

Psalm 74: Jerusalem Temple burning



Psalm 74 (73) (Mode 1. 5....65 / 3.....23)

Jerusalem has been devastated. Judah's enemies mock Jerusalem's God. The psalmist wonders why God, who conquered chaos, does not intervene, but allows the fury of the enemies to prevail. Why is God so angry against his people? Why does God not come to protect the downtrodden and the poor who cry for help?

It is likely that this psalm was composed in response to the destruction of the city and temple in 587BC. The language is reminiscent of the Lamentations. See also Psalm 102.

There are also similarities with a lamentation on the destruction of Sumer and Ur which can be found in the Ancient Near Eastern Texts (ANET 3a ed. 611-619).

In contrast to Psalm 44 and Psalm 79 there is no mention here of sin or innocence.

It makes no sense that God would allow to be undone what he himself has done, to reject what he Himself has chosen, to repudiate what he has redeemed, to choose his dwelling and then let it be burned, to consecrate it and then let it be profaned!

O God, my God
why do you leave us abandoned?
Why are you so angry
against the sheep of your pasture?

‘The earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him’(Psalm 18:7-8).

‘A people who provoke me to my face continually are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long’(Isaiah 65:5).

Remember your assembled people,
whom you acquired long ago.
You freed us that we might be
the people who are closest to your heart.

Remember Mount Zion,
where you established your dwelling.
Come and look at where everything lies in ruin,
at the devastation the enemy has caused to your sanctuary.

The city was also devastated by the Syrian forces in the early second century BC.

‘All the army assembled and went up to Mount Zion. There they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket, or as on one of the mountains. They saw also the chambers of the priests in ruins’(1Maccabees 4:37-38)

Your foes have lain waste the place of assembly.
There they have set up their standards.
They have hacked their way in
as one takes an axe to the thickest part of the forest.

With hatchets and hammers,
they have smashed the woodwork.
They set your sanctuary on fire;
they desecrated your dwelling place.

As they burnt it to the ground they cried:
'Exterminate the whole nation.
Burn all the meeting places
of God in the land'.

‘Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors
praised you, has been burned by fire, The places we
loved most have become ruins’(Isaiah 64:11).

From you we have no signs,
there is no longer a prophet.
There is no one among us
who knows how long this will last.

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
Is the enemy to revile your name for ever?

Why are you holding back,
keeping your powerful arm hidden from view?

The psalmist gives expression to the people's bewilderment and disorientation. All familiar supports have gone. Where does this leave God's promises? Where does it leave the covenant? What is the meaning of Israel? Will this tragedy ever have an end?

Compare 1 Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41.

God brought them out with mighty arm from Egypt.
Why not now?

Yet you, O God, are our King from of old,
bringing salvation to the land.
You divided the sea by your might.

‘The Lord brought Israel out from among them
with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. He
divided the Red Sea in two’(Psalm 136:11-13).

You broke the heads of the dragons in the sea.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

‘Dragons’ seems to refer to Rahab, the mythological sea serpent and Leviathan, a monster of chaos in Canaanite mythology.

‘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?’(Isaiah 51:9).

‘By his power he stilled the Sea; by his understanding he struck down Rahab’(Job 26:12).

‘You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it – you have founded them. The north and the south – you created them; Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name. You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand, high your right hand.’

(Psalm 89:10-13)

You opened springs and torrents;
you dried up flowing streams.

‘The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land,
a land with flowing streams, with springs and
underground waters welling up in valleys and
hills’(Deuteronomy 8:7).

Yours is the day, yours the night;
you established the moon and the sun.
You fixed all the bounds of the earth;
you made summer and winter.

‘As long as the earth endures,
seed time and harvest,
cold and heat,
summer and winter,
day and night, shall not cease’(Genesis 8:22).

Lord, remember this. See how the enemy scoffs,
and how a foolish people reviles your name.

‘Fools say in their hearts: There is no God’(Psalm 14:1).

‘I feared provocation by the enemy, for their
adversaries might misunderstand and say, ‘Our hand
is triumphant; it was not the Lord who did all this.’

They are a nation void of sense; there is no
understanding in them. If they were wise, they
would understand this; they would discern what the
end would be’(Deuteronomy 32:27-29).

Do not hand over to the wild animals
the life and hopes of your dove.

‘Life and hopes’ translates the Hebrew nepesh. Not only their life is at risk, but everything that gives meaning to their lives.

The dove is Israel’s heraldic emblem: ‘The wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with green gold’(Psalm 68:13).

Do not forget for ever
the life of your poor.

Have regard for your covenant,
for the dark places of the land vomit forth violence.
Do not let the downtrodden be defrauded.
Let the poor and needy praise your name.

Rise up, O God,
plead your cause;
remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.
Do not forget the clamour of your foes,
the uproar of your adversaries
that is growing ever more strident.