

Psalms 74:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?

Analysis

O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture? This communal lament opens with two anguished questions directed at God. Unlike Psalm 73's personal crisis, Psalm 74 addresses national catastrophe—likely the destruction of the temple. The psalmist (Asaph or one writing in his tradition) does not question whether God exists but why He has acted (or failed to act) as He has.

"Cast us off" (zanachtanu, זָנַחֲתָנוּ) means to reject, spurn, or cast away. The Hebrew conveys abandonment—God has thrown His people away like refuse. "For ever" (lanetzach, לְנֶצֶח) intensifies the pain: this appears permanent, not temporary discipline. The word can mean "perpetually" or "utterly," expressing the community's despair that restoration may never come.

"Thine anger smoke" (ye'shan appekha, יְשַׁׁן אֲפָקָה) presents striking imagery. Divine anger smolders like a fire, producing smoke—visible, choking, persistent. Aph literally means "nostril" (the place where anger shows in heavy breathing) but idiomatically refers to anger itself. The image of smoking nostrils appears in Deuteronomy 29:20 and Psalm 18:8, describing intense divine wrath.

"The sheep of thy pasture" (tzon mar'itekha, צָאן מַרְעֵיתֶךָ) invokes shepherd imagery also found in Psalms 79:13, 95:7, and 100:3. Israel is God's flock; He is their shepherd. The designation emphasizes covenant relationship and divine responsibility. Why would a shepherd rage against his own sheep? The tension

between God's covenant care and apparent abandonment drives the psalm's lament.

Historical Context

Psalm 74 is generally dated to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, when Nebuchadnezzar's armies razed Solomon's temple, killed many inhabitants, and deported others to Babylon. The graphic descriptions of temple desecration (verses 3-8) fit this catastrophic event, though some scholars propose the Maccabean period (167 BCE under Antiochus Epiphanes) as an alternative setting.

The destruction of the temple was theologically devastating. The temple was God's dwelling place, the location of His name, the center of worship, and the visible guarantee of divine presence. Its destruction seemed to indicate that God had abandoned His people entirely. The book of Lamentations expresses similar anguish: "How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel" (Lamentations 2:1).

The shepherd/flock metaphor was common throughout the ancient Near East for describing the relationship between deity (or king) and people. Hammurabi called himself "shepherd of the people." Israel's distinctive contribution was the intimacy and covenant commitment implied in Yahweh as shepherd—a commitment that made His apparent abandonment so painful.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the psalm's willingness to question God directly model authentic prayer during crisis?
2. What does the shepherd imagery contribute to understanding the depth of Israel's pain?
3. How should believers interpret national or communal disasters in light of God's covenant promises?
4. What is the difference between accusing God (which this psalm does not do) and lamenting to God?

Interlinear Text

אָלֹהֶם	לֹתָה	לֹתָה	לֹתָה	לֹתָה	לֹתָה
H4100	O God	why hast thou cast us off	for ever	smoke	
H430		H2186	H5331	H6225	
אָנָּגָרָה	בְּצָבָא	מְרַעִיתָה			
why doth thine anger	against the sheep	of thy pasture			
H639	H6629	H4830			

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 29:20 (Parallel theme): The LORD will not spare him, but then the anger of the LORD and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the LORD shall blot out his name from under heaven.

Psalms 79:13 (Parallel theme): So we thy people and sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks for ever: we will shew forth thy praise to all generations.

Psalms 100:3 (References God): Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Psalms 44:9 (Parallel theme): But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame; and goest not forth with our armies.

Psalms 95:7 (References God): For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. To day if ye will hear his voice,

Psalms 77:7 (Parallel theme): Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more?

Jeremiah 23:1 (Parallel theme): Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD.

Luke 12:32 (Parallel theme): Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Ezekiel 34:31 (References God): And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith the Lord GOD.

Psalms 78:1 (Parallel theme): Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

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