

Creation, Kingship, and the Defeat of Evil: A Reflection on Psalm 74¹

Criação, Reinado, and a Derrota do Mal:
Uma Reflexão no Salmo 74

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Abstract

In creation myths of the Ancient Near East, a divine battle against cosmic chaos commonly takes place. The creation of the world and the victorious deity's temple function as signs of the defeat of evil and the establishment of order. These ideas help explain the juxtaposition of a lament over the destruction of the temple (Psa 74:1-11, 18-23), which brought the community to experience divine alienation, and the hymn that proclaims Yhwh's victory over chaos at creation (Psa 74:12-17). A rhetorical analysis of the poem reveals the centrality of the creation hymn in Psa 74:12-17, indicating that creation theology functions as hope to the community in despair and to a world marred by sin, suffering, and evil.

Keywords: Ancient Near Easter creation myths, rhetorical analysis, lament, creation theology, chaoskampf, and divine kingship.

Resumo

Em mitos da criação do Antigo Oriente Próximo, ocorre-se frequentemente uma batalha divina contra o caos cósmico. A criação do mundo e o templo da divindade vitoriosa funcionam como sinais da derrota do mal e do

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estabelecimento da ordem. Essas idéias ajudam a explicar a justaposição de um lamento sobre a destruição do templo (Salmo 74:1-11, 18-23), que levou a comunidade a experimentar alienação divina, e o hino que proclama a vitória de Yhwh sobre o caos na criação (Salmo 74:12-17). Uma análise retórica do poema demonstra a centralidade do hino da criação no Salmo 74:12-17, indicando que a teologia da criação funciona como uma fonte de esperança para a comunidade em desespero e para um mundo marcado pelo pecado, sofrimento e mal.

Palavras-chaves: mitos da criação do Antigo Oriente Próximo, análise retórica, lamento, teologia da criação, chaoskampf, and reinado divino.

1. Introduction

In the literature of the Ancient Near East, divine kingship is intimately intertwined with a battle against chaos that results in the establishment of cosmic order concretely expressed in the building of both the world and the victorious deity's temple. The *Epic of Creation*, a Mesopotamian composition of the second millennium B.C., narrates "the exaltation of Marduk" to kingship.² At a time before creation, Marduk defeated Tiamat, the sea-god,³ in a cosmic battle. He divided her body into two halves, making the sky with one half to hold up her waters.⁴ He then proceeded to build the stars and constellations, humankind, with which he "charged with the service of the gods,"⁵ and the celestial gods, who then offered to build a temple for Marduk. Following a royal banquet for Marduk, the composition concludes with a list of his fifty titles that celebrate his kingship over the gods and the world and his defeat of the foes.⁶ In Egypt,

2. For the "exaltation of Marduk," see Benjamin R. Foster, "Epic of Creation," in William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World [COS]* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1:391.

3. For a discussion of Tiamat, see B. Alster, "Tiamat" in Karel van der Toorn, et alli., *Dictionary of Demons and Deities in the Bible [DDD]* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 867-869.

4. See E. A. Speiser, "The Creation Epic" in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament [ANET]* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 67: "He split her like a shellfish into two parts: half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky, pulled down the bar and posted guards. He bade them to allow not her waters to escape."

5. *ANET*, 68.

6. See *ANET*, 69, 70: "Lugaldimmerankia is his name which we proclaimed in our Assembly. His commands we have exalted above the gods, his fathers. Verily, he is lord of all the gods of heaven and underworld, the King at whose discipline the gods above and below are in mourning... who destroys the wayward foes."

the royal instruction treatise called *Merikare* praises the god who “subdued the water monster” at the creation of the world.⁷ Divine kingship is also linked with a cosmic battle to preserve the already created order against the ever-threatening cosmic chaos. In the second millennium B.C. composition, the *Baal Myth*, the storm-god Baal defeats Yammu, the sea-god. The defeat of Yammu involves a victory over the god Naharu, the dragon, also called the “twisting serpent” and “the closed coiled one with seven heads.”⁸ After the defeat over Yammu, a royal banquet celebrates Baal’s victory and a royal palace is built for him on mount Shaphan. A new threat arises with the god Môtû that challenges Baal’s kingship. Baal succumbs, only to return from the dead to face Môtû, who in the end accepts Baal’s royalty.⁹ In these compositions, divine kingship is asserted through the defeat of cosmic chaos and the establishment of cosmic order. The creation of the world with its spatial and temporal boundaries as well as the construction of the deity’s temple signal to the establishment of cosmic order. The temple embodies the created order to the point that it can be described as a “microcosm turned into stone.”¹⁰ Yhwh’s defeat of chaos at creation appears in the Old Testament (see Psa 89:9-13; Isa 51:9-11). In its theology, the Old Testament sees the Tabernacle and the Temple as concrete representations of Yhwh’s created or-

7. See Miriam Lichtheim, “Merikare,” in *COS*, 1:65: “Well tended is mankind – god’s cattle, he made sky and earth for their sake, he subdued the water monster, he made breath for their noses to live...”

8. See Dennis Pardee, “The Ba’lu Myth,” in *COS*, 1:252.

9. See *COS*, 1:273: “Let them place Ba’lu [on] his royal [throne], on [(his) resting-place, on the seat of] his dominion.”

10. In Mesopotamia, the ziggurat Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 B.C.) completed was called in Sumerian “Etemenanki,” which means “House, (which) is the foundation of heaven and earth.” The temple in Dilbat, southeast of Babylon, was named “House, which is the site of heaven and earth.” In Israel, the architecture and the iconography of the Solomonic temple recalls creation with representations of “cherubim, lions, and oxen” (1 Kings 7:29), “pomegranates” (1 Kings 7:18), representative of “fertility,” and the “molten sea” (1 Kings 7:23), which most likely depicted the fresh oceanic waters. For more on this, see Stefan Seiler, “Zur Funktion und Bedeutung der schöpfungstheologischen Aussagen in Ps 74,” *Vetus Testamentum* 69 (2019): 146-147. The location of the temple on Mount Zion also points to the temple as the “... entrance to the heavenly regions...,” see Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 171: “Even more strongly than its architectural configuration, however, the location of the temple on Mount Zion (the highest point of the city) characterized it as the entrance to the heavenly regions and as the link between heaven and earth. The temple is part of earth which reaches into the heavens – or a part of heaven that touches the earth.”

der. Any disruption of cultic life is seen as cosmic chaos' assault on order. These ideas help explain the juxtaposition of a lament over the destruction of the temple and the creation theology in Psalm 74. In this poem, the enemy's destruction of the Temple represents the apparent triumph of chaos, putting into question the kingship of God over the created order (Psa 74:1-11, 18-23). The answer to this chaotic situation is found in the hymn that praises God as the king who subdued cosmic chaos at creation (Psa 74:12-17). Below follows a discussion of the literary center of Psa 74, the meaning of Psa 74:12-17, the symmetrical form and function of the poem, and hermeneutical reflections on creation for today.

2. The ABA literary structure of Psalm 74

A rhetorical analysis of Psalm 74 reveals a well-structured poem with 74:12-17 at its center. The psalm can be divided into three stanzas (74:1-11; 12-17; 18-23), containing three strophes each. Seamlessly integrating form and content, Psa 74 bolsters its portrayal of Yhwh as the one who defeated chaos at creation and, so, as the one who can also defeat evil in the present life of the community.

2.1. Stanza A: Psa 74:1-11

The occurrence of the interrogative pronoun “why” (למה) in Psa 74:1a and 74:11a marks the beginning and the end of the first stanza.¹¹ This stanza can be further subdivided into three main strophes. The repetition of “forever” (נצח) in 74:1a, 3a indicates the limits of the first strophe,¹² while 74:3b does double duty, closing the first strophe and opening the second one with its explicit mention of the “enemy” that figures prominently in 74:4-9.¹³ The section is composed of a lament (74:1ab) followed by two petitions (74:2-3). Echoing the beginning of book II (see Psa 42:9; 43:2), the strophe questions God's rejection of his people (74:1). The characterization of the community as the “flock” carries deep theological convictions about God's continuing care in the role of a royal shepherd who protects his people from harm (see Psa 23; Isa 40:11). Yet, God has forgot-

11. See D. J. Human, “Die struktuur en tradisiesamentelling van Psalm 74,” *Skriften Kerk* (1993): 207; Seiler, “Zur Funktion,” 136.

12. Noted also by Human, “Die struktuur,” 206.

13. See also Human, “Die struktuur,” 206, who speaks of 74:3b as a “bridge verse” between the first (vv. 1-3) and the second strophe, which for him includes vv. 4-8.

ten his flock (see 74:2a) and has delivered it in the hands of the enemy (74:3b).¹⁴ In case the identification of the people as the “flock” of his “pasture” was not enough to move God to action, 74:2 further classifies the community as “your congregation,” “the tribe of your inheritance,”¹⁵ and the place of God’s dwelling (see 74:2d: “... Zion, where you dwell”). Thus, the divine rejection in 74:1 is countered with divine election in 74:2.¹⁶ The strophe asks God to “remember” (74:2a) and to “lift up” his foot (74:3a), presumably to walk toward Zion in salvation (see Isa 40:3-5, 9).¹⁷ The last line (74:3b) brings this sub-section to a climax since it gives a more concrete indication of the rhetorical situation of the present poem: an unidentified enemy caused evil in the “sanctuary.”

In contrast to vv. 1-3, the main grammatical participant in the second strophe is “your adversaries” (74:4a). The strophe uses seven finite verbs to describe the enemy’s actions: like a lion hunting for prey, “they roared” (74:4a), “they established” their emblems (74:4b), “they beat to pieces” (74:6), “they set on fire” (74:7a), “they profaned” (74:7b), “they said” (74:8a), and “they burned” (74:8c). The actions of the enemies were directed against “your meeting place” (74:4a),

14. See Seiler, “Zur Funktion,” 138: “Between him and his flock exist a special protection and a bond of trust, which, according to the prayers, was unilaterally cancelled by God. Therefore, the Psalm appeals already in the first verse to the royal fiduciary duty of God.” In this article, translation of non-English sources are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

15. Following M. Dahood, Pierre Auffret, “Essai Sur La Structure Litteraire Du Psaume LXXIV,” *VT XXXIII*, 2 (1983): 130-131, takes “tribe” as an accusative of means and transposes the pronominal suffix in “your inheritance” to the word “tribe.” He thus translates Psa 74:3 as follows: “Remember your assembly, which you have acquired from the beginning, which you have bought with your staff, your heritage, mount Zion, where you have established your residence” (emphasis mine). Such a procedure erases, however, the internal symmetry of Psa 74:2 which employs three main objects of the imperative “remember” that are further qualified by three relative clauses. Thus, “your congregation,” “the tribe of your inheritance,” and “mount Zion” are the object clauses respectively modified by “which you purchased of old,” “which you redeemed,” and “where you dwelt.” Moreover, Auffret’s proposal takes away the internal grammatical chiasmic structure of Psa 74:2, which intercalates object and modifying clauses as follows:

A. Obj. 1: “your congregation” + B. rel. 1: “which you purchased of old.”

B’. Rel. 2: “which you redeemed” + A’. obj. 2: “the tribe of your inheritance.”

A”. Obj. 3: “mount Zion” + B”. rel. 3: “where you dwelt.”

16. See J. P. M. van der Ploeg, “Psalm 74 and Its Structure,” in *Travels in the World of the Old Testament: Studies Presented to Professor M. A. Beek on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (eds. M. S. H. G. Heerma van Voss et alli., Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp. B. V.; 1974): 208.

17. See Dennis Sylva, “Precreation Discourse in Psalms 74 and 77: Struggling with Chaokämpfe,” *Religion and Theology* 18 (2011), 246.

“your sanctuary” (74:7a), the “dwelling-place of your name” (74:7b), and the “meeting-places of God” (74:8c). The strophe is linked with the preceding one in the use of “meeting place” (מועד in vv. 4, 8), “congregation” (עדה in v. 2) and “dwelling place” (see משכן in 74:2 and משכן in 74:7).¹⁸ Although the grammatical participant changes to “we” in 74:9, the repetition of “sign, emblem” (אות) in Psa 74:4b, 9a provides a frame around Psa 74:4-9 and brings the strophe full circle: because the enemy has set up its emblems as a sign of its victory (74:4b), the community is no longer able to see its own “signs” indicating how long the present situation would last.¹⁹

The last strophe (74:10-11) returns to the first one (74:1-3),²⁰ framing Psa 74:3a-9.²¹ Like 74:1-3, the present strophe is composed of a lament (see “how long” in 74:10a; 11a) followed by a petition (see “destroy” in 74:11b).²² The last strophe is different from the first one in that the main concern is no longer the community but the very “name” of God (see “your name” in 74:10b), anticipated by the mention of the “dwelling-place of your name” in 74:7. The third strophe in Psa 74:10-11 is a climax because it joins together strophes 1 and 2 in its use of “adversary” (צַר, see 74:4), the “enemy” (אויב, see 74:3b) “forever” (see 74:3a),

18. See Auffret, “Essai,” 131 n. 7, 138.

19. See Auffret, “Essai,” 132. He also sees v. 9 as a counterpoint to vv. 1-8. Conversely, Human, “Die Struktur,” 206-207 sees an *inclusio* in the usage of מועד “meeting place” in Psa 74:4a, 8b and takes 74:9-10 as linked by anadiplosis, even though he recognizes that 74:10-11 are more closely associated. But instead of connecting vv. 9, 10, the repetition of “how long” in 74:10a may aim at relating the strophe in 74:4-9 with the one in 74:10-11. An alternative Human proposes is to see 74:9 as a “bridge verse” joining 74:4-8 to 74:10-11.

20. See van der Ploeg, “Psalm 74,” 208.

21. See Seiler, “Zur Funktion,” 136.

22. There are three main problems with Psa 74:11ab: first, does “your right hand” belong with the preceding or the succeeding lines? Second, the *ketiv* reads “your order, limit, prescription” but the *qere* has “your bosom.” And, third, the imperative “destroy” at the end of the verse is awkward. Taken as it is, the text reads as follows: “why do you keep your hand back, even your right hand? From the midst of your limit, destroy!” As a solution, the BHS proposes (a) to move the *atnah* accent from “your right hand” to “your hand;” (b) to choose the *qere* reading “your bosom” instead of “your limit;” and (c) to read the imperative כלה as the *qal*, passive כָּלָה. These changes would produce the following reading: “Why do you keep your hand back? and [why] is your right hand restrained in your bosom?” While BHS is right in adhering to the *qere* reading “your bosom,” there is no need to change either the position of the *atnah* or the imperative כלה. The verse would then read thus: “Why do you bring your hand back, even your right hand? From within your bosom, destroy!”

“your name” (see 74:7b), and “in the[from] the midst of” (see 74:4a).²³ Tying up all three strophes is the expression of lament found in the interrogative pronoun *מַה*: “why” (*למה*) in 74:1a, “until how long” (*עַד-מַה*) as the last phrase of the second strophe in 74:9, and “why” (*למה*) in 74:11. The concentric²⁴ ABA structure highlights the fundamental problem of the rhetorical situation of Psa 74, namely, divine absence (74:1-3a) and inaction (74:10-11) in face of the apparent triumph of “evil” seen in the concrete destruction of the temple (74:3b-9).²⁵

2.2. Stanza B: 74:12-17

The conjunction *waw* attached to “God” introduces an adversative clause and points to a break with the preceding stanza (74:1-11).²⁶ The genre is now of a hymn that extols God’s actions in creation.²⁷ Psa 74:12-17 is a closed unit marked by the occurrence of the first person pronominal suffix at the beginning in “my king” followed by a declaration that “my king” works salvation on “earth” (74:12), ending with a second person pronominal suffix “to you” followed by a declaration that God has established all the boundaries of “earth” (74:17).²⁸ The present stanza can also be subdivided into three smaller strophes: (a) 74:12 is the introductory exclamation of the hymn, locating God’s actions in time (see “from of old”) and space (see “in the midst of the earth); (b) 74:13-15 depicts the defeat of primeval chaos represented by Leviathan and the watery imagery in “sea,” “waters,” “spring,” “streams,” and “permanent rivers;”²⁹ and (c) 74:16-17 portrays the creation of temporal and spatial boundaries.

23. See Auffret, “Essai,” 133. He also speaks of an *inclusio* between vv. 3, 10-11. Differently, however, he takes vv. 3-11 as one single strophe, despite noting the fact that God is addressed only in vv. 3, 10-11, while also being absent in vv. 3b-9.

24. For a similar concentric structure around 74:3b-9 bracketed by 74:1-3a, 10-11, see Auffret, “Essai,” 138.

25. Similarly, Auffret, “Essai,” 134, sees the two fundamental questions of 74:1-11 as of God’s remembrance of his people and of his intervention on their behalf. Human, “Die struktur,” 205, speaks of God’s “apparent absence and passivity.”

26. See Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen: 51-100* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 366; Seiler, “Zur Funktion,” 136-137.

27. For the classification of Psa 74:12-17 as a hymn, see Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* (trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 85.

28. See Auffret, “Essai,” 136.

29. Human, “Die struktur,” 207 see 74:15 as a bridge between 74:13-14, 16-17.

2.3. Stanza A': 74:18-23

The change in mood to an imperatival verb (“remember”) in Psa 74:18a indicates a break with the immediately preceding section in Psa 74:12-17, which is mostly composed of *qatal* verbal forms in the past tense. The stanza is demarcated by “remember,” “do not forget,” “taunt,” “scorn,” and “foolish” at its beginning (see 74:18a-19b) and end (74:22c-23a).³⁰ Additionally, the unit mentions the names of God at the beginning (see *Yhwh* at 74:18a) and end (see *’lhym* at 74:22a).³¹ Auffret sees an ABBA chiasmic structure with v. 20 at the center: vv. 18, 20-23 share the lexemes “remember,” “taunt,” and “enemy” in parallel with “fool” (74:18) or “adversaries” (74:22-23), while vv. 19, 21 have in common the jussive negations “do not...” and “poor.” But Auffret’s proposal does not account adequately for the data he himself adduced. The expression “your name” appears in 74:18, 20, while “do not forget” figures in 74:19, 22, rendering an ABAB type of literary structure.³² Additionally, the function of 74:20 as the center of Psa 74:18-23 is unclear. Different from Auffret, Human sees a chiasmic structure of the type ABCBA, composed around the negative imperatives (𐤇𐤍 + Jussive forms) 74:19, 21, 23 and the positive imperatives in 74:20, 22. The central verse is 74:21.³³ For whatever reason, Human did not include the positive imperative in 74:18a. With a slight modification of his proposal, the intercalation of positive petition(s) followed by negative ones indicates the existence of three main strophes in an ABA type of structure:

- A:** 74:18-19: “remember” (74:18a), “do not give” (74:19a), and “do not forget” (74:19b).
- B:** 74:20-21: “obey” (74:20a) and “do not let the oppressed return ashamed” (74:21a)
- A':** 74:22-23: “Arise” (74:22a), “plead” (74:22b), “remember” (74:22c) and “do not forget” (74:23a). These two verses are also linked by the petition “arise, o God” (74:23a) against those “who rise against you” (74:23b) and by the expressions “all day” (74:22c) and “continually” (74:23b).³⁴

30. See e.g., van der Ploeg, “Psalm 74,” 209; Human, “Die structuur,” 206.

31. See Auffret, “Essai,” 139.

32. See Auffret, “Essai,” 140.

33. See Human, “Die structuur,” 208.

34. See van der Ploeg, “Psalm 74,” 210; See Auffret, “Essai,” 139.

This last stanza shows a twofold concern amidst the enemies' actions: care for the people of God, who are suffering (74:19, 21) and, as a result, for God's own name, which is being defiled by the enemy's triumph over his people (74:23).

The shared vocabulary between Psa 74:1-11, 18-23 indicates that the last section is tightly linked with the first. The connecting words or concepts are (a) "remember" (74:2a, 18a, 22c): while Psa 74:1-3 petitions God to remember his people, Psa 74:18-23 asks God to remember the enemy's taunt (74:18a) and reproach (74:22c) directed toward God himself; (b) "enemy" (אויב, 74:3, 10, 18): the enemy has caused evil in the "sanctuary" (74:3) and has taunted God's name (74:10, 18); (c) "to taunt" (II 18, 74:10) (חרף) and "taunt" (חרפה in 74:20); (d) "to scorn you name" (74:10, 18): while 74:10 queries how long the enemy will scorn God's name, 74:18 petitions God to remember that the enemy has done so; (e) "your name" (21, 18, 10, 74:7) (שמך): the expression "your name" is evenly distributed in the first and third stanza of the poem. Psa 74:7, 21 form a contrast, indicated by the sound similarity in the verbs הלל "to praise" and הלל "to profane:" while the enemy has "profaned" the dwelling of God's name (74:7b), the psalmist's hope is that the oppressed and poor will "praise" his name (74:21b).³⁵ Similarly, the request that God remembers that the enemy has "disdained" (נאץ) his name (74:18c) is the first step in bringing a solution to the open-ended question of 74:10b: "will the enemy disdain (נאץ) your name forever?" (f) "forever" (19, 10, 3, 74:1) (נצח): in 74:1a, God is depicted as the one who has rejected his people "forever," while 74:19b petitions God to not forget his people "forever" (74:19b). The concrete signs of God's rejection and forgetfulness are the "perpetual" ruins³⁶ (74:3a) and the enemy's lasting disdain of God's name (74:10b);³⁷ (g) "adversary" (צר, II צרר, Psa 74:4, 10, 23). Psa 74:4a, 23a are parallel in thought: whereas the adversary has roared in the "meeting place," the poem comes full circle at the end, asking God to not forget the "noise" of

35. See Auffret, "Essai," 143: "L'espoir du psalmiste est que le Nom offensé par les ennemis... soit enfin loué par les fidèles..."

36. MT reads מִשְׁאוֹת "deceptions" from the root נשא "to deceive." Interpreting contextually, the LXX has ὑπερηφανίας "arrogance, haughtiness," which the Pesh. (ܡܥܠܡܬܐ) and the Vulg. (*superbia*) followed. But it is best to read מִשְׁאוֹת as מִשְׁאוֹר "ruins." See the Targ. (למשורח).

37. See further Auffret, "Essai," 144.

the adversaries.³⁸ The movement of the first stanza (74:1-11) to the third section (74:18-23) can now be fully described. The psalm starts mostly with a lament that describes the enemies' actions and God's inaction (1-11) and ends with a series of petitions, imploring God to act (74:18-23). Facilitating the transition from lament (1-11) to full petitions (18-23) is the poem's middle section in 74:12-17.

3. **Psa 74:12-17: Creation and the Defeat of Evil**

At first, the creation theme in Psa 74:12-17 appears out of place in a lament (74:1-11) and petition sections (74:18-23).³⁹ However, literary links with the surrounding sections show that Psa 74:12-17 is an integral part of the whole poem. The first-person singular pronoun in "my king" contrasts with the plural subject in 74:9: "our signs... we do not see." While the "enemies" occupy the center stage in Psa 74:1-11, the sevenfold "it was you who..." in Psa 74:13-17 highlights God as the main actor. Psa 74:12-17 sets in opposition the actions of God in creation with the destructive actions of the enemy in history (see Psa 74:3a-8).⁴⁰ Whereas fire is the main conqueror in 74:1-11, God is the vanquisher of the waters in 74:12-17. Thus the two stanzas depict two distinct, but interrelated scenes: the enemy against God (74:1-11), and God against the enemy (= "Sea" in 74:12-17).⁴¹ Another important link between the first two stanzas is the use of "in the midst of" (see 74:4a, 12b). While the enemy has wreaked havoc against God's chosen dwelling place on earth, God had at creation worked salvation amid the earth, thus, indicating his ownership of it. The issue revolves around the tension between the destruction of the place God chose to dwell and the God who is depicted as the ruler of creation.⁴² Finally, the God who "worked salvation" is asked to work that same salvation in the present life of the psalmist's community (see "God" in Psa 74:12a, 22a). In this fashion, Psa 74:12-17 is the literary center

38. See van der Ploeg, "Psalm 74," 209, who may be right in asserting that "clamour" in 74:23b may have been used to echo "they roared" in 74:4a. See further Auffret, "Essai," 143.

39. See a similar observation in Seiler, "Zur Funktion," 136.

40. See Human, "Die struktur," 208; Seiler, "Zur Funktion," 137. Against van der Ploeg, "Psalm 74," 209, who is not sure whether the psalmist was intentional about this contrast. Additionally, van der Ploeg mistakenly asserts that the personal pronoun "you" appears "no less than six times," when in fact it occurs seven times in Psa 74:12-17.

41. See Auffret, "Essai," 137, 139.

42. See Auffret, "Essai," 139.

of the entire poem.⁴³

3.1. Psa 74:12

Psa 74:12 functions an introductory confession to Psa 74:13-17. Considering the apparent triumph of evil (vv. 1-11; 18-23), v. 12 confesses God as king and qualifies his reign temporarily, “since antiquity,” and spatially, “who executes victories in the middle of the earth.” The proclamation of God’s reign is in opposition to the present reality of the people, which experiences the apparent triumph of evil. The section appeals to the God who redeemed his people “long ago” and who defeated chaos long before that (see “from of old” in Psa 74:2a, 12a).⁴⁴ If the enemy “roared amid the sacred assembly,” God as king wrought victories “in the midst of the earth” (vv. 4, 12). What victories would these be? The answer is found in vv. 12-17.

3.2 Psalm 74:13-15

Psa 74:13-17 develops the main introductory confession in Psa 74:12, and clarifies the “victories” of God as his defeat of cosmic chaos (Psa 74:13-15) and the creation of the world (Psa 74:16-17).⁴⁵ The “Sea” (*yam*, 74:13a), “the sea-dragons” (*taninim*, 74:13b), “Leviathan” (*leviatan*, 74:14a), and “Rivers” (*naharot*, 74:15b) are personifications of chaos. The “Sea” and the “sea-dragon” is clearly personified in Job 7:12: “Am I the Sea (*yam*) or the Dragon (*tannin*) for you to place a guard against me?” (see also Job 28:14; 38:8). In Job 28:14, the “Sea” appears in parallel with the “Abyss” (*tehom*), which is the cosmic chaotic waters that existed at creation (see Gen 1:2). Similarly, the “sea-dragon” parallels the “Abyss” (*tehom*) in Psa 148:7, where they are both enjoined to praise Yhwh. The association of the “Sea” or the “sea-dragon” with the “Abyss” clearly indicates the cosmic nature of the four elements mentioned in Psa 74:13-15. Although this is clear for the “Sea,” “sea-dragon,” and “Leviathan,” the personified usage of “Rivers” (74:15b) and its association with cosmic chaos requires more evidence.

43. See Auffret, “Essai,” 145, who sees an *inclusio* around the appeal to God in 74:10-11 and to Yhwh in 74:18.

44. See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen*, 366-367.

45. Similarly, Seiler, “Zur Funktion,” 137.

In the *Baal Myth*, the “Sea” (*yam*) often parallels the “River” (*nahar*):

“Surely I smote the Beloved of El, Yam?
Surely I exterminated Nahar, the mighty god?
Surely I lifted up the dragon,
I overpowered him?
I smote the writhing serpent,
Encircler-with-seven-heads!”⁴⁶

Like in Psa 74:13-15, the above passage mentions all four elements representative of chaos: the “Sea,” the “River,” the “dragon,” and the “writhing serpent,” which is a designation for Leviathan (see Isa 27:1): “Though you smote Litan, the wriggling serpent, finished off the writhing serpent, Encircler-with-seven-heads...”⁴⁷ In the *Baal Cycle*, Baal’s defeat of the “Sea” (*yam*) and Leviathan is a victory over the forces of chaos. Such a victory results in a banquet celebrating Baal’s royalty as well as the construction of a royal palace for Baal.⁴⁸ The *Baal Cycle* is not a myth about world origins, but about the preservation of the world in the face of cosmic enemies that threaten to bring the world to its pre-creation chaotic state.⁴⁹ Other texts speak of a divine struggle against a serpent-like figure. The Egyptian composition *The Repulsing of the Dragon* narrates the Sun god’s daily struggle against a serpent that tries to overcome him during his journey in the world of the dead. But the sun-god overcomes the serpent with the help of Seth.⁵⁰ Because Psa 74:13-14 belongs to a section that clearly speaks of creation

46. See N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit* (2nd. Ed., London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 1.3, III. 36-44. From archaeological excavations in 1929 at the Ras Shamra site, located “near the Mediterranean coast of Syria,” scholars have found a series of texts written in Ugaritic, among them the *Baal Cycle of Myths*. These texts derive from a kingdom that flourished there during the 2nd millennium BCE. See Marguerite Yon, “Ugarit,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* [ABD] (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:695. For the mythological interpretation of “rivers” in Psa 74:15 in connection with the Ugaritic text cited above, see also Seiler, “Zur Funktion,” 141.

47. See Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 1.5, I.1-3.

48. The *Baal Myth* has been variously interpreted. For a general, brief discussion, see Dennis Pardee, “The Ba’lu Myth,” in *COS*, 1:241-242. For a more detailed overview, see William D. Barker, *Isaiah’s Kingship Polemic* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 17-29. For a detailed review of this work, see Wilson de Angelo Cunha, “Review of William D. Barker, *Isaiah’s Kingship Polemic*,” in *Bibliotheca Orientalis* LXXIII, 1-2 (Jan-April, 2016): 197-201.

49. See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen*, 368.

50. See Robert K. Ritner, “The Repulsing of the Dragon,” in *COS*, 1:32.

(see vv. 16-17), it alludes to a divine chaos battle that Yhwh won at the time of the creation of the world.⁵¹

Yhwh first “roused” the sea with his strength (74:13a). The *poel* verb *parar* has been variously translated since antiquity. The LXX reads “you strengthened the sea,” which the Vulg. follows (“*tu confirmasti in virtute*”),⁵² while the Pesh. (פּאַרַר) and Targ. (גּוֹרְתָהּ) have “to divide.” Most modern Bible translations interpret *parar* as “to divide.”⁵³ There are two homonyms of *parar*. I *parar* means “break, destroy, suspend” (see e.g. Isa 24:5) and II *parar*, whose general sense is “to move back and forth” (see, e.g., Isa 24:19).⁵⁴ The meaning of *parar* in Psa 74:13a must agree with “you shattered” in the parallel line (Psa 74:13b). HALOT proposes II *parar*: “it was you who violently stirred up the Sea.”⁵⁵ Others point to Akkadian *parāru* in the intensive stem: “to break up, shatter, to rupture, disperse,” which would be a fitting parallel to “you shattered” in Psa 74:13.⁵⁶ The sense, therefore, seems to be that Yhwh broke up the Sea and shattered the heads of the sea-dragons, smashing Leviathan. This language echoes a primordial divine battle against the forces of cosmic chaos.⁵⁷

Disagreement exists as to whether Psa 74:15 should be interpreted as an allusion to creation or to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.⁵⁸ The lexemes בקע “to split open” and יבשה “dry ground,” which is cognate with the verbal form יבש “to dry up” that occurs in Psa 74:15b, appear in the exodus narrative (see

51. For a detailed and valuable discussion of Leviathan traditions in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Ugarit, see Barker, *Kingship*, 129-170.

52. A modern version following the LXX is the *Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible* which has “to master” (“tu as maîtrisé la mer par ta force”).

53. See e.g., NIV, ESB, NRS. See also the Dutch version *Herziene Statenvertaling* (HSV): “Ú hebt door Uw macht de zee gespleten,” the German *Neue Luther Bibel* (NLB): “Du teilst das Meer durch deine Kraft,” the French “en français courant” (BFC, 1997): “Tu as eu la force de fendre la mer,” the Italian *La Sacra Bibbia della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana* (CEI): “Tu con potenza hai diviso il mare,” and the Portuguese version ARA: “Tu, com o teu poder, dividiste o mar.”

54. See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [HALOT] (trans. and ed., M. E. J. Richardson; Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000).

55. For this meaning, see HALOT. See also the *Lutherbibel, revidiert 2017* (L17): “Du hast das Meer aufgewühlt durch deine Kraft.”

56. See Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 205 n. 51.

57. NET reads “you destroyed,” and the TNK has “you drove back the sea.”

58. See, e.g., Human, “Die structuur,” 212.

Exod 14:16) and in texts that recollect it (see Neh 9:11; Psa 66:6). According to these texts, Yhwh split open the sea, making it possible for the Israelites to pass through it on dry ground. However, it is important to note that it is the “sea” that is split open in these texts, not the “spring” and “wadi” mentioned in Psa 74:15.⁵⁹ A closer parallel exists between Psa 74:15 and creation-related narratives that have a cosmic dimension in their purview. Thus, Gen 7:11; 8:2 use both בקע “to split open” and מעין “spring” to narrate the cleaving of the “springs of the deep (תהום).” The “deep” is the primeval ocean present at creation (see Gen 1:2), symbolizing the chaos and disorder upon which the Creator acts to bring complete order (Gen 1:1-2:3). Additionally, the verb יבש “to dry up” also appears in the flood narrative, describing the earth as “dry” after the flood had subsided (see Gen 8:7, 14). Similarly, the “dry ground” appears in the creation narrative after God separated the waters (see Gen 1:9, 10). Finally, both נהל “stream” and נהר “river” can carry cosmic undertones (see 2 Sam 22:5//Psa 18:5; Psa 24:2). In the light of the clear creation tradition in Psa 74:16-17, it appears, therefore, that Psa 74:15 fits better in the context of creation texts than in the scope of redemptive texts like the exodus narrative.⁶⁰

More specifically, Psa 74:15 may be an allusion to the flood narrative. First, Psa 74:15a speaks of “splitting open” spring and wadi. As seen above, the combination of “splitting open” (בקע) and “spring” (מעין) appears at the beginning of the flood narrative (see Gen 7:11; 8:2). Thus, Psa 74:15 may be alluding to God’s initial act of initiating the flood. And, second, the expression “durable rivers” in Psa 74:15b parallels “spring and wadi” in the previous line (Psa 74:15a). Psa 74:15 contrasts the verbs “to split open” (74:15a) and “to dry up” (74:15b). The flood narrative also uses the lexeme “to dry up” to describe the dried condition of the earth after the flood had passed (see Gen 8:7, 14). As such, while 74:15a refers to the beginning of the flood event, 74:15b denotes its end. In the purview

59. See Seiler, “Zur Funktion,” 142.

60. Human, “Die Struktur,” 213. The strict separation of “salvation” from “creation” does not fit the theology of the Old Testament which holds both as two sides of the same coin. That is to say, “creation” is already the first step in redemption, while redemption is patterned after “creation.” For a soteriological understanding of creation, see Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (München: Kaiser Verlag München, 1960), 2:250-251: “... for him [Deutero-Isaiah], creation is the first historical act of salvation of Jahwe and a especial witness to his salvation will.”

of creation-related texts, Psa 74:15 recollects the God who both initiated and ended the flood.

3.3. Creation as Hope

What is the rhetorical purpose of Psa 74:12-17? The clue lies in the use of $\square\kappa\eta$ (Psa 74:12a), the expression “in the midst of the earth” (Psa 74:12b), and the declaration “you have established all the boundaries of the earth” (Psa 74:17a). The noun $\square\kappa\eta$ is used temporally in Psa 74:2 in the expression “you purchased of old.” But in this context, $\square\kappa\eta$ has a definite point in time, namely, the establishment of Israel as God’s people at Sinai after the exodus from Egypt. Contrarily, $\square\kappa\eta$ in Psa 74:12a extends to a point before time.⁶¹ Thus, Psa 74:12a as best translated as “But God is my king from time immemorial.”⁶² God’s defeat of chaos at creation rightly ascribes him with the title of “king.” While the psalmist appeals to God to remember his people whom he acquired of old, in a definite point in time (Psa 74:2b), he finds hope in the God who has shown himself as “king” from a period of time that preceded the historical creation of Israel in time. The other important point is the phrase “in the midst of the earth.” As seen above, this expression echoes “your adversaries roared in the midst of your meeting place” in Psa 74:4a, which opens the central section narrating the enemy’s attack on the temple (Psa 74:4-9). While the enemy claimed his stake in the temple, the psalmist finds hope in the God who has acted in the whole earth. The confession of God’s all-encompassing acts of salvation serves to diminish the importance and extent of the enemy’s actions in the temple. Finally, the expression “you have established all boundaries of the earth” (Psa 74:17a) echoes “all the evil the enemy caused in the sanctuary” (Psa 74:3b). Whereas the enemy’s actions are limited in time and space, Yhwh has been king before time and in all the earth. Therefore, the hymn in Psa 74:12-17 presents an answer to the apparent triumph of evil described in Psa 74:3b-9 and presupposed in Psa 74:18-23. As one scholar well put it: “Les vv. 12-17 apparaissent au centre comme la garantie, le point de départ de toutes ces inversions, la certitude en particulier sur laquelle s’appuie le

61. For this reason, Sylva, “Precreation,” 244 n. 1, rightly assigns Psa 74 to a set of “precreation texts.”

62. See *HALOT*.

double appel de 1 pour le peuple et de 22-23 contre les ennemis.”⁶³ Or as another indicated: “The hymn of praise ‘gives power’ to Yahweh... but it also provides the congregation with new strength and faith.”⁶⁴

4. Form and Function

Reading a biblical text well requires attention not only to *what* the text says but also to *how* the texts says what it says. Psa 74 exemplifies how its form matches its rhetorical function. As the discussion above has demonstrated, the poem can be divided into three stanzas of three strophes each:

Stanza I: 1-11	Stanza II: 12-17	Stanza III: 18-23
A: 1-3a	A: 12	A: 18-19
B: 3b-9	B: 13-15	B: 20-21
C: 10-11	C: 16-17	C: 22-23

The symmetry above is used by the writer to covertly communicate the poem’s central message, namely, that Yhwh brought order out of chaos at creation. Certainly, the rhetorical addressees of Psa 74 were living in times of trouble, ravaged by the chaos that the destruction of the temple caused. The symmetry of Psa 74 is a counterpoint to the situation of chaos in which the community lived and it points to the God who acted in creation as the source of hope for the overcoming of evil and the coming of the community’s restoration. The author’s interest in symmetry can also be detected in the sevenfold use of “it was you who...” in the poem’s central section (Psa 74:12-17). Seven is not only the number of perfection but it is also rooted in the perfection of the created order in Gen 1:1-2:3. Thus, the symmetrical form of Psa 74 goes hand in hand with its message of a God who brought order to disorder at creation (Psa 74:12-17).

63. Auffret, “Essai,” 145.

64. See Mowinckel, *The Psalms*, 88. See also Sylva, “Precreation,” 245; Seiler, “Zur Funktion,” 143: “Durch ihre ‘Ver-gegenwärtigung’ wird die *Vergangenheit* ins aktuelle Geschehen ‘eingeholt’ und weckt Hoffnung für die *Zukunft*” (italics his).

5. Conclusion: Some Hermeneutical Reflections

The creation hymn in Psa 74:12-17 is an integral part of the laments in Psa 74:1-11, 18-23. As it has been shown, it functions as the answer to the community's experience of divine alienation and the apparent triumph of evil. Creation theology in Psa 74 (see vv. 12-17) is the foundation for hope in face of the apparent triumph of evil in the present. Because Yhwh defeated evil in the creation past, recalling it brings hope that he can once again defeat it in the present.⁶⁵ Creation theology also provides the answer to divine alienation (see Psa 74:13a) and inaction (Psa 74:10-11, 22-23). In a world marred by sin, suffering, and evil, Psa 74 is an invitation to proclaim the kingship of God demonstrated in creation but apparently questioned in times of trouble. As one scholar put it: "... the reign of God is always proclaimed amid circumstances that seem to deny it... in the worst of times, when the forces of evil seem to prevail, the people of God profess their faith in a cosmic sovereign whose power seems to be no power at all, whose 'power is made perfect in weakness'."⁶⁶

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65. See John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 22.

66. See J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "Psalms," in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 3:509.

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