

# REFUGE

## *The Meaning*

BY M. PIERCE MATHENEY, JR.

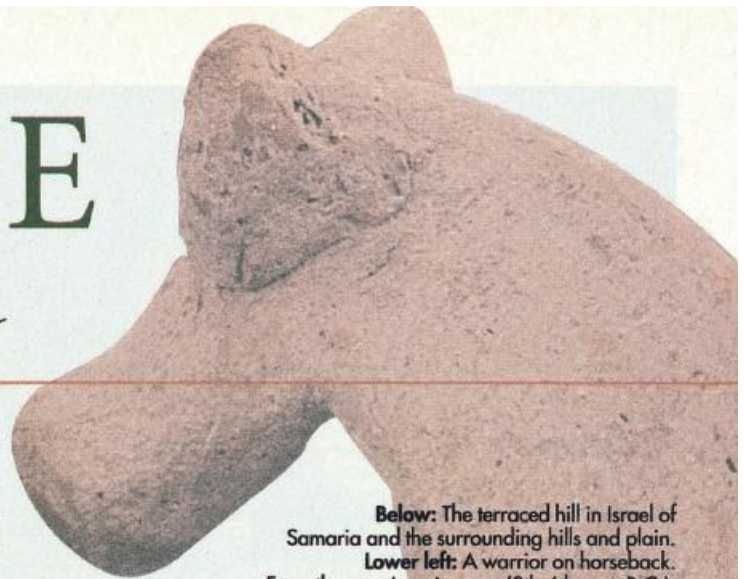
**G**od is our refuge and strength is the beginning phrase of Psalm 46:1.<sup>1</sup> The noun translated “refuge” is frequently used (11 times) in the Book of Psalms for trust in the Lord. It is prayer language that occurs in laments, hymns, songs of Zion, songs of confidence among other types of psalms. The lament in Psalm 31 begins with the verbal root of the noun refuge: “In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge.” This verb, which also occurs frequently (11 times) in Psalms, is one of three major verbs in the Old Testament for trusting God.<sup>2</sup> The psalmist continued: “be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me” (31:2b). This word for “refuge” is a different word from the main one in Psalm 46:1, but is related to its parallel word, “strength.” The use of the term “rock” to refer to the Lord is a prevalent reference to His protective power and provident watchcare over His people.<sup>3</sup>

The refrain of Psalm 46, which concludes the second and third of its three parts, reads “The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (46:7,11, KJV). Here the word “refuge” is not the same as in the first verse, but a synonym that means “fortress” (NIV). The terminology of God’s protection is influenced by the thought of the Lord as captain of earthly and heavenly armies (hosts, KJV).<sup>4</sup>

The second part of Psalm 46:1 reads “a very present (well proved) help in trouble” (RSV). This adds to the concept of refuge and strength in God, since He “is found” (the literal meaning of “present” or “well proved”) a help. The word for “help” appears often in the prayer language of Psalms (14 times). Sometimes (9 times) the psalmist asked God for help but as here sometimes (5 times) he testified to God as helper.

In natural catastrophes, such as earthquake or tidal wave, the believer in God as refuge need not fear! (46:2-3). The river of the water of life is in Zion where the Most High (Elyon) God has His holy tabernacle, the symbol of God in the midst of His people (46:4-5a). Perhaps there is a historical reference to the saving of Jerusalem from the siege of Sennacherib in the next

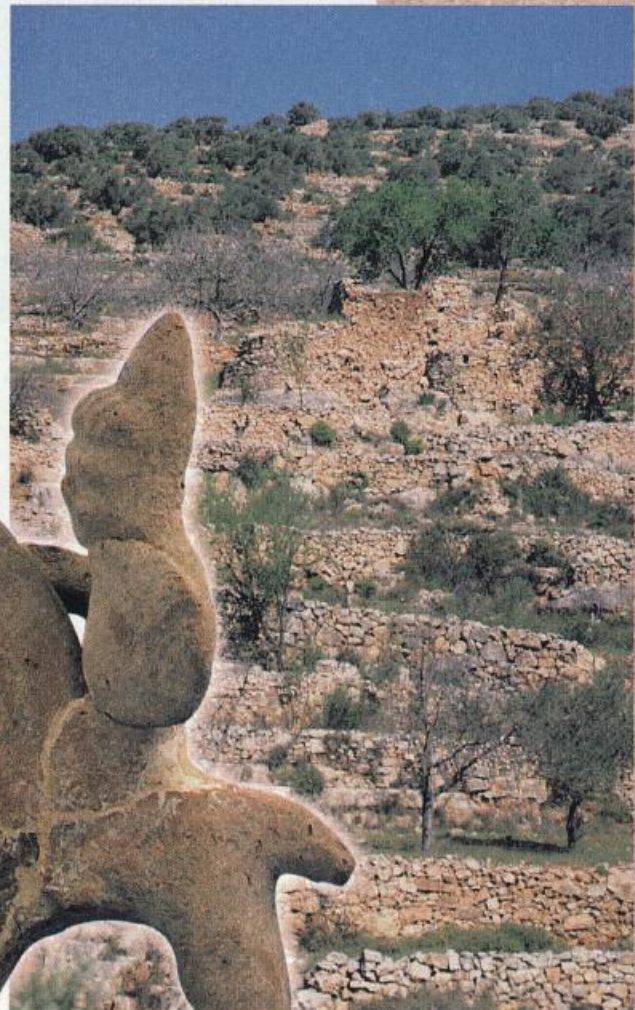
**Lesson Reference:**  
**FBS: Psalm 46:1-11**



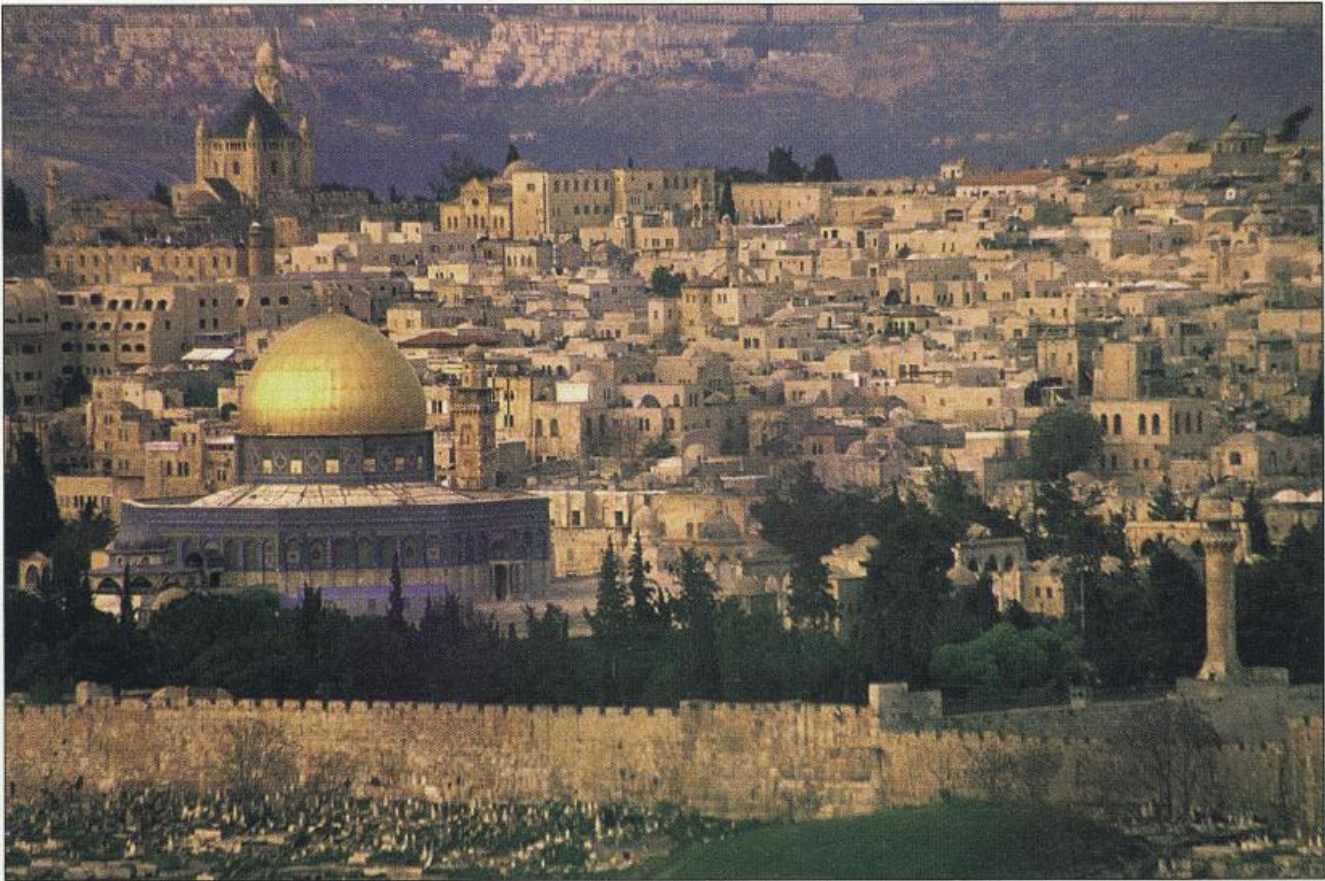
**Below:** The terraced hill in Israel of Samaria and the surrounding hills and plain.

**Lower left:** A warrior on horseback. From the neo-Assyrian age (8th-6th cent. B.C.).

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statement: “God will help her at break of day” (46:5b).<sup>5</sup> Some commentators think this promise of help is, like the reference in 46:1b, a more general promise of His divine protection.<sup>6</sup> When nations rage and kingdoms totter, the divine theophany (voice/thunder) has the power to melt the earth (46:6)! The power of the majestic Lord Himself protects the people of God, not the inviolability of the city of Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> So, “the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge” (46:7, RSV)!

Nor will future wars be any greater threat to the one for whom God is refuge/strength/help. The psalmist almost like a prophet bids his audience to behold the works of the Lord, how He has wrought (marvelous) desolations in the earth (46:8). The Lord stops war by destroying its weapons (bow, spear, chariots, V. 9, RSV; or shields, NIV). Then God Himself speaks in regal splendor to the nations: “Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth” (VV. 9-10, NRSV). The Lord of history is God of our future. He alone can stop war, destroy weapons, and create peace. One is reminded of the visions of Isaiah.<sup>8</sup>

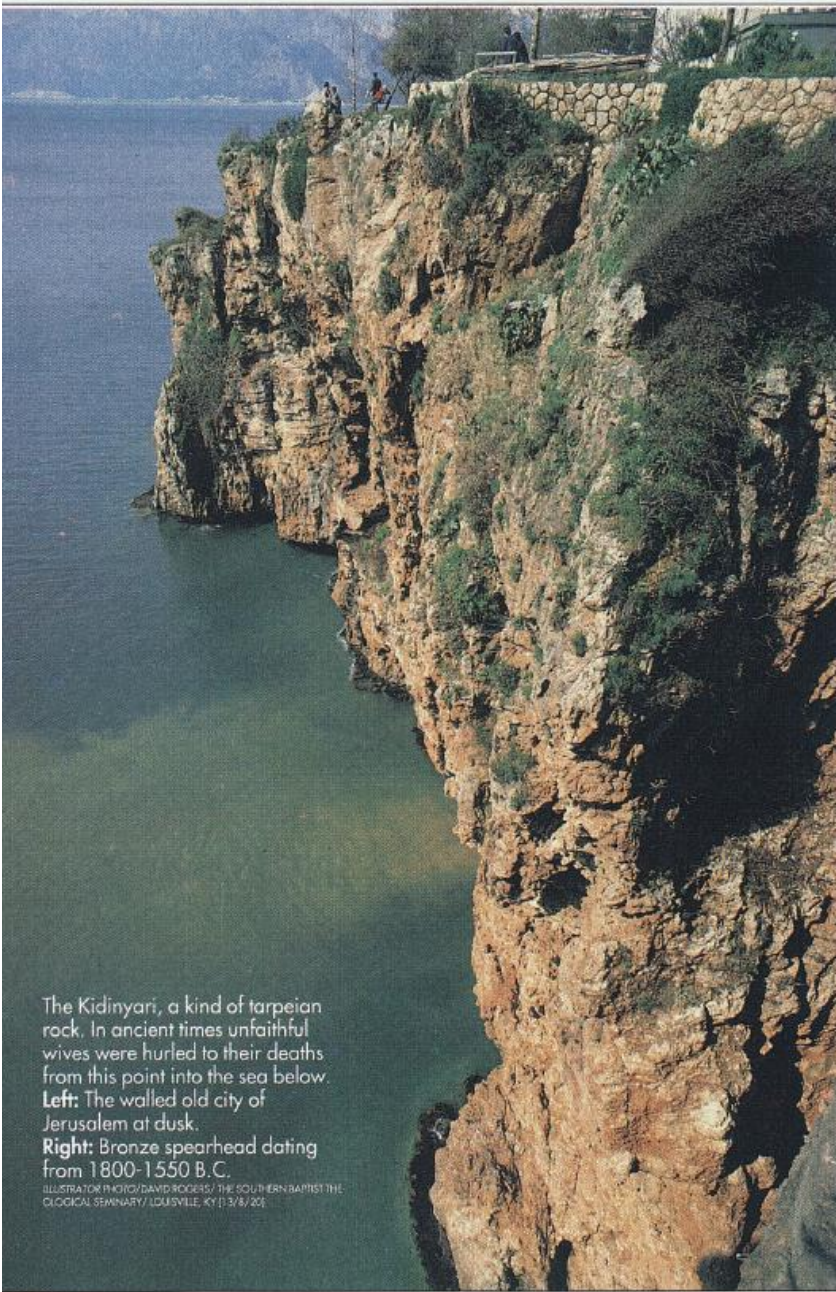
Consider other types of psalms that bring the same testimony of God as refuge. The individual thanksgiving of David in Psalm 18:2 (RSV, see also 2 Sam. 22) testifies: “The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge (verb, compare Ps. 31:1), my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold (synonym, “fortress” compare Ps. 46:7,11). Or, again: “He is a shield for all those

who take refuge in him (verb again) . . . And who is a rock except our God?” (18:30b,31b, NRSV).

The occurrence of the verb and nouns for “refuge” in the individual psalms of lament, such as Psalm 31:1-3; 62:2,7-8; 71:1-3 has led some scholars to detect oral formulaic language in the composition of such complaints, which inevitably begin or end with a statement of trust in God as refuge.<sup>9</sup> Psalm 62:8b is almost identical with Psalm 46:1a.

A famous psalm of confidence, Psalm 91, begins: “You who live in the shelter of the Most High (Elyon), who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust’” (vv. 1-2, NRSV). God becomes a protecting eagle in verse 4: “He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge.”<sup>10</sup> Ronald Goetsch translated Psalm 91:9 “Surely, You, O Yahweh, are my Refuge! The Most High (Elyon) you have made your Dwelling.” He interprets this as a duet, a first person restatement of the theme from verse 2, with a confirming response from another voice.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of God as refuge may be related to the ancient legal right of asylum in a sanctuary of God’s appointment.<sup>12</sup> When that was the ark of the covenant sanctuary provided by David in Jerusalem, both Adonijah and Joab sought “sanctuary” at the horns of the altar there.<sup>13</sup> This is related to the “cities of refuge” commanded by Moses and provided by Joshua, though the word in Hebrew is a completely different “refuge”



The Kidinyari, a kind of tarpeian rock. In ancient times unfaithful wives were hurled from this point into the sea below. **Left:** The walled old city of Jerusalem at dusk. **Right:** Bronze spearhead dating from 1800-1550 B.C.

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<sup>1</sup>Quotations in this article will be from *New International Version* unless otherwise noted. Statistics for the occurrence of Hebrew words are taken from *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Weiser, "πιστεύω, πιστις, πιστός, πιστώ, ἀπιστος, ἀπιστεύω, ἀπιστία, ὀλιγόπιστος, ὀλιγοπιστία" *The Old Testament Concept*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. vi (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 182-196. The references in addition to Psalm 31:1 are 7:1; 11:1; 16:1; 25:20; 37:40; 57:1; 64:10; 71:1; 141:8; 144:2. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962 reprint), 340.

<sup>3</sup>Alan Richardson, "Rock, Foundation, Refuge, Strength, Peter" in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 204. There are 16 other references to God as "rock" in the Psalms. *BDB*, 731-732, 738-739, 849, 960. Compare George A. F. Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), 184-189.

<sup>4</sup>Trygve N. D. Mettiner, "Fighting the Powers of Chaos and Hell—Towards the Biblical Portrait of God," *Studia Theologica, Scandinavian Journal of Theology* (Vol. 39, No. 1, 1985), 21-38, esp. 26-29. The Lord as Warrior is one of the necessary functions of the Lord as King. Compare Marc Brettler, "Images of YHWH the Warrior in Psalms," *Semeia* 61:135-165, esp. 142-147.

<sup>5</sup>A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms in the Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), 253-246. Compare Isaiah 37:33-38.

<sup>6</sup>A. A. Anderson, *The New Century Bible Commentary, The Book of Psalms*, Vol. 1 (Psalms 1-72) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 354-355. Compare Mary Frances Owens, *Salt from the Psalter* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 45-49.

<sup>7</sup>Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59, A Commentary*, Hilton C. Oswald, trans. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 463. Compare Christoph Barth, *God with Us: A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 242-243.

<sup>8</sup>Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:6-7; 11:6-9. John T. Willis, "Isaiah 2:2-5 and the Psalms of Zion" in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah*, Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 296-307. Compare Peter C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Psalms 1-50 Vol. 19 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 341-346.

<sup>9</sup>J. Gamberoni, "חָסוּת hasa; חָסוּת mahaseh; חָסוּת hasut" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Johannes Botterwick and Helmer Ringgren, eds., David E. Green, trans. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 5:64-75, esp. 67-71; compare Robert C. Culley, *Oral Formulaic Language in the Biblical Psalms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 53.

<sup>10</sup>*New Revised Standard Version*. As in the ancient covenant speeches, Exodus 19:4, Deuteronomy 32:11.

<sup>11</sup>Ronald W. Goetsch, "The Lord Is My Refuge," *Concordia Journal* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1983), 140-145.

meaning sanctuary or asylum, not related to the prayer language of Psalms that we have been studying.<sup>14</sup> It is doubtful whether the language of the psalms can be used to prove that any permanent asylum was ever granted in the physical proximity of the Jerusalem temple.<sup>15</sup>

In the Prophets, God continued to be a refuge for His people. When trouble comes to Zion, the pillar of cloud and fire will be a refuge.<sup>16</sup> God's destruction of nations proves He is still a refuge to the poor and needy.<sup>17</sup> Even when changes occur in the heavens at the Lord's roar of judgment, He is still a refuge to His people.<sup>18</sup> When the proud have been banished and only the humble remnant are left, "they shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Exodus 21:12-14.

<sup>13</sup>1 Kings 1:50; 2:28, providing only a temporary safety for Adonijah, and none for Joab. Compare M. Pierce Matheny, Jr. "Introduction to 1-2 Kings and Commentary on 1 Kings" in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 3. 1 Samuel—Nehemiah (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 162-165.

<sup>14</sup>Numbers 35; Joshua 20; Deuteronomy 19, Moshe Greenburg, "The Biblical Conception of Asylum" *JBL* Vol. LXXVIII, Part II (June 1959), 125-132. Compare A. Graeme Auld, "Cities of Refuge" in *Israelite Tradition: Journal of the Society of Old Testament Study*, Issue 10 (November 1978), 26-40.

<sup>15</sup>Gamberoni, 68,73.

<sup>16</sup>Isaiah 4:5-6.

<sup>17</sup>Isaiah 25:4.

<sup>18</sup>Joel 3:16.

<sup>19</sup>Zephaniah 3:11-12, NRSV.

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