

Psalm 74: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 74, a mascal of Asaph. O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?

Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage. Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt. Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins.

The enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary. Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place. They set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees, and all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers.

They set your sanctuary on fire. They profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. They said to themselves, we will utterly subdue them.

They burned all the meeting places of God in the land. We do not see our signs. There is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long. How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

[1 : 05] Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them. Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.

You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

You split open springs and brooks. You dried up ever-flowing streams. Yours is the day. Yours also the night. You have established the heavenly lights and the sun.

You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth. You have made summer and winter. Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs, and a foolish people reviles your name.

Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts. Do not forget the life of your poor forever. Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.

[2 : 07] Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame. Let the poor and needy praise your name. Arise, O God, defend your cause. Remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day.

Do not forget the clamour of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually. In Psalm 74, the psalmist speaks from a situation of national crisis.

The city of Jerusalem and its temple have been destroyed, and the enemy scoffs at the people and at their guard. The context of the psalm is almost certainly found in the Babylonian destruction of the city in 586 BC.

The psalmist recalls the powerful deeds of God for his people in the past, in both redemption and creation. He calls God on the basis of his covenant and his promises, to act decisively on his people's behalf and to come to their deliverance.

Conrad Schaefer divides the psalm into three movements. The first runs from verses 1 to 11, beginning and ending with anguish, questions and cries. The second movement is from verses 12 to 17, relating God's power in Exodus and creation.

[3 : 16] And the third movement goes from verses 18 to 23, in which the psalmist calls upon God to act for the sake of his name and covenant. The disaster of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people seemed like a final hammer blow, something from which the people stood no chance of recovering.

It was like a complete abandonment from God, as if a story that held immeasurable promise was suddenly concluded with little hope of resumption. This is the holy Saturday of Judah's experience, the cold grave from which they call out to God, but without answer, when all seems utterly lost.

Mount Zion is in ruins. The flock of the Lord is scattered on foreign hills. Verse 2 drives the point home. It is the Lord's own people who are suffering this dreadful fate. They are his congregation, his inheritance, redeemed by his mighty hand.

And Mount Zion is his former dwelling place. Will he not turn back and let his face shine upon them once more? Or are they completely disowned and cast off? God's enemies have taken his former dwelling place.

Like mighty beasts, they now roar in triumph as they take his territory. They remove the old marks of God's presence and favour and raise up their own military signs and emblems in their place.

[4 : 35] The temple of Solomon, with all its wooden pillars and panels, is like a forest before woodcutters. They have stripped it of its finery and burnt down the sanctuary. And this fate goes beyond Mount Zion alone.

All of the meeting places of God in the land were burned. The identity of the meeting places referred to here isn't entirely clear and is debated by scholars. Are these other high places which were forbidden?

Are they synagogues for which we have no clear evidence at the time? Are they appointed feasts in view here? Or perhaps it is a reference to the many buildings of the temple site. Derek Kidner raises the possibility that a reference to the previous sanctuaries such as Shiloh might be in view. I find Marvin Tate's suggestion that it refers to various sites of non-sacrificial worship of God in the land to be the most persuasive. The destruction of all of these sites renders the humiliation of Judah complete.

The signs of the enemy have been raised, but the signs of the people have been removed. The prophets functioned as something akin to signs, giving indications of God's purpose, but now there are none of them to be found.

[5 : 41] This psalm might have been written not from the perspective of someone exiled in a foreign land, but one of the poor remnant that remained in the land, under the power of the Babylonians. They mark God's impotence to save his people, and the psalmist wonders how long God can allow such a situation to continue.

God must see it. Why isn't he acting? He should be destroying these people who are marking his name. In verses 12-17, the tone of the psalm suddenly changes, From a tone similar to the Book of Lamentations and other places like that, the psalmist turns to extol God for his mighty deeds of old. God demonstrated his power over the nations in the Exodus. The psalmist describes the crossing of the Red Sea in language purposefully redolent of ancient Near Eastern myths, with Baal's defeat over the dragon and the serpent Lotan.

The gods of the nations may perform great exploits in myth, but God performs them in history. The crushing of the heads of Leviathan is God's demonstration of his power over the personified waters of chaos.

However, as Alan Ross recognises, it is also a representation of the nation of Egypt, as we also see in the sea monster called Rahab, in places such as Psalm 89 verses 9-10.

[6 : 56] You rule the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass. You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. And in Isaiah chapter 51 verses 9-11.

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?

Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing, Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.

They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Egypt is called Rahab in Isaiah chapter 30 verse 7. This is true to the historical events too, of course.

At the Red Sea, God displayed his power over the natural might of the waters of the deep. He also demonstrated his power over the sea monster of Egypt, Pharaoh and all of his forces.

[7 : 59] God's power over the natural order, and his power over the international order, merged together in such stories and symbols, inviting the hearer to take reassurance from the fact that God is the God of creation, and the God over the nations, who expresses his power in his deliverance of his needy people.

The Exodus involved further demonstrations of God's power over creation, in his opening of springs and brooks to give water to the people, and in his drying up of streams that stood in their path.

From this, the psalmist moves to the creation itself. God established the structures of time itself, the day and the night, and the heavenly bodies appointed to rule over them. He established the very foundations of the earth, and created the seasons.

The psalmist, in reflecting upon these things, assures himself of God's power. Even in the grave of exile, the God of Exodus, the God of creation, could redeem them.

The God who defeated Leviathan can deliver them from the clutches of the other sea monster of Babylon. The psalmist appeals to the Lord to see the situation and to intervene.

[9 : 03] His enemies revile him, and think that they can do this with impunity. The psalmist calls the Lord to see the plight of the needy people of the land, the poor, who depend entirely upon him.

He petitions the Lord to consider his covenant and its promises. The uproar of God's enemies continually arises. This should not occur without consequence. God must see, and God must judge, defending his cause, upholding his covenant, and redeeming his people.

A question to consider. What are some other places in scripture where we see sea monster imagery being employed?