

A NOTE ON PSALM 73(74):13-15

Ps. 74 is a prayer for divine assistance in some great national disaster. The editors of the new Latin Psalter (hereafter LP) identify this disaster as the fall of the monarchy of Judah under the attack of the Babylonians in 587 B. C. This identification is not relevant to the present note, and needs no further discussion. After a description of the fallen city and sanctuary, the Psalmist appeals for divine succor by recounting, as the Psalms so frequently do in their petitions, the divine attributes as manifested in great deeds of power. The verses in question occur in this second part of the Psalm. The second part is further divided into a recital of the mighty deeds of God (12-17) and a direct appeal for vengeance upon the enemies of Israel (18-23). The text of 12-17 in LP follows:

Deus autem rex meus est ab antiquo,
qui efficis salutem in medio terrae.
Tu dirupisti potentia tua mare,
contrivisti capita draconum in aquis.
Tu confregisti capita Leviathan,
dedisti eum escam monstribus marinis.
Tu elicuisti fontes et torrentes;
tu siccasti fluvios copiosos.
Tuus est dies et tua est nox;
tu stabilisti lunam et solem.
Tu statuisti omnes terminos terrae;
aestatem et hiemem tu formasti.

The exegetical note of LP on vv. 13-15 follows:

“Agitur de Exodo: *dracones et Leviathan* sunt Aegyptii in Mari Rubro occisi; *fontes et torrentes*; cf. Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 20:1-13; *fluvios copiosos* i.e. Iordanem (cf. Ios. 3 sq.)”

The interpretation given in this note is traditional among the older commentators; and it is still defended by some modern authors. Since the discovery of ancient Semitic creation myths in the 19th century, most modern commentaries have discussed the influence of these myths on a number of Old Testament passages, of which the present passage is one. So Calès, Büttenwieser, and Oesterley have found an allusion to a myth in the present passage; they identify the myth as Babylonian.¹ A similar passage of the Psalms is Ps. 88(89):10-11, which is thus rendered in LP:

¹ Calès, *Le Livre des Psaumes*, Paris, 1936, II, 15-16; Büttenwieser, *The Psalms*, Chicago, 1938, 614; Oesterley, *The Psalms*, London, 1939, II, 348-349.

Tu imperas superbiae maris,
 tumorem fluctuum eius tu compescis.
 Tu transfixum conculcasti Rahab,
 bracchio potenti tuo dispersisti inimicos tuos.

Vv. 12-13 of this psalm offer a suggestive parallel to Ps. 74:16-17, in that both passages are recitals of works of creation:

Tui sunt caeli, et tua est terra;
 orbem terrarum et quod eum replet tu fundasti;
 Aquilonem et austrum tu creasti;
 Thabor et Hermon in nomine tuo exsultant.

The exegetical note of LP on Ps. 89:11 follows:

"*Rahab*, monstrum quo personificatur superbia et rebellio (*rahab*, 'excitatus, commotus est'); aquae, quae initio tegebant terram (Gen. 1:2, 6-9), hic poetica personificatione proponuntur ut hostes, quibuscum Deus pugnat (cf. v. 10; Ps. 73(74):13; Job 9:13; 26:12; Is. 51:9 s.). Secundum alios Rahab est Aegyptus (Ps. 86[87]:4)."

These two notes are not altogether in harmony. The note on Ps. 89 refers to Ps. 74 as a parallel to the personification of the waters of the primeval sea as enemies. The note on Ps. 74 makes no mention of such a poetic figure; it identifies the waters as those of the Red Sea, and the monsters as the Egyptians. It seems quite clear that the editors of LP intended to reject the interpretation of such figures as those of Ps. 74:13-15, 89:10-11, and the other passages mentioned in the note quoted above as allusions to Semitic mythology.

It is possible that the different approach to the problem in the two notes lies in the immediate context. In Ps. 89 this context is placed in the scene of creation (cf. vv. 12-13); and the editors of LP have understood vv. 10-11 as likewise referring to the works of creation. But Ps. 74:16-17 are also references to the works of creation; *a pari*, the immediate context should be the same. Zorell finds an allusion to Oriental myths of creation in Ps. 89:10-11 (*Rahab*); but his note on Ps. 74:13-15 is substantially identical with the note of LP.²

The other passages which have been adduced as exhibiting the same ideas are quoted here, translated from the Hebrew:

² *Psalterium ex Hebraeo Latinum*, Rome, 1939, *ad loc.*

Isa. 27:1:

On that day
 Yahweh will visit with his sword,
 Hard and great and strong,
 Leviathan the fleeing serpent,
 And Leviathan the twisted serpent,
 And he will slay the monster (*tannin*) which is in the sea.

Isa. 51:9-10:

Awake, awake, clothe yourself with strength,
 O right hand of Yahweh!
 Awake as in the days of old,
 The generations of ages!
 Was it not you who hewed Rahab in pieces,
 Who pierced the sea-monster (*tannin*)?
 Was it not you who dried up the sea,
 The waters of the great abyss (*tehom*)?
 Who made the depths of the sea a road,
 For the ransomed to pass?

Job 9:13:

Eloah does not turn back his wrath;
 Under him bowed down the helpers of Rahab.

Job 26:12-13:

By his power the sea is quiet,
 And by his discernment he smites Rahab;
 By his wind the sky is cleared,
 His hand pierces the fleeing serpent.

Job 38:8-11 may also be adduced as pertinent:

Who enclosed the sea with doors,
 When it burst forth, issuing from the womb?
 When I made the clouds its clothing,
 And deep darkness its swaddling bands,
 And I laid upon it my mandate,
 And I set bar and doors;
 And I said: Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
 And here the proud swelling of your billows must halt.

The Babylonian epic of creation was first published in 1876 by George Smith under the title, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*. The biblical passages which bear some resemblance to this myth—outside, of course, the creation account of Gen. 1:1-2:4a—were first collected and discussed by Hermann Gunkel.³ From these texts as a basis, Gunkel, with characteristic cleverness attempted to reconstruct the myth of creation as it existed among the Hebrews. In the Babylonian epic⁴ we find the myth of the combat between Marduk, the solar deity to whom creation is attributed, and Tiamat, the monster of chaos, in which Tiamat is slain and cut in pieces, from which are fashioned the earth and the sky. Both the name (identical with the Hebrew *tehom*, "abyss") and the conception of this monster show that it represented the primeval sea. The myth of creation was current in variant forms of which the *Enuma Elish* is only one; but it is the only one preserved at length. The biblical allusions do not show that the biblical authors knew the myth as it appears in the *Enuma Elish*.⁵

The Canaanite religious poems of Ugarit furnish a striking variant of the myth of the struggle between a celestial god and a chaotic monster. The relationship of the Ugaritic texts and the Psalms has been studied by John Hastings Patton.⁶ Dr. Patton has paid particular attention to Ps. 74:13-15, 89:10-11, and finds in them clear allusions to the Canaanite myth. Selections of the Ugaritic texts have been published in English translation by C. H. Gordon.⁷ In this myth, the conflict takes place between Aleyan Baal and the adversary, called "draconic" by Gordon, with the names of "Prince Sea" and "Judge River." In text 67 (Gordon) the adversary of Baal is Lotan, "the fleeing serpent, the tortuous serpent, Shalyat of the seven heads." Here there is no mistaking the draconic character of the adversary; and the epithets of Lotan, as well as the name itself, are exactly those of Isa. 27:1. This adversary, however, is not identical with the adversary called Sea-River in Text 68.

Vv. 16-17 suggest that the passage of the Psalm deals with the creative activity of God. A detailed study of the language of vv. 13-15 confirms this opinion. The line, *qui efficit salutem in medio terrae* (v. 12b), suggests, in its Latin rendering, the interpretation given in LP note. *Salutem* represents the

³ *Schöpfung und Chaos*, Göttingen, 1895, 29-114.

⁴ Most recently published in English translation, with other Babylonian creation accounts and a full discussion of Old Testament parallels, by Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, Chicago, 1942.

⁵ Cf. Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 87-96.

⁶ *Canaanite Parallels in the Book of Psalms*, Baltimore, 1944.

⁷ *The Loves and Wars of Baal and Anat*, Princeton, 1943, 19-21; Ugaritic text in transliteration in the same author's *Ugaritic Handbook*, Rome, 1947, Text 68, p. 150.

Hebrew plural *y^eshu'oth*, rather "victorious deeds, triumphs," with some commentators. The word could, of course, refer to the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt; it could as easily refer to God's victory over the primeval foes. The question must be decided from the context. The scene of the event, *in medio terrae*, is studiously vague; it does not suggest the scenes of the Exodus. "The earth" without qualification is more likely to signify the earth as a whole than any particular region. In v. 13a, *Tu dirupisti potentia tua mare, dirupisti* of LP translates the verb II *parar* (BDB Lex.). This verb is used only here and in Isa. 24:19, where it is understood to signify the splitting of the earth during a temblor. The passage in Isa. is apocalyptic. The word is never used of the division of the waters in the Exodus narrative; and it seems arbitrary to state that this uncommon word would suggest the Exodus narrative, unless we suppose that this event is intended whenever there is an allusion to a division of the seas. The Semitic mythological material makes this supposition very difficult.

V. 13b reads *contrivisti capita draconum in aquis*. *Dracones* here translates the Hebrew *tanninim*. *Tannin* means a large sea-monster; the meaning is vague, because the Hebrew idea of marine life was vague. That this monster is serpentine appears from the use of the word in Ex. 7:9, 10, 12, where the rod of Aaron turns into a *tannin*, and the feat is duplicated by the Egyptian magicians. *Tannin* means a serpent also in Ps. 91:13 and Deut. 32:33. In Gen. 1:21, Ps. 148:7, it means large forms of marine life. In its five other appearances outside Ps. 74:13 it signifies a monstrous being. In Job 7:12, "Am I *yam* (sea), or *tannin*, that you should set a ward over me?", recent commentators have seen a clear allusion to the mythological monster of the Ugaritic texts; the language of Job is scarcely justified by taking "sea" and "serpent" in the ordinary sense. In Isa. 51:9, 27:1 (cf. above), commentators since Gunkel have seen a reference to a mythological monster. In Ezek. 29:3, 32:2, Egypt is compared to a *tannin* that lurks in the streams and in the seas. This is the only passage in which the *tannin* is identified with Egypt and the identification is explicit. The basis of the comparison is probably the crocodile. There is no other passage in the Old Testament which indicates that this identification was a common figure of speech which would be readily understood in a casual allusion, such as Ps. 74:13 would have to be. In Jer. 51:34, Nebuchadnezzar is called a *tannin* which has devoured the Hebrews. That the crocodile was regarded by the Hebrews as a monstrous being may be rather easily deduced from the poetic description of the animal in Job 40:25-41:26; cf. below. Many commentators believe the singular should be read here rather than the plural of MT. The singular is found only in Gen. 1:21, Deut. 32:33, Ex. 7:12, Ps. 148:7; in all these passages the word has lost any mythological force.

The name Rahab, which appears in several passages quoted above, has not been found in extra-biblical literature. The derivation given by BDB Lex. is *rahab*, "act stormily, boisterously." The name occurs six times. It is certainly applied to Egypt in Isa. 30:7, Ps. 87:4. This application cannot be demonstrated for Ps. 89:11, Job 9:13, 26:12, Isa. 51:9; the context in these passages suggests a mythological monster. The note in LP on Ps. 89:11 does not seem to favor the interpretation of the word as an emblematic name of Egypt in this passage. The noun is masculine in formation; but its gender cannot be determined from any of its appearances. Tiamat (the word is identical with the Hebrew *tehom*, "abyss"; cf. Gen. 1:2, Isa. 51:10), the Babylonian chaotic monster, was feminine. The derivation of the word is the only clue to the identity of Rahab; and this suggests the stormy sea, which agrees with other designations of the monster. Heidel, however, argues from Job 26:12-13 that Rahab is not the sea, but something in the sea, a huge marine creature.⁸

V. 14 reads in LP: *Tu confregisti capita Leviathan, dedisti eum escam monstris marinis*. LP here accepts the pointing *l'amlese yam*, suggested by I. Löw, and incorporated into most modern commentaries. The commentators understand the word to mean sharks; the *monstra marina* of LP probably mean the same thing. Leviathan occurs four times outside this passage. The identity of the name with the Lotan of the Ugaritic tablets is not doubted by modern scholars; in particular, the verbal parallel between Text 67 and Isa. 27:1 (cf. above) has been decisive. Leviathan in Ps. 104:26 is a large sea animal; there is no obvious mythological connotation. In Job 3:8 it is a monster which is conjured up by sorcerers. Heidel and Eerdmans notice that Leviathan appears both as a celestial being (Isa. 27:1, cf. Job 3:8, 26:13) and a marine animal.⁹ As a celestial being, it is the monster which causes dark nights or eclipses. Both writers believe that Leviathan, like *tannin*, is the name of a natural species which is transferred to a creature of fancy. Eerdmans identifies Leviathan with the dolphin. But Eerdmans admits that the name is applied to the celestial dragon also. The significance of monster cannot be excluded from the word; but the character of the monster appears in variant forms. The Ugaritic texts give the only clue to its identity; there it is a seven-headed hydra. Leviathan in Job 40:25 is identified by most modern commentators with the crocodile.¹⁰ It should be noticed, however, that the crocodile has been transfigured into a monstrous figure in

⁸ *Babylonian Genesis*, 89.

⁹ Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 89, 90; Eerdmans, *O. T. Studien*, Leiden, 1947, 354 ff.

¹⁰ Driver and Gray, *Job* (ICC), N. Y., 1921, I, 359; Dhorme, *Le Livre de Job* (EB), Paris, 1926, 570; Kissane, *The Book of Job*, N. Y., 1946, 288.

the poetic description of Job. These uses do not indicate that the word would be readily understood as an emblematic name for the Egyptians.

V. 15 reads: *Tu elicuisti fontes et torrentes, tu siccasti fluvios copiosos*. There does not appear, at first glance, to be any mythological allusion here; the question is whether the verse refers to the events of the desert journey of the Israelites, as indicated in the note of LP, or whether this verse is to be referred to the works of creation. There is no reference in the creation accounts of Gen. 1 and 2 to a "cleaving" of springs and water-courses. The ancient Semitic conception of the visible universe imagined the earth as a disk poised upon the waters of the lower abyss. The terrestrial waters came up from this lower abyss through apertures in the earth. Gen. 2:10-14 is thought to reflect one conception in which all the great streams of the earth flow from a single source. The creation Ps. 104:10 says, using the same nouns as Ps. 74:15, "He causes springs and streams to flow." The passages appear to express the same idea: that God's creative activity, by opening the sources, causes the waters of the lower abyss to rise to the surface of the earth.

Fluvios copiosos (rivers of *ethan*, *ibid.*) are identified by the lexx. as perennial streams, in contrast to the *nahal* mentioned in 15a, which flows only during the rainy season. *Copiosos* is not an exact rendition of this word. The allusion suggested by the LP note cannot be regarded as obvious. In the context, the phrase rather suggests the imposition of limits upon the primeval waters, alluded to in Isa. 51:10:

"Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great abyss?" Cf. also Job 38:8-11; Prov. 8:29. It is not at all impossible that "rivers" (note the plural) should signify here the primeval sea; cf. the double title of "Prince Sea" and "Judge River" applied to the monstrous adversary of Aleyan Baal in the Ugaritic texts.

The passages thus collected may not appear to define the allusions of Ps. 74:13-15 beyond all doubt. Nevertheless, they offer some very clear indications. It does not seem possible any longer to deny the presence of mythological allusions in the Old Testament. They appear almost entirely, as far as present research has shown, in poetic passages, where they add vividness and color to the imagery and the language. They do not, on the other hand, permit one to affirm the existence of creation myths among the Hebrews, corresponding to those of Mesopotamia and Canaan. Gunkel's brilliant attempt to do this was a conspicuous failure.¹¹ The creation accounts of the Bible are studiously composed to exclude mythological elements. The fact that such allusions were freely admitted in poetry indicates no more than this,

¹¹ Cf. Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 93-96, for a very convincing discussion.

that the Hebrews were acquainted with Semitic myths. Where these are cosmogonic myths, the work of the creative deity, or his victory over chaos, is simply transferred to Yahweh; other deities involved in the myths are ignored. In no sense can it be said that the Hebrews incorporated "mythopoeic thought" (to borrow a word from Frankfort) into their own religious conceptions; they did, however, assimilate mythopoeic imagery and language.

The question is raised by Heidel whether these are to be called works of creation, or antecedent to creation; for there is no indication of any chronological order, and some events (e.g. Isa. 27:1) appear to be in the future.¹² To this it may be said, in the first place, that we should not make the Gen. creation accounts the governing idea. Some of the passages under discussion (Job 38, Ps. 89:12-13, Ps. 74:17; cf. also Ps. 104) show traits which are not found in the Gen. accounts, and justify the assumption that the creation story existed in variant forms. The imagery employed in these passages cannot be reduced to the Gen. accounts, and is not easily assigned, because of certain recurring characteristic features, to the independent composition of the several authors. In the second place, God's primeval victory may be imagined as occurring in the present, since the natural phenomena signified by the monsters of the poetic imagination still exist and appear to offer resistance to the restraints imposed upon them. The idea of creation as a process finally accomplished at the beginning of the world, which appears in Gen. 1, did not exclude from Hebrew thought another conception of creation as a continuous process fulfilled in each natural event.

The Old Testament allusions cannot be traced back to any definite pattern. The Babylonian literature shows that variant forms of the myths existed, even in writing; the Canaanite material is too limited to permit the same affirmation, but analogy suggests it. Hence we find that the mythological allusions of the Old Testament cannot be synthesized; the discordant elements, doubtless drawn from different sources, show that the Hebrews also knew the myths in variant forms. In this way (and, it seems, in no other way) do we understand how the monstrous being is sometimes identified with the sea, sometimes said to be in the sea; how it has different names; how Leviathan appears both in the sky and in the sea; how the monster is slain, yet lives; how the sea is dried up, or split, or imprisoned. The weight of the probabilities suggests that the phenomena described in Ps. 74:13-15 are creative works, and not the historical events of Exodus; and that the imagery employed is derived from Semitic—principally Canaanite—mythology.

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¹² *Babylonian Genesis*, 95-96.