‘Only Ruins Remain’. Psalm 74 as a Case of *Mundus Inversus*¹

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**ABSTRACT**

The world pictured in the psalms of lamentation is one of hostility, pain, sorrow and disorientation. As the voices of those under attack from enemy forces, these prayers seek to redress a distressed and fear-stricken situation. They beseech Yahweh to intervene and save the righteous from the evildoers. At times, they are also expressive of the cognitive dissonance as experienced by the afflicted. Psalm 74 can be considered a case in point. In this communal lament, the supplicants try to fathom the inexplicable behaviour of Yahweh. They are rejected by the deity and humiliated by the enemy. Moreover, their secured and structured order has been turned upside-down. Given that the current situation is seen as a violation of the ideational-symbolic structure, this paper endeavours to illustrate that in Psalm 74 reality is described as ‘mundus inversus’.

**A  INTRODUCTION**

In the psalms of lamentation, we hear urgent voices requesting Yahweh to intervene and save the righteous.² As hostile forces close in and life itself is threatened, the cry for help becomes more intense. In these circumstances, the call for divine intervention is indeed the proper response. The deity is implored to destroy the enemy and in so doing bring about a change in a distressed and fear-stricken situation. However, at times, these prayers are also expressive of the cognitive dissonance as experienced by the afflicted. According to Brueggemann (1997:321) the ‘genre of lamentations is an expression of candour about the reality of life experience that is incongruent with Yahweh; at the same time it is an expression of hopeful insistence that if and when the righteous Yahweh is mobilized, the situation will be promptly righted.’ These poems affront the deity with suffering in hopes of eliciting a response (Linafelt

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² ‘Alle Klage Israels kommt wie aus dem Kerker, wo Lebensmöglichkeiten beschnitten und die Sicherheiten zerbrochen sind … Speise ist in Gift, Freude in Trauer verkehrt … die Gemeinschaft hat kein Fundament mehr’ (Gerstenberger 1971:72). Whereas the psalms of praise served to acknowledge and promote confidence in a world where Yahweh reigns supreme, the psalms of lamentation express a crisis that threatened stability (cf. Balentine 1996:140).
Psalm 74 can be regarded as a case in point. In this communal lament, the supplicants articulate this incongruity by foregrounding the unfathomable conduct of Yahweh. Amid the clamour of the enemy, a beleaguered and bewildered community enunciates its discontent with the present disarray. Through their lament, the supplicants linguistically enter into a new distressful situation in which the old and reliable orientation has been inverted (Brueggemann 1980:7). The supplicants want to bring it the deity’s attention that the present ‘arrangements are dysfunctional, unbearable and unacceptable’ (Brueggemann 1992:73). Yahweh stands accused of rejecting his people and causing them to be humiliated by the enemy. Furthermore, it seems as if the deity condones the actions of the foes. They are rampant, defile the holy place and taunt the name of God. For an embattled community the situation has dangerously changed and reality itself has been turned upside-down. The current disorder thus generates the cries that provoke Yahweh into decisive transformative and restorative action (cf. Brueggemann 1992:49). Assuming the inversion of the known and established order, this paper endeavours to illustrate that Psalm 74 is more than just an anguished cry for help; it also paints a picture of a topsy-turvy world in which the ideational-symbolic structure has been violated. Moreover, this contribution aims to highlight certain manifestations expressive and characteristic of such a condition in the context of this communal lament. To achieve this objective, the paper will draw upon some of the most important insights related to the topos of symbolic inversion and apply them to the situation described in Psalm 74.

**B MANIFESTATIONS OF MUNDUS INVERSUS IN PSALM 74**

To the suffering community reality as the structure, system and arrangement of the socio-religious life that is known and relied upon has become inverted. The chosen, guarded, defended, and maintained patterns of everyday life are now rearranged in such a way that only disorder remains (cf. Brueggemann 1988:13). A familiar environment is suddenly arranged in such a way that it contrasts the way people experience the world and referring to reality as *mundus inversus* becomes the appropriate response (cf. Cole 1966:16). Babcock (1978:14) describes this notion as ‘any act of expressive behavior which inverts,

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3 Our ancient Israelite counterparts employ the rhetoric of lamentation to voice their discontent with the present affliction, assaults those who are responsible for it, and insist on the restoration of the status quo (cf. Brueggemann 1992:71).
4 As Watson (2005:159) aptly observes ‘Indeed at the heart of the psalm is the paradox that Yahweh, her God who had from the beginning manifested himself in great deeds of deliverance, and had subsequently been relied upon to protect her, had now ‘cast her off.’
contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to common held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social and political.\textsuperscript{5} Stubbe (1988:200) remarks, ‘Darüber hinaus soll aber das Verkehren von normalen Zustände ausdrücken, daß es sich nicht um die bekannte Welt und das wirkliche Leben, sondern um eine andere Welt … handele.’ The existing social, political, and religious order is attacked or undermined in such a way that the normal state of affairs becomes inverted and ultimately unbearable (cf. Kruger 2005:42). It is argued that in Psalm 74, the inversion of the known and reliable structure and patterns of life finds expression in the severed divine-human relationship (divine rejection and divine inactiveness) and the destruction of the temple. The supplicants of this communal lament experience a cognitive dissonance as they try to come to terms with the seemingly inexplicable behaviour of Yahweh. To them it appears as though the deity has terminated his history with his chosen people by destroying all its historical beacons of salvation (cf. Albertz 1994:400).

1 Divine Rejection (vv. 1, 2)

Psalm 74 opens with the typical question (\ldots)\textsuperscript{6} probing into the anomaly of Yahweh’s anger smouldering (\ldots) against his own people (Israel) (cf. Broyles 1989:152). Through \ldots, the people try to get behind the reason(s) for their continuous suffering. Disturbing as it may seem, this opening question challenges the received tradition that attests to the loyalty of Yahweh towards his people. It is an attempt to make sense of the dissonance between the current crisis and the people’s story that in the past God has acted on their behalf (cf. Pleins 1993:39). The supplicants find neither meaning nor justification in the emotional-psychological agony (cf. Terrien 1978:323).\textsuperscript{7} They perceive the affliction as a manifestation of God’s rejection of and rage against them. The continuous scoffing of the enemy compels the community to utter the questions ‘How long?’ (\ldots) and ‘Why?’ (\ldots) in vv. 10 and 11 (cf. Basson 2006:213). Moreover, they mediate complaints that something terribly wrong has occurred in the life of the supplicants (Balentine 1983:149). The present rejection as a manifestation of an inversed reality challenges the core testimony of the


\textsuperscript{6} Cf. ‘Why, God, did you reject forever, does your anger (lit. ‘nose’) smoulder against the sheep of your pasture’ (v. 1).

\textsuperscript{7} This concurs with the assumption of Brueggemann (1992:33) that the counter-tradition expressed in the psalms of lamentation refuses to accept responsibility for the current affliction.
plaintiffs by calling into question the fidelity and sovereignty of Yahweh. This style of questioning re-echoes the mood of vv. 1-3, where the emphasis was on the deity’s care for his people, but now divine honour is at stake in the community’s fate (cf. Miller 1993:358).

As a representation of a topsy-turvy world, Yahweh’s rejection of the supplicants violates the covenantal principles, which serve as the bedrock of the divine-human relationship (cf. vv. 1, 20). The lamenting community is in precarious situation in which the voice of a distressed and inversed reality is unleashed and no longer covered by the assumptions of conventional wisdom teaching (cf. Brueggemann 1980:12). The wordplay (v. 1b) adds to the agony of the continuous rejection as experienced by the community. By way of contrast v. 2 reminds (cf. ) God that the people suffering rejection are related to those he once redeemed and took as his possession. The verb ‘invokes a previously-existing relationship and harks back to the election tradition’ (Watson 2005:160). In their anguish, the supplicants of Psalm 74 recall the past and therefore request the deity to remember ( ) how he liberated their ancestors. According to Miller (1994:94), ‘The appeal to divine memory carries with it, therefore, an assumption that God’s remembering is not simply a favorable attitude but involves activity for or against the objects of memory … .’ The current state of affairs thus necessitates the actualisation of the salvific deeds of an earlier period.

Urgent appeals are made to Yahweh for renewed action (cf. Ackroyd 1968:46). The community requests the deity to revivify his covenant with his people and bring about a change in their distressful situation. They seek ‘den Gott, der sich mit Israel eingelassen und die Verantwortung für dieses Volk übernommen hat’ (Gerstenberger 1971:72). Expressions like ‘sheep of your pasture’, ‘your assembly’ and ‘tribe of your inheritance’ (vv.1-2) accentuate the notion of Yahweh’s ownership of those lamenting their affliction. The antiquity of the relationship implies that it should have enduring value. is not just an appeal to reminisce about the past, but an urgent cry to Yahweh to act, and in so doing, show his willingness to deliver his people from the abyss of chaos. Reflecting on a glorious past enables the lamenting community to call on Yahweh from the whirlwind of destruction to remember that past, and act

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8 Compare also the remark of Albertz (1994:404) in this regard ‘… Yahweh’s action to the forefathers offered itself as the last historical basis which had not been detrimentally affected and on which it was possible to build.’

9 Cf. ‘Remember your assembly you acquired of old; the tribe of your inheritance, which you redeemed’ (v. 2).

10 As Pleins (1993:33) observes ‘the community laments are hardly content with nostalgia; rather, they explore the contradiction between such an affirming history and a disrupted present … .’
decisively in the present circumstances. To remember thus signifies blessing, salvation, and an end to the continuous rejection.

2 A ruined sanctuary (vv. 3-8)

The communal lament becomes the proper response to the destruction of the temple as a manifestation of Yahweh’s rejection. The pronouncement of destruction and divine rejection is a ‘confession that these occurrences represent the anti-pole of Yahweh’s deeds of salvation’ (Gous 1993:358). In an inverted state of affairs city, temple and life are lost (cf. Brueggemann 1988:115). Since a topsy-turvy world represents a loss of a meaningful beacon and a privileged position on the part of the suppliants, the communal lament is a religious response to that loss. Although crushed and downtrodden, the suppliants still have the courage to implore Yahweh to lift up his steps and look at the damage caused by the enemy (cf. v. 3).

Verses 4-7 vividly depict the destruction brought about by the foes. They desecrated the temple and audaciously put up their symbols in the ruined sanctuary ‘intended as manifest signs of Israel’s humiliation, and are felt to be so with all the resentment of the powerless’ (Goulder 1996:65). The smashing of the carved works and the defiling of the temple (vv. 6-7) represent total religious profanation and physical destruction of the divine abode. Fire has consumed former splendour and ruins fill the space where a holy place once signalled the presence of God. A demolished temple exacerbates communal humiliation and adds insult to injury. In addition, the foes direct their scorn against the deity, deriding Yahweh’s name and ultimately challenging his sovereignty and authority (cf. ‘How long, O God, will the adversary deride? Will the enemy blaspheme your name forever?; v. 10). Since the grandeur of the temple represented the grandeur of the deity, the ruin thereof suggests the eclipse of the once powerful Yahweh and the rise of a foreign deity (cf. Clifford 2003:26).

The lament over a ruined sanctuary underscores the significance of the temple as a tangible reminder of the people’s election and Yahweh’s unfailing presence, blessing and protection in history (cf. Klein 1979:3; Ryken et al.

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11 ‘Es entsteht die Zuversicht, daß er wieder einschreiten, retten und helfen wird, so wie er in der Vergangenheit als der rettende und helfende Gott sich erwiesen hatte’ (Kraus 2003:81).
12 Cf. also Ps. 79:1; Lam. 1:10; 2:7. Noteworthy is the occurrence of a similar complaint regarding the destruction of the temple in an Akkadian prayer: ‘Elumaš, your sanctuary, the foe has assailed, your pure chamber he has defiled. In your pure place he set his foot, Your far-famed dwelling he destroyed’ (As translated by Widengren 1937:169).
13 As Kraus (2003:123) observes ‘Durch das Zerstörungswerk der Feinde ist Jahwes Ehre, sein heiliger Name, geschmäht worden’. 
Moreover, the temple represents a place of communication with and about God.\textsuperscript{14} In the sanctuary Yahweh’s presence and power is experienced and made real as a source of life (cf. Ackroyd 1968:99; 248).\textsuperscript{15} In its quarters, joyful voices proclaim the salvific presence and sovereignty of the deity.

However, for a moment these voices became silent as foreign clamour resounded through the holy place. The altar that once bestowed joy on the people has been destroyed by the foes. Exultation has turned into lament and the expression of joy became inverted in the state of mourning. Deserted lies the dwelling-place of God. Sacred concepts of holiness and divine presence that undergirded the identity of the people of God suddenly became devoid of meaning. The desecrated temple signifies the severed divine-human relationship and the ruins that now remain become the starkest sign of a topsy-turvy world. Moreover, a defiled sanctuary is a mockery of divine power (cf. Fohrer 1973:10). ‘Worst off all, the temple’s destruction called God into question: either there were deities stronger than or superior to Yahweh, or for some reason Yahweh had rejected his own people and his own place’ (Klein 1979:3-4). The deity’s apparent immobility is in contrast with the divine character because Israel’s past experiences bear witness to a God who acted on her behalf. The roar of the enemy in the ruined temple therefore suggests to the suppliants that their God is powerless and unable to intervene and alleviate the prevailing distress (cf. Clifford 2003:22).

The lamenting community perceives the current inversed order as violation of the ‘ideational structure that determines their perception and knowledge of the world of phenomena … they live in …’ (Malul 2002:462). It represents the anti-structure insofar as it comprises the elements of destruction, separation and loss. The anti-structure in turn is seen as the representation of chaos. The experience of loss due to disruption challenges the fundamental structure of interpretation of the suffering community. Marris (1974:17) contends, ‘if events contradict crucial assumptions about our world of experience, they threaten to overwhelm the structures of thought on which we depend to assimilate and adapt to life.’ Apart from the disintegration of their predictable, reliable and secure environment, the suppliants’ existence might also be threatened.

\begin{footnotes}
14 Cf. 1 Kings 8:28, 29; Ps. 138:2; Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11.
15 Terrien (1978:306) writes, ‘The hymnology of the … Temple was on the whole a psalmody of divine (AB) presence.’ Compare also the remark of Kraus (2003:88) in this regard ‘Vor dem Tempel fällt die Kultgemeinde nieder, zum »Haus Jahwe« hin betet sie … denn im Tempel ist Jahwe gegenwärtig, »wohnt«, »thront« er … Dort teilt Jahwe sein Wort mit … von dort kommen Hilfe und Beistand für Bedrängte und Notleidende … .’
\end{footnotes}
3 Divine inactiveness (vv. 11, 22)

As the one praised for his mighty deeds of the past, Yahweh’s current inactiveness is incongruent with the divine character. As Miller (1994:71) observes, ‘The present circumstances of distress seem to indicate to the ones praying a terrible inconsistency on the part of God … The Lord seems to have caused or allowed things to happen in a way inappropriate to the faithfulness and compassion that are characteristic of the Lord of Israel.’\(^{16}\) Since the deity revealed himself as the God who acts, it could be argued that the community perceives the present indifference as an inversion of the secure and viable order. The hand that once rescued Israel from Egypt has now become immobile. The *deus revelatus* has become the *deus absconditus*. The questions ‘Why do you draw back your hand? and (Why) is your right hand hidden in your bosom?’ (v. 11) poignantly express the problem of divine inactiveness and aloofness. Moreover, they encapsulate the anguish of a beleaguered and bewildered community insofar as the people regard the catastrophe as due to relatively inexplicable withdrawal of divine assistance and protection (cf. Ackroyd 1968:227). Divine unwillingness might therefore be interpreted as a sign of impotence and possible disloyalty on Yahweh’s part (cf. Gerstenberger 2005:90).

Through the lament, the people express their recognition of dependence upon divine assistance. Since a lack of divine help indicates an inversed reality, the communal supplication seeks a movement from radical inactiveness of Yahweh to a renewed salvific involvement on the deity’s part. In form and content, the prayer for divine intervention assumes that God can be persuaded to bring about a change in the current situation. The lament implores the deity to take decisive action against the enemy and set in motion his deeds of transformation and restoration. The aforementioned interrogatives carry with them a request for an immediate and decisive action. Only the powerful hand of God can change the topsy-turvy world around. Whereas Yahweh’s hand for the most part symbolizes power and liberation, the withdrawal thereof signifies disaster for those relying on divine assistance. A hidden hand implies an absence of security, protection, and prosperity.

Given that Yahweh’s hand serves as an instrument of deliverance, the community requests him to lift his hand against the enemy (cf. v. 22). According to Brown (2002:175) the image of God’s hand emphasises the efficacy of his response in situations of distress. Yahweh’s right hand is majestic and exalted; it supports, answers the needs of, and provides refuge to the afflicted (cf. Putnam 1997:468). The lifted hand of the deity marks his resolve to take action, whether in delivering the helpless or punishing the evildoers. From the salutary

\(^{16}\) It was not ‘die (theoretische) Nichtexistenz Gottes, sondern die (praktische) Unwirksamkeit Gottes war die Anfechtung, die den Menschen zerriß’ (Perlitt 1971:367).
hand of Yahweh should issue forth salvation, blessings and life. The deity is able to restore the community to its former glory and in so doing put an end to the current suffering. As long as his hand remains drawn back, the never-ending taunts of the adversaries will be a constant reminder of the powerlessness of a sovereign and majestic god. In a topsy-turvy world, the enemies are in control, vociferously declaring the victory (cf. v. 10). The triumph over the foes is only assured when Yahweh’s hand fights on behalf of the suppliants.

Since the divine-human relationship is at risk, the suppliants engage the deity to act in accordance with the covenant (cf. ‘consider your covenant …’; v. 20). It is in the nature and character of the covenant between Yahweh and his people that the deliverance from pain and suffering, the overcoming of affliction and oppression can be counted upon (cf. Miller 1993:362). The plaintiffs are not content with accepting reality as it is, instead they desire a world transformed from hurt to joy. Even though they encounter a mute and inactive God, their voices ceaselessly rise above the roar of the foreign powers proclaiming the imminent restoration and transformation. Despite its atrocious and unbearable life experience, the lamenting community will remain true to its core testimony.

According to Brueggemann (1997:318) the people’s ‘testimony to Yahweh has proposed a God who in majestic sovereignty provides a viable life-order in the world through decisive, transformative interventions, a God who in generous compassion attends to the needs of Yahweh’s own.’ It is a testimony that refuses to accept that Yahweh’s salutary acts in the days of yore are exhausted. The suppliants invoke the deity to create a secure order in which disorientation will be replaced by a new orientation and lament by praise. In warrior-like fashion, Yahweh should intervene and save them from the forces that symbolize a hostile and dysfunctional reality (cf. ‘Arise, O God, defend your cause …; v. 22). From the ruins of disrupted and almost shattered lives, voices of hope refuse to be silent. Continuously they ascend to the one who heeds the cry of the afflicted and is able to invert the present disorder.

C CONCLUSION

Even though the psalms of lamentation put Yahweh in the dock, they also bristle with hope for deliverance and a changed circumstance. In Psalm 74, pain-filled voices refuse to be overwhelmed by the clamour of hostile forces. Since the current plight necessitates a repeat of the past acts of salvation, Yahweh is implored to intervene and put an end to the hubris of a foreign power. The foes wreaked havoc and turned a secure and reliable order upside-down. As is the case in many laments, the suppliants perceive the actions of the enemy as a manifestation of divine rejection and inactiveness. In addition, the holy place

17 Gerstenberger (1971:72) is of the opinion that ‘Alle Klage Israels hofft auf einen Durchbruch … Sie setzt gegen allen Augenschein auf die Hilfe Jahwes.’
that once symbolized Yahweh’s presence among his people lies in ruin and unfamiliar signs have replaced symbols of salvation. Reality as it is experienced and described in Psalm 74 has become inverted and chaos has triumphed over order. In a topsy-turvy world, God is stripped of his sovereignty and foreign deities appear to have the upper hand. Only when he intervenes, can Yahweh turn the topsy-turvy world around and reclaim his rightful position as the deity par excellence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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