

OpenTheo

November 28th: Psalm 74 & Acts 22:23—23:11

November 27, 2020



Alastair Roberts

A psalm in national disaster. Paul before the Sanhedrin.

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

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

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? 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 paw forever. Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.

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 clamor 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 God. 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 anguished questions and cries.

The second movement is from verses 12 to 17, relating God's power in exodus and creation. 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. 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.

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 mock 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 mocking 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. You ruled 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. God's power over the natural order and his power over the international order merge 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 involve 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. 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? Acts 22-23-23-11 When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.

So the tribune came and said to him, Tell me, are you a Roman citizen? And he said, Yes. The tribune answered, I bought this citizenship for a large sum. Paul said, But I am a citizen by birth.

So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately. And the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet.

And he brought Paul down and set him before them. And looking intently at the council, Paul said, Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

Then Paul said to him, God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall. Are you sitting to judge me according to the law? And yet contrary to the law, you order me to be struck. Those who stood by said, Would you revile God's high priest? And Paul said, I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest.

For it is written, You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people. Now when Paul perceived that one part was Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.

And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit. But the Pharisees acknowledged them all.

Then a great clamour arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him? And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him

away from among them by force, and bring him into the barracks. In Acts chapter 21, Paul was taken in the temple by the Romans after the Jewish crowd were on the verge of killing him, following the accusations of the Jews from the province of Asia.

What had initially been intended to serve as a visit to strengthen relations between Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Judea, and Gentile Christians elsewhere in the empire, was now provoking the most hostile of reactions among the Judean Jews. Of course, Paul had been told this already by the Holy Spirit, and various prophets had warned him about what awaited him in Jerusalem on his journey back. However, now he is in captivity, with people seeking his life.

His first attempt to defend himself before the crowd in the temple had just failed. The moment that he mentioned that he was sent by God to the Gentiles, the crowd wanted him to be put to death. The extreme hostility provoked by the prospect of the Gentile mission might recall the reaction that Jesus received after his sermon in Nazareth, back in Luke chapter 4, verses 25-29.

But in truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath, and they rose up and drove him out of the town, and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff.

To the Jews in the temple, Paul's reference to going to the Gentiles would seem to confirm the accusations of the Jews from Asia, showing that Paul really had pro-Gentile beliefs, and that he was probably compromising the covenantal purity and uniqueness of Israel. The fact that all of these things are occurring in Jerusalem should be considered. Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets in the New Testament.

Jesus was rejected as a prophet in Jerusalem, and his servant Paul must be rejected there too. Taking up the story at the end of chapter 22, the tribune, who had let Paul speak to the crowd to try to calm things down, now wants to get to the bottom of why the crowd so violently worked up about him. The tribune probably did not understand Aramaic, so didn't hear what it was that made the crowd so furious at him.

The tribune determines to take Paul back to the barracks and to flog him, hoping thereby to get the truth out of him. While Paul had received a beating with the rods in Acts chapter 16, here a whip would have been used, and the whip would be one with a wooden handle and leather thongs, with bits of metal and bone within it. In Acts chapter 16 in Philippi, Paul had revealed that he was a Roman citizen after he had already been beaten.

Here he does so just as they are stretching him out on the whipping frame to be whipped. Daryl Bach notes that this is likely at Gabbatha, where Jesus was probably also whipped. On several occasions in the book of Acts, Paul uses some aspect of his identity to his advantage.

He will do so again shortly after this, when he will identify himself as a Pharisee, suffering on account of his belief in the resurrection of the dead. We see Paul becoming all things to all men in 1 Corinthians 9, 19-23, so it was better to reach them with the gospel. That sort of adoption of different identities is in order to remove any obstacle to the acceptance of the gospel.

However, here Paul is employing his ability to move between identities as a means of disguise and evasion. One moment Paul is a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a man raised in the city of Jerusalem, learning at the feet of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, speaking fluently in Aramaic and deeply conversant in the Jewish law. A few moments later, he is an eloquent Greek-speaking Roman citizen from a cultured city in Cilicia.

The next day, he will be the Pharisee born of Pharisees, who is being tried because of his belief in the resurrection of the dead. None of these identities is a false one, but Paul's adeptness in adapting his identity and approach to his circumstances and audiences is very clearly an important skill for his mission. Bach quotes Cicero and Roman citizenship.

To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him an abomination, to slay him is almost an act of murder. Paul presumably has evidence on his person to demonstrate his identity. Paul received his citizenship from birth, while the tribune had to pay a large sum to obtain his, possibly with a bribe.

We might wonder whether Paul's father was a man of some status. Ben Witherington makes the point that Paul was probably reluctant to reveal his Roman citizenship, especially in a situation where he was being accused of compromising with gentile identity and behaviour. As soon as Paul's Roman citizenship is known though, they withdraw and they call off the flogging.

The next day, however, the tribune wants to discover the nature of the accusations against Paul and summons the Sanhedrin to meet, placing Paul before them. Paul begins by looking intently at the Sanhedrin. Perhaps he is seeking to get their attention, or perhaps he is carefully sizing them up in preparation for his use of their divisions against them later on.

He was presumably fairly familiar with the Sanhedrin from past involvement with them. He had lived in Jerusalem for several years, been an outstanding student of the law, was taught by Gamaliel, one of their members, and had also been authorised by them in his persecution of the church. There are probably still a number of familiar faces on the Sanhedrin, even though many of them have changed.

Luke draws close parallels between Jesus' trials and Paul's trials. Jesus was tried before the council, before Pilate, before Herod, and then was brought before Pilate again. In Acts, Paul is tried before the council, before Felix the governor, before Herod Agrippa II, and before Festus.

Luke is eager for his hearers to recognise that Paul, like other key figures in the book of Acts, is conformed to his master. Paul begins his defence by declaring that he has lived his life before God in good conscience, similar to the claim that he will later make in chapter 24 verse 16. As Craig Keener notes, he is almost certainly speaking in Greek, the Jerusalem elite would be fluent in Greek, and more importantly the tribune would be able to understand and finally discover what the nature of the complaint against Paul actually was.

The high priest Ananias, before whom Paul is being tried, was high priest from around 47 AD to 58 or 59 AD. He had a reputation as a corrupt man, using wealth and force to get his way. Ananias orders that Paul be struck on the mouth by those standing near him.

Paul rebukes him in response, calling God to judge him, saying that God will strike him, describing him as a whitewashed wall, perhaps a reference to his hypocrisy, in the same way as Christ refers to whitewashed tombs in the book of Matthew. He accuses Ananias of sitting to judge him, according to the law, but yet actually not observing the law. As a whitewashed wall, he appears clean, but there is nothing behind the surface.

He is not offering the impartial justice that the law requires, but has already determined Paul's case in his mind. He is immediately rebuked by those standing nearby him. Why would Paul declare such a judgment or a curse upon the high priest of God's people? And strangely enough, Paul seems to accept this rebuke.

He says that he would not have declared this had he known that he was the high priest, and then goes on to quote Exodus chapter 22 verse 28, You shall not revile God nor curse a ruler of your people. It is a strange series of events, and a number of different proposals have been made to try and explain it. Some have suggested that for some reason or other, Paul did not recognise that it was the high priest that gave the order.

He was struck by those standing alongside him. Perhaps the signal was given by the high priest and Paul was looking elsewhere, or perhaps his failure to recognise was a result of his poor eyesight, an affliction that many scholars have speculated that Paul suffered from. Maybe he has just been away from Jerusalem for so long and he doesn't know that Ananias has become the high priest.

Maybe it is just an immediate reaction, and he doesn't consider that it is the high priest that he is speaking of. Or perhaps he is giving a response that is purposefully ironic. He is affirming the law and his knowledge of it, but he is implying that the high priest is not to be recognised as the legitimate high priest.

Determining between these positions is not easy, though perhaps we should see whatever position we hold that there is some irony here. Whether Paul intends it to be so or not, his statement concerning the high priest is true, and though seemingly retracted it still stands as such. Paul, as we have noted, is familiar with the Sanhedrin, and as he looks out at them he can recognise that there are different camps among them.

They are divided among themselves between the sect of the Pharisees and the sect of the Sadducees. Perhaps now that he recognises that he is not going to get a fair hearing, he decides to exploit this, and also to make his trial about the resurrection. This serves in part as a calculated means of causing confusion, but it also functions to make Christ central to the trial, rather than the hearing merely being about Paul himself.

The reason why he is on trial, he insists, is because he believes in the resurrection. That is the hope of Israel, but it is also the reason why he has faced so much opposition. Paul knows the Sanhedrin well, and as a result of his statement they are instantly divided between the two camps of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Sadducees, as Luke describes them, deny that there is a resurrection, nor angel nor spirit. The exact meaning of these denials is not entirely clear. The resurrection, presumably, is the bodily resurrection.

The angel or spirit might be a reference to different modes of intermediate state. Perhaps it is a reference to different angelic hierarchies. Or maybe it is a reference to speculation about angels.

Or maybe it is a reference to not different modes of post-mortem life prior to the resurrection in an intermediate state, but different modes of resurrection itself, resurrection as a sort of angelic being, or resurrection as a spirit. There is immediately after this a reference to an angel or spirit in verse 9. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him? Elsewhere in the Gospels, and also in Acts chapter 12, there are references to angels or spirits in association with persons. These angels or spirits seem to be some sort of post-mortem manifestation of the person, a post-mortem expression that isn't just connected with the shadowy beings of Sheol.

The Pharisees raise the possibility that some spirit or angel has spoken to Paul. That night, the Lord appears to Paul again, declaring that he will testify concerning him in Rome, just as he has in Jerusalem. The Lord has a great purpose for him.

A question to consider. In this chapter we see Paul using different aspects of his identity in a chameleon-like fashion, using them as shrewd means of disguise and evasion. Are there any ways in which we might follow his example in our own situations?