

Psalm 48

The City of the Great King

The LORD is the great king who is sovereign over the world and all the nations in it; Zion, the city and the hill on which it stands, is the great king's capital and site of his temple-palace. That is the theology on which [Psalm 48](#) is based. It is one of the songs of Zion (Introduction, sec. [6.10](#)), hymns whose subject is the importance and meaning of Jerusalem in the LORD's relation to his people and the world. The song speaks of Jerusalem under the sacred name of Zion and portrays Israel's small and unimposing capital as the city of God. Its purpose was to lead the congregation to see what only the eyes of faith could perceive.

1. The unifying theme of the song is the LORD as defender (stated in v. [3](#)). The song begins with the praise of the greatness of the LORD whose city is the center of the earth and who has revealed himself as a refuge in its citadels (vv. [1-3](#)). The second part (vv. [4-8](#)) ranges the kings of earth (cf. [2:1-2](#)) against the great king in his city and reports that on seeing it (i.e., city and citadels), the kings were thrown in panic. The congregation testifies that what they have seen confirms what they have heard. (What they had heard about and now

have seen presumably is the imposing citadel of the city as representation of the LORD as stronghold; see vv. [12-14](#) and [Psalm 46](#).) In the third part (vv. [9-11](#)), the congregation confesses what God's role as defender of the city gives them to think about as they worship in the temple—God's steadfast love and righteousness (NRSV, "victory") displayed in his judgments (i.e., saving acts to maintain his rule and defend his realm). The psalm concludes with a general call for a procession that circles the city, all the while viewing its defenses as representation of the God who will be their guide forever (as in [Psalm 23](#)). The song seems designed for use by pilgrims, probably to the fall festival, as they stood before the temple and prepared for a procession around the city. The psalm would help those who sang it see Jerusalem in a way they could not without its faith and vision.

2. The psalm discloses the human town as the city of God. The geographic site is of course Jerusalem, the old Jebusite citadel that David captured and made his capital, so that it was called "the city of David." But for the psalm, the political place is the theological place, and it is of that identity that it speaks by using a vocabulary that does not correspond to

the physical and political reality of Jerusalem. The low ridge on which Jerusalem sits is called a holy mountain, beautiful in its towering height that makes it visible and central to the whole earth. It is called, not Jerusalem, but Mount Zion. It is located, not in the Judean hill country, but on the “summit of Zaphon” (so NJPS correctly instead of NRSV “in the far north”; Zaphon is the name of the cosmic mountain where El and Baal exercised their kingship in the mythology of Canaanite religion). It is not the town of David but the capital of “the great king,” the most high God who rules over all other kings, gods, and human beings; and he it is who has established and now maintains the city. In all this contradictory language the psalm is disclosing that other identity which Jerusalem acquired when the ark of the LORD was brought into its walls (see [Psalm 132](#)). In the religions of Israel’s world, “the place” of the gods where they assembled and from where the high god ruled was such a cosmic mountain thought of in terms used in this psalm. Because the LORD had chosen Jerusalem as the place for ark and name to be, the worshipping congregation knows that this place has acquired the identity and role of “the city of the great king.”

3. The psalm views the city as a medium through which God can be known. The temple–palace of the holy city is the place where pilgrims are led to “imagine” (v. 9; NRSV, “ponder”) God’s acts as the great king. There they are confronted by signs and symbols of God’s reign. They see the temple, its architecture and furnishings, as representation of God’s way in his rule—God’s steadfast love (v. 9), righteousness and judgments (v. 11). The visible is transparent to the invisible and focuses mind and spirit on what cannot be seen. The city is also a visible witness to God. What the pilgrims can see of Zion, with its towers, ramparts, and citadels, furnishes them the material to tell a later generation about God (vv. 12–14). As the content of confession and testimony, Zion provides two themes of instruction and nurture. First, the city is one of the ways by which God has specific identity and through which people know and respond to God in his particularity. Our God is the God, says verse 14, to whom this city belongs, who is worshiped in its temple, and whose reign is symbolized by its royal plan. Second, the city is a visible sign of God’s commitment to the people whose life is guided by his way. It is tangible evidence that the LORD has taken them as flock to which he is shep-

herd. The pilgrims are to go home and tell of Zion in such a way that others will know better who God is and that God is our God.

4. The psalm interprets the city as the symbol of God who is the refuge of those who trust in him. “By her citadels God has made himself known as refuge” (v. 3). Note that it is not the fortifications of Jerusalem but God himself who is haven; the citadels represent to the eye the refuge created by the rule of the LORD. Verses 4–7 describe the effect of seeing the defenses of Jerusalem as manifestation of the LORD on other kings who assault the city. Reports of the defeat of unnamed kings and enemies occur in other Zion songs (46:8–9; 76:1–12). The reports do not seem to refer to some specific historical occasion, but they do reflect Israel’s past experiences of the help of the LORD (48:3; 46:1). The reports are dramatic combinations for liturgical purposes of these memories and confidence in the certainty of the great king’s defense of his city. In Zion’s role as city of God, its citadels become the medium of theophany. The notion of the impregnability of the city arises from its identity as city of God and depends on God’s relation to the city. In verse 8 the worshiping congregation reports that they also “see”

in the city of God. What they had known only as a report becomes visible to the pilgrims by the medium of the city.

5. The way in which the psalm speaks of Jerusalem as Zion, the city of David as the city of God, is a way of envisioning the earthly in terms of the heavenly, the temporal in terms of the everlasting. It is language that uncovers the transcendent dimension of the immanent created by the relation of God’s rule to the world. The psalm uncovers what modern Christians can easily lose, the discernment of the church as a society created in the finite and temporal by the infinite and everlasting. The church is not just a human society that can be analyzed by sociological description. A vocabulary is needed that is not congruent with buildings we build, organizations we devise, and rolls of conglomerate persons. Faith must also say of the church, “Holy ... catholic ... body of Christ,” because, whether humble or imposing in its social form, it is constituted in its theological reality by the Spirit and the name of God. It is the city of God, a society that represents and anticipates the coming reign of God.