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November 18th: Psalms 47 & 48 & Acts 17:16-34

November 17, 2020



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Mount Zion, the highest of the mountains. Paul's speech on the Areopagus.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 47, to the Choir Master, a Psalm of the Sons of Korah. Clap your hands, all peoples. Shout to God with loud songs of joy.

For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great King over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob, whom He loves.

God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises. Sing praises to our King, sing praises.

For God is the King of all the earth. Sing praises with a psalm. God reigns over the nations.

God sits on His holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather, as the people of the God

of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God.

He is highly exalted. Psalm 47 is a great celebration of the Lord's kingship. Like Psalms 93 and 96-99, it praises God's sovereignty over all.

Sigmund Mowinckel famously proposed the existence of an annual New Year's festival celebrating the Lord's enthronement, at which these particular psalms will be performed. This theory has proven influential, but it is highly speculative. We don't have any clear evidence for the existence of such a festival.

Given the fact that psalms are material to be performed, many scholars have hypothesized concerning the setting in life, or to use the scholarly German expression, the *Sitz im Leben*, of specific psalms. Knowing the *Sitz im Leben* of a particular text can assist us in the task of interpretation. For instance, if 2,000 years from now someone discovered the lyrics of *Here We Come a-Caroling*, they might be rather confused by them.

A key to understanding these lyrics would be to understand that their setting in life, or *Sitz im Leben*, is the practice of caroling from house to house. However, there is a danger in taking such approaches too far. Alan Ross pushes back against excessive theorizing about the *Sitz im Leben* of this particular psalm, remarking, Conrad Schaefer observes that this psalm is formed of two symmetrical panels.

The section from verse 1 to verse 5 can be mapped onto the section from verse 6 to verse 9. Both begin with an invitation to worship, which introduces the contents of the praise that follows. There is then a declaration of the Lord's universal sovereignty, and his rule over and subduing of the nations. Paralleled with the first panel's presentation of the Lord's choice of Jacob, is the second panel's presentation of people of other nations gathering as his people.

The first panel concludes with a reference to God's ascension in power, and the second by pronouncing his exaltation. He subdued the seven Canaanite nations under them. Verses 6-7 repeat the engagement to sing praises, calling on the assembly to join in the acclamation.

God is the King of all of the earth, but he is also the King of his people Israel in a very particular way. He sits on his throne, represented by the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat, in the temple on Mount Zion, ruling over all of the nations. However, there is a surprising shift in the final verse.

It isn't merely Israel who gather as worshippers, but all of the nations with them. They are gathering either with or even as the people of the God of Abraham. The blessing of Abraham is not restricted to Israel, but all nations participate in it to some extent.

This is looking towards the future, and I believe, to what Christ brings in through the

Gospel. This fulfills both the promise given to Abraham, in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed, and also prophecies found in places such as Isaiah chapter 19 verses 21-25. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day, and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them.

And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, Blessed be Egypt, my people, and Assyria, the work of my hands, and Israel, my inheritance.

All the shields of the earth belong to God, all the mighty men and warriors are under his rule, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess his lordship. Psalm 48, a song, a psalm of the sons of Korah. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, his holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth.

Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great king, with her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress. For behold the kings assembled, they came on together, as soon as they saw it they were astounded, they were in panic, they took to flight, trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor. By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish, as we have heard, so we have seen, in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever.

We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple, as your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad, let the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments.

Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever, he will guide us forever. Psalm 48, like Psalm 46, is a psalm about Mount Zion, the place where the Lord has put his name. The significance and the glory of Jerusalem arises not from its people, from its geographical importance or its topological prominence, from its buildings or its fortifications, nor even from its might and grandeur.

Its importance comes from the fact that the Lord has chosen to dwell there, among his people, in his holy temple. The psalmist describes the city in ways that seem almost embarrassingly inappropriate to its actual strength, location and prominence. Much in this psalm might remind us of Isaiah chapter 2, especially verse 2 and the verses that follow.

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established at the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it, and many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Mount Zion is re-envisioned in a sort of a new theological topology. The great mountains of surrounding people shrink, and the low ridge of Jerusalem is elevated to become like Mount Everest in its awe-inspiring height, inspiring worship, striking fear into the hearts of all who would assail her.

The whole world flows to and from it. The glory of the city is the one who dwells there, and what a glory it is! Various scholars have suggested that a specific historical event likely prompted the writing of this psalm, perhaps the defeat of the besieging Assyrian army in 701 BC. The psalm begins with a declaration of the Lord's praise, a praise that is located in the city of Zion.

Zion is the place where the Lord's glory is most especially seen and present. Mount Zion is described as beautiful in elevation, the joy of all the earth, and in the far north. All of these descriptions seem more than merely hyperbolic, clearly inaccurate.

Jerusalem isn't in the north. It is on a very low mountain, and it was of relatively little renown among the nations. The psalmist is not discouraged in his surprising praise, however.

Irrespective of how Jerusalem might have appeared to the untrained eye, the truth was that this mountain had been exalted over all others by the Lord's determination to dwell there. The expression in the far north might be a reference to Mount Zaphon, the mountain where the chief god of a near eastern pantheon dwelt. But Zion is the true Zaphon, the true holy mountain of the Most High God.

Elsewhere, in Psalm 68, verses 15-16, other mountains are rebuked for their attitude towards Mount Zion. O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan, O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan, why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the mount that God desired for His abode, yes, where the Lord will dwell forever? While there might be many pretenders to the claim of the holy mountain, Zion is unique. Zion is the city of the Great King, of the Lord Himself, the King of Kings.

God dwells in the midst of Jerusalem's citadels, and by His dwelling acts as a fortress for the city. He is its great elevation, He is its high walls. The Lord, as the great fortress of

Zion, has defended the city from assault.

Mighty kings might try to assemble against her, but Zion will be secured from harm, and her enemies put to flight and shattered. In Isaiah 10, verses 32-34, the Lord prophesied the deliverance that He will grant to Jerusalem from the Assyrians. This very day He will halt at Nab.

He will shake His fist at the mount of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem. Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop their bows with terrifying power. The great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low.

He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one. The enemies of the Lord will be struck with trembling and travail. They will be wrecked like ships in a storm.

Isaiah 33, verses 20-23 describes this. Behold, Zion, the city of our appointed feasts. Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be plucked up, nor will any of its cords be broken.

But there the Lord in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor majestic ship can pass. For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King. He will save us.

Your cords hang loose. They cannot hold the mast firm in its place, or keep the sail spread out. Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided.

Even the lame will take the prey. The psalmist now reflects upon God's character, his steadfast love and his righteousness. His name and its praise reach to the ends of the earth.

He acts faithfully and justly in his defense of his people from their enemies. Considering all of this, the psalmist summons various groups to join him in his expression of praise, both the inhabitants of the city and its surrounding towns and villages, the daughters of Jerusalem. The hearer of the psalm is encouraged to walk about Zion, reflecting upon its defenses and upon the way that the Lord is the one who truly upholds them.

As they do this, they should prepare themselves to pass on the message about the Lord as the glory and the defense of Zion to coming generations. A question to consider, how does the reign of the Lord from Zion relate to other nations in Psalms 47 and 48? Acts 17, verses 16-34 He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities, because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears.

We wish to know therefore what these things mean. Now all the Athenians and the

foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, We will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Amoris, and others with them.

Facing a threat to his safety earlier in Acts chapter 17, Paul was moved away from Berea by some of the believers in verse 15. Paul was now in Athens alone, waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him. No longer a great centre of power and population, the population of Athens had dwindled considerably by Paul's day.

Once one of the most powerful cities in the world, Athens was now overshadowed by the Roman city of Corinth. Athens still had considerable symbolic value on account of its continuing association with culture and learning. Paul was deeply distressed at the abundance of idols and images within the city.

This reaction was a characteristically Jewish one, much that Paul says in this passage will reflect common Jewish polemics against idolatry. Consistent with the general pattern of his missionary work, Paul first focuses upon the synagogue, where he reasons daily with the Jews and with Gentile worshippers. He also speaks to the wider population within the marketplace.

Among the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who encounter him, the accusation is made

that he is a babbler, or seed picker, and a proclaimer of foreign gods. They seem to think that he's just a dabbler. He picks up one philosophical notion here, another over there, and strings them together without any thought to how it all fits.

These charges challenge both Paul's spiritual authority and the right of the religion that he proclaimed to a place within Athenian life. Some commentators have suggested that the second charge, that Paul proclaimed foreign gods, arose from the misconception that resurrection was a female deity alongside Jesus. This charge also recalls the charge that was made against Socrates.

This is not the first time that Luke seems to have referred to Socrates within his text. In chapter 5, verse 29, there is another allusion to Socrates, as the apostles speak about the fact that they must obey God rather than the man. In aligning Paul with Socrates in this manner, Luke presents him as wise, and the Athenians as foolish in repeating the mistakes of their ancestors.

This likely serves Luke's apologetic ends. Paul is then brought to the Areopagus. Whether this is a situation resembling a formal trial, or merely an attempt by a curious council to get a clearer sense of where Paul's teaching stands is unclear.

The softened form of the challenge to Paul might suggest the latter. The description of the Athenians and the foreigners of the city is not a flattering one. They are, as Luke characterises them, driven by a lazy and a faddish curiosity rather than by a genuine love for and commitment to the truth.

Robert Garland has argued that there were three criteria for the introduction of a new religion to the city of Athens. First, the sponsor must claim to represent a deity. Second, he must provide evidence that the deity is eager to reside in Athens.

And third, the deity's residence in Athens must benefit Athenians as a mark of its goodwill. In the speech that follows, Paul subversively addresses each of these conditions. The manner of Paul's speech provides evidence of his scholarly training.

His opening reference to the extreme religiousness of the Athenians has an ambiguity that he will proceed to exploit. As a reference to the piety of his audience, it could be regarded as a shrewd attempt to create a favourable impression. However, through his reference to the altar of the unknown god, Paul paints a picture of an excessive superstitious piety.

In the saturated market of Athenian idolatry, Paul identifies this monument to uninformed devotion as an object that epitomises the religion of the city, a religion characteristic of the times of human ignorance that he discusses in verse 30. Paul declares the transcendence and the sovereignty of God as the creator of all things. This deity is related to all human beings and is involved in the life and the destiny of the race.

God's engagement in and ordering of humanity's life occurs in order that humanity might grope for him and find him. Such a transcendent deity who is reflected in humanity as his offspring, cannot appropriately be represented by inanimate idols of our own creation. Having introduced this transcendent, personal, providentially active deity, intimately engaged in human affairs, Paul proclaims the end of the age of ignorance and groping in the darkness with the revelation of Jesus as the bearer of God's salvation and judgement.

This message might remind us of one of the earlier run-ins that Paul had with idolatry, back in Lystra in chapter 14 where Paul delivered a similar message in verses 15-17. Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men of like nature with you, and we bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways, yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

While Paul is speaking to pagans, he is presenting them with a message that is very clearly shaped by a Jewish understanding of divine creation and providence. This is not a God who is distanced from the world, rather he is a God who is very close to everyone. He is a God who is our Father and he is the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

He is the God who directs the affairs of men. He has divided the nations, appointed their times and their places of habitation, and now he has brought to an end the age of their ignorance, calling all people to respond to the message of Christ, who holds the destiny of the whole human race within his hands. He is the one who will judge all, something that is demonstrated by the fact that he was raised from the dead.

The religious marketplace of the Athenians may seem rather remote from that of the more secular world that we inhabit. However, we can learn much from Paul's approach to the Athenians, particularly from Paul's initial move. As Tomor Shalik argues, the altar to an unknown God is precisely the most appropriate place for proclaiming the Christian message.

He claims, I am convinced that if anyone wants to preach the good news of the paradoxical God of the Bible, he has to find the altar to an unknown God. To speak about Christ at the altar to familiar gods would be blasphemy or risk even greater misunderstanding than on that occasion at the Athenian Areopagus. While Paul speaks of the altar to the unknown God and announces that he is proclaiming that God to them, we should observe that although he is finding common ground, he is completely subverting their religious system.

The God that Paul proclaims cannot just be fitted into the existing pantheon as yet

another God to be worshipped. He overturns the whole pantheon. He is, as Paul presents him, the God that shows the futility of all idolatry.

He is the one true God and he is beyond the control or the representation of man. Paul's message at the Areopagus received a lukewarm response. His declaration of a God who lays claim to humanity in Jesus Christ, his revealed and appointed agent of blessing and judgement, cut entirely against the grain of both speculative and superstitious religion, the forms of religion that prevailed in the city of Athens.

The listless Athenian preoccupation with hearing something new was answered with a demand for absolute commitment. The darkness of superstition was scattered by the dazzling light of divine revelation. The council desiring to cast judgement on a new religion found itself called to account before the bar of heaven.

It is this same message that we are called to declare to the powers and the rulers and the thinkers of our own age. In our societies God is often experienced as the thoroughly known God, the God who holds no surprises. We can talk about ourselves as living in Christian countries and this claim, although it can be an encouraging one for some Christians to hear, should excite some concerns.

In the comfortable alignment of Christianity and our national heritage and identity and culture, God is easily rendered familiar and unthreatening, a tame and mute idol to our cultural and social values. This sort of dynamic can especially be seen in civil religion, where Christian values are routinely appealed to with the assurance that they align in all principal respects with our particular movements, identities and solidarities. In responding to this, we must join with Paul in proclaiming the transcendent God, who stands above and orders all human affairs, sustaining and upholding us in existence, closer to us than closeness itself.

This God eludes all attempts to reduce him to an object of our mastery. Like Paul, we must locate the gaps in the captive webs of our cultural idolatries, declaring the identity of our God from these points and calling all to account. A question to consider, how does Paul's speech on the Areopagus represent something of the conflict between Jewish and Christian patterns of religion and belief, and the patterns of religious belief that were more common in a Hellenistic context?