to the last, this (*psalm*) communicates the excitement and jubilation of an enthronement; and the king is God himself." [2]

The literary structure consists of two divisions, each beginning with a call to praise (vv. 1, 6), followed by the 'content of praise' (vv. 2-5, 7-9). [3] The figure of speech is one of progressive parallelism, the comparison revealing "a striking progressive unfolding of the divine plan of salvation." [4]

According to Cohen, the use of numerical devices combines to reinforce the theme of Yahweh's reign over the whole earth and accordingly over all nations. YHWH is found exactly in the centre of the psalm (v. 5), placing the covenantal name of God at the centre of all things; the name *Elohim* occurs seven times, the significant number suggesting wholeness and completeness. [5]

The Call to Praise – The Worship of God

The psalmist rejoices in the great works of YHWH on Israel's behalf, [6] calling the *ammim* to acknowledge His sovereignty in worship (vv. 1, 6), [7] a grand vision anticipating v. 9. This distinctive call addresses not only Israel, but also *the conquered nations*, [8] now concurrent vassals to Israel's God, the Great King. [9] The song speaks of a relationship with YHWH that is utterly trustworthy in the face of every threat; the deep conviction growing out of specific salvific experiences - a *confession of faith* in the indestructible rule of God, [10] who is exalted over the whole earth – that is to be celebrated.

The Awesome God of Israel – The Power of God

The psalm portrays the power struggle between YHWH and the nations who are in conflict with God's purposes. Through the action of YHWH in the history of Israel, the nations of the world are confronted with the awesome power of the living God of Israel. Unlike parochial 'gods' - limited by some imagined cultural or geographic boundary – the God of Israel is superior, unlimited in power and authority. None are able to withstand his might or thwart his purposes. [11]

As a result of the awesome revelation of power, YHWH is to be feared (v. 2), *yare*. [12] The psalmist's statement may allude to a desired response of allegiance to the LORD Most High – a turning from evil, [13] forsaking impotent idols and worthless 'gods.' [14] Fear of the Lord is a common response to the miraculous deeds accomplished through YHWH and His *chosen vessels*, which reveal the power of the 'invading' kingdom of God throughout history. [15]

The LORD Most High – The Reign of God

The universal sovereignty of YHWH is reason for praise, [16] and allegiance, not simply because he is 'awesome,' but because he is *Yahweh 'Elyôn* (v. 2), the Most High, the legitimate ruler of both cosmic and earthly realms. [17] The title 'great king (v. 2), so arrogantly assumed by the Assyrian king, really belongs to YHWH, [18] who occupies an undisputed throne (vv. 7, 8), and whose decrees, acts, and commands are holiness itself. [19]

The significance of the Name of God lies in its intrinsic description of the character and identity of the unseen God – *incrementally revealed* throughout history. [20] The *final revelation* of God is understood in the *Name of Jesus*; He is *Kurios*, the King of kings, and Lord of lords. There is no other name proclaimed under heaven through which salvation is mediated - at His name every knee shall bow. [21]

The motif of the reign of God is reinforced in v. 5. 'Ascent' implies the 'descent' of YHWH [22] into the historic context of Israel as a "manifestation of what is going on behind and above the chaos of history." [23] Triumph over the nations and their gods provides evidence of YHWH's supreme authority to administer the affairs of men and nations, calling all to obedience. [24] Like a triumphant conqueror YHWH 'ascends' His throne amid acclamations of praise and sound of the *sofar*. [25]

The 'reign of God' signifies both the *efficacy* and the *effects* of God, both purposive power and historical results of God's activity over time." [26]

Similarly, the incarnation, resurrection and ascension of Christ parallels this scene, as Jesus enters human history to bring salvation to mankind, ascending triumphantly, having disarmed powers and principalities. [27] Eschatologically, in the context of 1 Thes 4:16, YHWH in Christ will 'descend' with a shout, and 'ascend' with His people in the final procession of victory over death. Thus Evans argues convincingly for the use of Ps 47:6 as the background to 1 Thes 4:16, using Jewish and patristic exegesis. [28]

The Election of Israel – The People of God

The emphasis of vv. 3-4 is on the *sovereign action* of YHWH. The nation of Israel was *chosen* as God's *cegulla* [29] a treasured possession, selected at birth, before any possible accrual of merit – a peculiar *election* of grace – because of God's *love* and *oath* to the forefathers, and God's *universal purpose* to bless the nations.

"The Lord has made a place for his people among the nations, so that the nations may be included among his people." [30]

The 'dialectic of majesty and mercy' [31] are seen in God's sovereign rule, encompassing both the general governance of the nations and His special commitment to Israel. The two are always in tension, never resolved. [32] Israel was called as a prophetic sign of both blessing and judgment, [33] a mediator of the righteousness of YHWH, whose salvific acts were testimony that Israel's redemption had its source in the honour of YHWH Himself. [34]

YHWH's kingship not only analysed all human exercise of power, but provided the authorisation for the peculiar vision of political authority held in Israel. [35] The zenith of Israel's social, political and religious existence occurred during the reigns of David and Solomon, [36] reflecting the wisdom and righteousness of the God of the nation. Thus, rulers of the heathen nations were drawn to Israel to experience the greatness of the kingdom, [37] which foreshadowed the eschatological reign of Christ – characterised by righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The Place of the Nations –The Salvation of God

The place of the nations is majestically contrasted in vv. 3 and 9. As sovereign ruler over mankind, YHWH uses the nations according to His purposes, [38] later punishing them for their ill treatment of His chosen people, [39] forcing them to submit under the feet of their conquerors (v. 3). [40] The singer's prophetic words engender hope and faith in YHWH's merciful intervention in the affairs of the world, echoing down the corridors of history, where past present and future merge in the eschatological fulfilment of his promises of gentile salvation. [41]

The final verse (v. 9) contains a remarkable change, the climax being similar to Ps 46:10, above and beyond 46:9 - it is the point to which everything moves. The insignia of pomp, the emblems of rank, and the weapons of war, [42] are now portrayed as paying homage to the sovereignty of YHWH. [43]

The nations - the former enemies of Israel - are remarkably transformed and incorporated *into* the people of God. [44]

Today we see how this prophetic scene is accomplished through the sovereign intervention of YHWH in Christ, who has again forced the submission of the powers, [45] which would thwart His eternal plan for the people from every tribe tongue and nation. [46] United as one, the 'new ethnic,' [47] is characterised, not by racial or national identity, but by righteousness, joyful worship and willing [48] submission to the God of Abraham. When every knee bows, God is exalted. [49]

Further Missiological Reflections – The Mission of God

Historic progression determines the mission function of God's people. The mercy of God was revealed at the Fall of man - the dawning of *Heilsgeschichte* ('salvation history'). Subsequently, the Creator inaugurated a new era in Abraham, who would be heir to the world, through his seed. [50] As the *children of Abraham*, Israel was called to 'live' the miracle of its existence as a light of revelation to the gentiles, [51] sustained by YHWH, *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven, without regard for the effect – a passive, centripetal, witness. [52]

The historical 'Christ Event' marked a decisive change in mission to the Gentiles. In a sense, the *ekklesia* inherits and continues the mediatory function of Israel as priest, prophet and king [53] - sustained by the power of God - yet now actively sent into the nations to *proclaim* the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. [54]

Despite initial resistance, [55] the apostolic ministry of the restored nation is a pledge that 'eschatology is in the process of being realised.' [56] If at first sight, the mission of the NT seems centrifugal; it is so in order to become centripetal [57] - an ingathering of the heathen into the kingdom, from the four corners of the world. The result of this centrifugal movement is a universal regrouping of mankind, [58] no longer focussed on Jerusalem, but on the person of Christ. [59]

The NT writers substantiate the psalmist's portrayal of the dependency of mission on the hidden activity of God within His people.

"The evangelisation of the world is not merely a matter of words or deeds: it is a matter of presence – *the presence of the People of God in the midst of mankind and the presence of God in the midst of His people.* [60]

Truly, “The power of mission is worship.” [61]

Notes

- [1] Mays: 187.
- [2] Kidner: 177, cf Rogerson & McKay: 222. This psalm is linked with the so-called Enthronement Psalms 93, 96-99, although there is much debate as to whether they were composed for a pre-exilic annual festival which dramatised God's power over his foes and his kingship over creation. (Refer varied works by Mowinckel and Gunkel).
- [3] Du Preez: 312 separates vs. 9 into two verses; Anderson: 360 is similar in his analysis of the psalm.
- [4] Du Preez: 317.
- [5] Cohen quoted by Du Preez: 311.
- [6] 1 Chron 29:10ff.
- [7] This does not appear to be an overt call when seen in the context of the rest of the psalm, although there may have been people from foreign nations present on the occasion of Ps 66:1ff; 117.
- [8] So Craigie: 347; Du Preez: 312; Brueggemann, 1984: 149; Kidner: 177; Leupold: 369 propose that *peoples* include both Israel and the nations.
- [9] In the context of the terms of the covenant-treaty context of Israel's faith; cf Hittite monarch was also addressed as *great king* in vassal treaties.
- [10] Du Preez:319 (cf Ps 65:5; Isa 33:22).
- [11] Isa 14:27; 45:7; Jer 10:10.
- [12] Used to denote the quality of God, which inspires fear and terror in YHWH's enemies (Anderson: 468).
- [13] Prov 3:7; 8:13; 45:9.
- [14] Isa 40:18ff; 46:1ff; Jer 10:3ff; 16:20f; Hab 2:18ff.
- [15] Especially in the ministry of Jesus and His disciples Matt 14:26; Mk 5:33; Lk 8:25; Ac 5:5,11.
- [16] Brueggemann, 1984: 149; Du Preez: 312.
- [17] This combination of names is commonly found in psalms 42-83 (the 'Elohistic Psalter'), seen by some as the replacement of foreign gods by YHWH (cf Isa 45:14; Jer 10:10; Mal 1:14).
- [18] Du Preez: 313, (Isa 36:4ff).
- [19] Spurgeon: 354.
- [20] Ex 6:3, cf Heb 1:2.
- [21] Ac 4:12; Phil 2:9-11.
- [22] The idea of YHWH's intervention in the earthly domain is often conveyed by the word *descend*' (Cohen: 147), as in Gen 11:5,7; Ex 19:18ff; Prov 30:4; Is 31:4.
- [23] Mays: 187.
- [24] Isa 45:21f, cf. Ac 17:30.
- [25] Trumpets are an integral part of the worship of Israel - associated with the assembly before the Lord (Num 10:2ff); before battle as a reminder to the Lord (Num 10:9); before the celebration of feasts (Num 10:10); at the commemoration of atonement (Lev 23:24ff; 25:9f).
- [26] Johnson: 130.
- [27] Col 2:15; Eph 1:19ff.
- [28] Evans: 242-246 notes that seven of the nine words of the LXX Ps 46:6 are found in I Thes 4:16.
- [29] Ex. 6:6-7; 19:5; Deut. 4:20; 7:6; 10:15; 14:2; 26:18; 27:9; 29:1,12ff.
- [30] Mays: 186
- [31] Brueggemann, 1988: 65.
- [32] Brueggemann, 1984: 150.
- [33] The heathen nations recognised the sinfulness of Israel through the judgments of their God (Deut 29:24ff; 2Chron 29:8).
- [34] Martin-Achard: 15; cf Isa 43:7; 48:9,11; Ezek 20:9,14,22; cf Eph 12.
- [35] Brueggemann, 1984: 151.
- [36] Both David and Solomon sat upon the throne of the Lord in Jerusalem (1Chron 28:5; 29:23; 2Chron 9:8).
- [37] 2 Chron 9:1,5-6,8,23.
- [38] Isa 44:28; Hab 1:5,11; 3:16.
- [39] Jer 25:12f.
- [40] The metaphor of subjugation, 'beneath our feet' arose from the symbolic practice of victory, wherein, as the final act of humiliation, the victor stood with his foot on the neck of the conquered foe, (Josh 10:24; 1Ki 5:3; cf Rom 16:20; 1Cor 15:25,27; Eph 1:22; Heb 1:13; 2:8).
- [41] Isa 19:22ff; 56:6ff; 60:3ff; Mic 7:12; Zech 2:11; 8:22f.
- [42] Translated as 'rulers of the earth' in LXX, refer Anderson: 366.
- [43] Spurgeon: 355 (cf Isa 66:18,20,23).
- [44] In the Hebrew, there is no linking word between the phrases 'the princes of the peoples,' and 'the people of the God of Abraham,' The idea of the nations gathering as the people of God is favoured by Cohen: 148; Du Preez: 316-317, Keil & Delitzsch: 100; Kidner: 178; Leupold: 372; and Rogerson & McKay: 223.
- [45] Eph 1:22.
- [46] Eph 1:4f; 1Pe 1:18ff; Rev 13:8; 17:8.
- [47] Eph 2:14f.
- [48] Rather than *princes* or *leaders*, Leupold: 373 translates *nadib* as 'willing ones' according to the primal meaning of the Hebrew word. Refer also Harris, Archer and Waltke, *TWOT*, Chicago, Moody, 1980, p.1302.
- [49] Isa 45:23f; Heb 1:13; 2:8; Rom 16:20; 1Cor 15:24ff, with Rev 7:9ff; 5:13.
- [50] Gen 22:18; Rom 4:13; Gal 3:16.
- [51] This was not clearly delineated to the nation until the time of the prophet Isaiah (Isa 49:3).
- [52] Polish: 166.
- [53] Martin-Achard:77.
- [54] Matt 28:18ff, Lk 24:47 with Isa 44:1-5; Gal 3:29; Eph 3:6; Ac 2:39.

- [55] Jewish exclusiveness caused resistance to the salvific purposes of God, Jonah 1:1f; 3:1f; Lk 4:28; Ac 11:17f.
 [56] J Jeremias, quoted by Martin-Achard: 77.
 [57] J J Von Allmen, quoted by Martin-Achard: 78.
 [58] Eph 2:13ff.
 [59] Walker sees Jesus speech in Mk 13 as the symbolic watershed of mission, from a centripetal into centrifugal dynamic - of the 'flight from the temple' 13:14 and the ingathering of the elect from the ends of the earth 13:27. Jesus becomes the new focus of the nation, in every respect the fulfilment (Walker: 9).
 [60] Martin-Achard: 78.
 [61] Piper: 30.

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