

## God the Creator: Contrasting Images in Psalm 65:10-14 and Jeremiah 23:9-15

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article two contrasting images of God as the creator are highlighted. For this purpose Psalm 65:10-14 and Jeremiah 23:9-15 are discussed in relation to each other. What started off as an observation of two contrasting texts on creation resulted in challenging theological questions about God. On the one hand he is the one who blesses creation, but on the other the one who curses creation. The theological issue addressed is that God, when it comes to his involvement with creation, is portrayed by these two testimonies of Israel as responsible for good as well as bad.*

### A INTRODUCTION

**Psalm 65:12** The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy (NRSV)

(WTT) **Psalm 65:13** נְאוֹת מִדְבָּר וְגִיל גְּבֻעוֹת תַּחֲגֹרְנָה:

**Jeremiah 23:10** For the land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land mourns, and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. Their course has been evil, and their might is not right (NRSV)

**Jeremiah 23:10** מִנְאֲפִים מְלֹאָה הָאָרֶץ כִּי־מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתָי הָאָרֶץ יִבְשׁוּ נְאוֹת מִדְבָּר וְתִהְיֶי מְרוֹצְתָם רָעָה וְגִבוֹרָתָם לֹא־כֵן: (WTT)

The tradition of God as the creator is part and parcel of the history of the people of Israel and Judah. The topic of creation is widely discussed today. Many debates take place between religion and science, but within religion itself, creation is also a frequently discussed matter. The concern of this article is not, however, with the issue of when creation took place and how, but with the testimony of Israel and Judah of God as the creator. In an article of this limited scope, the matter cannot be covered in all its detail. Only two testimonies of how God as creator is presented in the Old Testament will be discussed. One of these versions is in Psalm 65 and the other in Jeremiah 23:9-15. These two passages, one from a cultic context and the other from a context of prophetic conflict, will first be investigated as separate units. The passages present two different and contrasting testimonies of God the creator. They will then be brought together and discussed in relation to each other while keeping the Pentateuch in mind.

**B PSALM 65<sup>1</sup>**

This Psalm consists of fourteen verses and can be subdivided into three main sections. Besides the heading in verse 1 which indicates that it is a psalm of David in the form of a song, the subdivisions are as follows:<sup>2</sup>

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Verses 2-5:   | Prayer and praise to Elohim in Zion             |
| Verses 6-9:   | The universal God is deliverer and creator      |
| Verses 10-14: | Yahweh's involvement with the earth in blessing |

The division of the Psalm in three parts is accepted by most scholars and the fact that it concerns praise is not disputed either.<sup>3</sup> It seems, however, that the genre of Psalm 65 is somewhat mixed and contains elements of prayer and praise.<sup>4</sup> Others simply regard it as a hymn of praise of God who takes care of his people, the people of the earth and the land itself.<sup>5</sup> God is praised by the cultic community as one who hears and blesses.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this article, the focus is on 65:10-14.

<sup>1</sup> Most English translations regard vv. 1 and 2 as verse 1 and therefore end up with 13 verses in the Psalm.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld & Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2, A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 138; Willem S. Prinsloo, "Psalms," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (eds. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), 396. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen 2. Psalmen 64-150* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), 449 divides the Psalm into two independent units, 1-9 and 10-14. The heading in v. 1 followed by 2-9 he calls 'Chorhymnus mit Motiven eines Dankliedes des Volkes' and 10-14 a 'Hymnus eines einzelnen'. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations, volume xv* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans, 2001), 20 calls Psalm 65 a hymnic prayer.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 219-221 regards the Psalm as a song praising God as God of the temple, God of the world and God of the earth.

<sup>4</sup> Hossfeld, *Psalms 2*, 138.

<sup>5</sup> Prinsloo, *Psalms*, 396; James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 214 regards this Psalm as a "hymn with a call to praise." For a discussion of views on the genre of this Psalm, see Kraus, *Psalmen 2*, 450. Regarding the best setting for the Psalm he says the following: "Am besten Fügt sich der Psalm in die Situation der Proskynese vor dem Weltschöpfer und Weltkönig der auf dem Zion thront und in der hymnischer Anbetung geehrt wird" (Ps 95:6; 96:9; 99:5, 9; Kraus, *Psalmen 2*, 450).

<sup>6</sup> Kraus, *Psalmen 2*, 448-450.

## 1 Psalm 65:2-5

These verses emphasise the notion that God is in Zion in the temple (v. 2). This idea is further promoted with references in verse 5 to “his courts” and “his holy palace.” Within this *inclusio* verses 3 and 4 speak of humans with their iniquities, but also of God’s forgiveness. We should take note of all the second person singular references in these verses which clearly put the focus on God and his presence in the temple in Zion (cf. v. 3: to you all flesh will come; v. 4: you forgive, you choose and bring near, your courts, your house and your holy temple). The psalmist’s appeal is that God should be praised. He should be praised in particular for the fact that he hears prayers and also answers them.<sup>7</sup> The repetition in verse 2 of “to you” ,ךָ ,strongly emphasises the fact that nobody but God should be honoured. It is perhaps not farfetched, in the light of the fact that in Psalm 65 God is praised for the blessing of rain and the harvest, that the intention of this repetitive reference “to you” has the function of downplaying the idea that Baal is the deity who should be honoured for vegetation and fertility.<sup>8</sup>

What is also of interest in this section is the people’s admission in verse 4 that they have transgressed. Verse 4 displays an *abab* pattern (deeds of iniquity–overwhelm/too strong; transgressions–expiate/cover). Sin and transgressions overwhelm the suppliant and people, but God forgives them (literally covers the sins and transgressions). What seems to be too much for humans is not the case with God. Verse 5 refers to a third person singular who is privileged or lucky to be close to God in his temple. Perhaps the Psalmist has participation in the cultic meal in mind or is metaphorically referring to the benefits, resulting from participation in the cult rituals or festivals.<sup>9</sup> However, 5a seems to be a general statement and does not have a particular person in mind. It is the privilege of every Israelite who formed part of the consecrated nation.<sup>10</sup> This is in contrast to Goldingay’s view that this refers to a person, such as a king, or most probably a priest.<sup>11</sup> Many of the psalms in the Psalm collection have this way of announcing good fortune. Goldingay<sup>12</sup> is probably correct in regarding 5a as a summary statement announcing what is to follow. Verse 5b moves from the general remark to the announcement that all the people<sup>13</sup> will benefit from the goodness that is associated with the temple, God’s holy palace.

<sup>7</sup> Kraus, *Psalmen* 2, 451.

<sup>8</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 275.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hossfeld, *Psalms* 2, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Kraus, *Psalmen* 2, 451.

<sup>11</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 277.

<sup>12</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 276.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms* (trans. by Herbert Hartwell, Chatham, Kent: SCM Press, 1962), 463.

At the temple the people will celebrate the gift of land and the harvest they receive from God every year.<sup>14</sup>

The following two sections (65:6-9 and 10-14), will elaborate on God's goodness, with regard to deliverance and his involvement with nature.

## 2 Psalm 65:6-9

These verses take the form of a hymn in which God is praised as redeemer and creator. A characteristic of this section is the focus on the universality of God's salvation and his power as creator (cf. vv. 6 and 9).

Verse 6a communicates the fact that God answers the people in faithfulness (rightness), by performing awesome deeds. It seems to imply that at times the people approached him when they were in situations that needed some awesome deed from God to deliver them from a predicament. In verse 6b God is hailed as an object of trust and refuge for people as far as the ends of the earth and the farthest seas.<sup>15</sup>

The hymn shifts the focus in verse 7 to God as the creator.<sup>16</sup> By means of participles to emphasise the continuing nature of the verbs involved,<sup>17</sup> expression is given to God's creation of the mountains by his power and their girding by his might. Not only did he create the mountains, but he also secures them. His involvement therefore is not limited to creative acts, but also encompasses his ability to secure the world by his might. An important aspect of God as creator is raised in verse 8, by referring to God's taming of the forces of chaos.<sup>18</sup> According to Kraus, "Mythische Vorstellungen von einem Ringen der Urzeit klingen hier an (vgl. Ps 46:4; 89:10ff; 93:3). Sie haben aber eine unmittelbar präsentische Beziehung."<sup>19</sup> Both Psalms 29 and 46 mention the matter of God subduing the chaotic waters of the sea and silencing the forceful waters. This act of subduing the chaotic forces formed part of God's creative work from the beginning of creation. In this verse, participles again serve the function of indicating that "securing the world" is not only a past event which is described here, but a continuing act of God.<sup>20</sup> The verse, however, not only concerns nature; God also has authority and control over the tumultuous forces of international politics. The nations do not fall outside the boundaries of this power and might. The final verse (v. 9) of this section again brings to focus the

<sup>14</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 277.

<sup>15</sup> Hossfeld, *Psalms* 2, 139 regards the description in 65:2-5 as a picture of the pre-exilic cult in Zion.

<sup>16</sup> Weiser, *Psalms*, 464-465 refers to God's power as creator of the entire world. This is displayed in the creation of mountains and the sea and the history of the nations.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kraus, *Psalmen* 2, 449, 451.

<sup>18</sup> Prinsloo, *Psalms*, 396.

<sup>19</sup> Kraus, *Psalmen* 2, 451.

<sup>20</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 279.

universality of God's influence and reach. To the whole world his actions will serve as signs of his awesome power. His awesome deeds will resound from the east to the west. A song of joy will sound to the ends of the earth.<sup>21</sup>

### 3 Psalm 65:10-14

This last section of the Psalm shifts the focus to God's involvement in nature by showing his goodness mentioned in 65:5b: "We shall be filled with the goodness of your house, your holy palace."<sup>22</sup> Verses 10-12 belong together and describe in hyperbolic terms how God provides rain, water and growth in abundance for the crops to produce lavishly. All of these testify to God's goodness by providing an affluent year in which richness is experienced. According to Hossfeld,<sup>23</sup> the description in this passage points to autumn and the harvest to come. This is followed in verses 13-14 with a depiction of nature's response to the goodness that God has imparted.

It is clear from this passage that the intention of the poet is to emphasise that Elohim is the acting party and no one else.<sup>24</sup> It is he who attends to the land,<sup>25</sup> sends the rain, waters the furrows, prepares the grain and provides the grain for the people. The use of the imperfect tenses is an indication that they are recurring actions that are in mind.<sup>26</sup> It is stated in the Psalm that the water flows from the "brook of God".<sup>27</sup> His blessings are so abundant that the pastures of the wilderness overflow and the hills reflect a joyous appearance.<sup>28</sup> Besides this, the meadows are covered with flock, a picture of fertility and prosperity (v. 13). The poet adds to the picture the image of valleys, covered with

<sup>21</sup> Hossfeld, *Psalms* 2, 140 speaks of God's active creative power "both in the *creatio prima* and in the *creatio continua*" with reference to Isa 51:15; Pss 89:10; 93:3-4; 104:5-9.

<sup>22</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 277.

<sup>23</sup> Hossfeld, *Psalms* 2, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Hossfeld, *Psalms* 2, 141 discusses the possible linking of Psalm 65 with the Ugaritic storm-god Baal and comes to the conclusion "that there is no trace of an exchange of the Canaanite Baal for the Israelite Yhwh." However, he remarks that "Psalm 65 presents an integrative theology that does not shrink from associations with the Baal traditions."

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Kraus, *Psalmen* 2, 452 who says we should read ארץ here as land instead of earth. Land would then refer to the land of Israel.

<sup>26</sup> Kraus, *Psalmen* 2, 452.

<sup>27</sup> Kraus, *Psalmen* 2, 452-453 says "Hier handelt es sich nicht um einen 'himmlischen Gottesbach' (so H Gunkel), sondern um einen konkreteres Mythologumenon, dass in die Kulttradition Jerusalems aufgenommen worden ist." From this sanctuary God provides the grain for bread on which humans live.

<sup>28</sup> Weiser, *Psalms*, 466 argues that the poet had a picture of God in mind travelling "over the earth in a chariot of clouds" and he continues that "God's tracks drip with fatness." A picture is thus created of abundance, blessing and joy because of God's goodness and grace.

wheat, all adding to the expression of jubilation because of God's goodness (v. 14).

In Psalm 65 deliverance or salvation and creation are celebrated together. The focal point where this takes place is on Zion where God is present in his holy abode, the temple.

## **B JEREMIAH 23:9-15**

Jeremiah 23:9-15 forms part of a cycle of oracles against the so-called false prophets in 23:9-40. This collection is part of a bigger collection of oracles which commences in 21:1 and extends to 24:10. This block of material has an introductory passage in 21:1-10 that concerns King Zedekiah, followed in 21:11 with a cycle aimed at the kings of Judah, continuing up to 23:8. This is followed by the cycle against the prophets, 23:9-40. The block of material ends with a passage in 24:1-10, again a passage that involves King Zedekiah. A suitable theme for this block of material would perhaps be: Failed leadership in Judah.

As mentioned, Jeremiah 23:9-40 is a collection of oracles aimed as a polemic against so-called false prophets. The book of Jeremiah entertains the theme of false prophets in several instances such as 14:14-16 and in chapters 27-29. The passage 23:9-15 forms the first section of the oracles against the prophets and to a great extent sets the tone of the complaints against the prophets. It seems that the various oracles first functioned as separate oracles reflecting on circumstances in the last days in Judah before the commencement of the Babylonian exile. The collection which we now have clearly testifies to the involvement of traditionists in the collecting and structuring of the oracles, therefore providing a literary context for the oracles which should be taken into account when they are interpreted. Most probably these oracles were collected for purposes of the exilic community to address issues from that specific period of time and to explain the reasons why they ended up in exile.

Jeremiah 23:9-15 consists of two sub-sections, namely 23:9-12 and 13-15. Both these sections are indictments launched against prophets<sup>29</sup> and announce Yahweh's judgement on them.

Verse 9a commences with a heading indicating that this particular collection of oracles is about the prophets.<sup>30</sup> In the second part of verse 9, the author of the oracle, presumably the prophet Jeremiah, describes the bodily affect that Yahweh and his words had on him as a person. Of significance here is the reference to Yahweh's word as holy or sacred. This reference in particular

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 331.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Werner H. Schmidt, *Das Buch Jeremia. Kapitel 1-25* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1997), 201.

sets the tone for the contrasting description of ungodliness to follow in verses 10-12 and 13-15. Jeremiah 23:9-12 is a short poem reflecting the reaction of a speaker to the bad condition of the land.<sup>31</sup> Verses 10 and 11 are linked together by three occurrences of the particle **כִּי**. Verse 12 to follow is introduced by **לְכֵן** (particle preposition **לְ** + particle adverb **כֵּן**) which explains what the outcome of the transgression mentioned will be.

What is important in this section is the issue of a curse<sup>32</sup> on the land. The transgressors are blamed for committing adultery,<sup>33</sup> a term most likely suggesting worship of foreign gods. It all boils down to the breaking of the covenant,<sup>34</sup> resulting in a curse on the land and the detrimental consequence of drought.

The next three verses (13-15) are also regarded as poetry.<sup>35</sup> Of these three verses, 13 and 14 belong together to display the contrast that is created between the prophets of Samaria and those of Jerusalem. Verse 15 links back to 13-14 expressing the consequences (**לְכֵן**) of the ill-doings of the prophets of Jerusalem.

## 1 Jeremiah 23:9-12

There seems to be a build up of tension and progressive revealing of who the culprits are that are addressed in this poem. This section starts off with the reference to the holiness of Yahweh, followed by the profane behaviour of the adulterers. This is followed by mourning about the drought in the land, because of a curse on the evil conduct of, at this stage, unknown persons. Verse 10 refers to them as people of might. The progression is taken a step further in verse 11 by now identifying the priests and the prophets as the profane (polluted) ones, cult officials blamed for their evil (wickedness). Finally, verse 12 announces that the holy one will as a result punish the “unholy” cult officials.

<sup>31</sup> Robert P. Carroll, 1986. *Jeremiah. A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1986), 452.

<sup>32</sup> Some scholars suggest that the Masoretic Text (MT) should be altered, but as William McKane, *Jeremiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 569-570 has argued, this is not necessary since the referral to a curse makes sense in the context which suggests covenant transgressions. The choice to keep the MT as it is, is also supported by Jan de Waard, *A Handbook on Jeremiah* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 100-101.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36. A new translation with introduction and commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 182; Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelly & Joel F. Drinkard Jr, *Jeremiah 1-25* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1991), 337; Arthur Weiser, *Das Buch Jeremia* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), 202. Cf. Jer 3:3-8; 5:7.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas W. Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood. A Study in the Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (London: SCM, 1970), 50-51. Cf. also Isa 24:4-6; Ezek 16:59; 17:18.

<sup>35</sup> Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 455; Also Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, 185.

## 2 Jeremiah 23:13-15

Jeremiah 23:13-15 forms part of the cycle of oracles against the false prophets which commences in 23:9. There are no longer indirect references to the prophets, as was the case in 23:10, but direct mention of how they act. The final verse of this section, verse 15, brings the indictment to the point of judgement. Introduced by the particle לִיָּהּ, it is pronounced that Yahweh will poison the prophets. This judgement is motivated by a sentence introduced with כִּי, blaming these prophets of Jerusalem for causing ungodliness (profaneness) to spread throughout the land. Again the reference is to profaneness or pollution, which stands in contrast to the holiness of Yahweh (cf. 23:9). In 23:15 the prophets are blamed for spreading profaneness (ungodliness) throughout the land and in so doing polluting the land. The transgression in this regard is not explicitly spelled out, but it is plausible to assume that the prophets did things which were in breach of the covenant stipulation. In all possibility, the worship of foreign gods is intended here.

The main issue to take note of in this polemic against the prophets is the response of Yahweh, the creator God, to the adulterous practices (evil deeds in generic terms) and abuse of power by the prophets (and priests) associated with the temple in Jerusalem. A link is drawn to the drought of the land, calamity and the pollution of the land by their atrocious deeds. Yahweh responds with a curse on the land, causing the land to mourn.<sup>36</sup>

In Jeremiah 23:9-15 Yahweh's punishment and its consequences for creation are linked together. Again the central point is the temple on Zion, which is the place of Yahweh's holy presence, where the priests and the prophets committed their transgressions.

## C HIGHLIGHTING SOME RELEVANT ISSUES

The two sections under discussion in this article have no formal relationship to each other. The various contexts of the two passages differ totally and there is no deliberate link between them. The context of Psalm 65 is most probably a situation where a congregation offers a hymn of praise to God, whilst the one in Jeremiah is about a conflict situation between prophets at about the time of the Babylonian exile. The textual links established between the two passages can perhaps be explained by the fact that they come from a mutual tradition of Israelite texts. The mutual issue that led to the comparison of the two said passages is the fact that both concern God as creator, who is actively involved in what takes place in nature on earth.

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed exposition of this passage cf. Wilhelm J. Wessels, "Prophets at Loggerheads: Accusations of Adultery in Jeremiah 23:9-15" (Paper read at the International Society for Biblical Literature, Tartu, Estonia, August 25-28, 2010).



I have noticed while engaging with the passage Jeremiah 23:9-15 that a causal relationship is promoted between the evil doings of people of Judah and the detrimental effect it had on the land. This in particular is indicated in 23:10:

For the land is full of adulterers; because of the curse *the land mourns*, and *the pastures of the wilderness are dried up*. Their course has been *evil*, and their *might is not right* (NRSV).

The repetition of the expression “the pastures of the wilderness”<sup>37</sup> in Psalm 65:12 was noticed, but with the realisation that it occurred in a context where God is praised for blessing the land and the joy it brought the people. Two opposing descriptions emerge of God’s engagement with the land and the people who were dependent on the conditions in the land. In Jeremiah 23:10 God’s involvement brought a curse on the land, resulting in the land mourning and subsequent drought. In Psalm 65 God’s involvement resulted in the blessing and flourishing of the land, people and animals.

Besides the above observations, the following similarly constructed expressions but with opposite meanings were detected. In Jeremiah 23:12 we read of “the year of their punishment” (NRSV - שְׁנַת פְּקֻדָּתָם) and in Psalm 65:11 of “the year of your goodness” (שְׁנַת טוֹבָתְךָ). In Psalm 65:10 the verb פָּקַד is used in a positive sense of the word, referring to God’s blessing of the land and the people. However, as seen above in Jeremiah 23:12, פָּקַד has the meaning of God visiting with the intention to punish.

An interesting point to note is the matter of the relationship between sin, rebellion, evil and adultery and the resulting effect on the conditions in the land. In Jeremiah 23:10 the people are blamed for practising adultery and doing evil deeds. As a result God put a curse on the land with devastating consequences. It caused a severe drought and calamity for the people of Judah. Sin and evil caused the creator God to bring about drought and famine. Psalm 65:4 also refers to the people who are overwhelmed by their sin and rebellious deeds, but presents God as a forgiving God. It seems like admission of sin in Psalm 65, but in Jeremiah the impression is that of stubbornness and perseverance in wrongdoing. In Psalm 65 the creator God not only forgives, but blesses the land and the people by giving rain, fertility, growth and plentiful flock, resulting in joy and praise.

This leads to a less obvious but important point of comparison between the two passages. A case is argued that both the passages discussed have a bone of contention with the Baal religion. In Jeremiah 23:9-12 there is no direct reference to Baal, but the reference to the adulterous practices seems to allude to the worship of Baal. Jeremiah regarded these practices as disloyalty on the part of the prophets and the people of Judah towards Yahweh and his covenant. In

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Jer 9:10; 23:10; Joel 1:19; 2:22.

23:13-15 the name of Baal is mentioned with regard to evil practices of the people of Samaria. It is then used to promote the point that the prophets in Judah had done worse things than Baal worship. This, however, seems to be a literary technique, as Domeris<sup>38</sup> has argued, to focus the attention on Baal and the transgression of worshipping the god. If this argument proves to be true, then Jeremiah 23:9-15 presents a secondary issue besides the conflict between true and false prophets in this passage. Yahweh the creator has the ability to nullify those matters for which the people worship Baal. Baal as the storm and fertility god is worshipped for the good he can bring about in terms of good harvests, food and prosperity. Jeremiah's polemic against Baal is founded on the idea that Yahweh is the creator who in his power and might can take away that which Baal supposedly can provide and is hailed for.

It also seems possible to see some form of polemic against Baal in the way Elohim is presented in Psalm 65. Baal is not mentioned directly in any instance in this Psalm, but as was indicated in the discussion above, the way in which and the purposes for which God is praised in Psalm 65 cause one to think that some reference to Baal might be implied.<sup>39</sup> In the first instance the universality of God is promoted more than one. He is the God whose influence stretches to the ends of the earth and to the furthest seas. Besides this, God is presented as the creator who from the beginning battled with the forces of chaos and who has silenced these forces with his power and might. A major impression Psalm 65 wants to create is the fact that God is the creator God. He is the one who has established the mountains and contained the seas. He is the one who, on an ongoing basis, secures his creation and involves himself with his creation. It is he who blesses the earth with rain, fertility, growth, wheat and plentiful flock. Verb after verb emphasises the point that it is God and no one else who is responsible for the prosperity and blessing which the land and the people enjoy. It is not Baal whom so many people worship for the fertility and vegetation on earth, but the work of the creator God.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, a technique of refraining from mentioning the opposing party is applied, but the implied message is quite clear – God is the one providing the blessing and prosperity, not Baal or any other deity.

<sup>38</sup> William R. Domeris, "When Metaphor Becomes Myth: A Socio-linguistic Reading of Jeremiah," in *Troubling Jeremiah* (eds. A. R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, & Louis Stulman, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 244-262.

<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to notice that Howard Wallace, "*Jubilate Deo omnis terra: God and Earth in Psalm 65*," in *The Earth story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (ed. Norman Habel, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 59-61 also feels the need to discuss Baal in his exposition of Psalm 65. However, he does so by comparing literature on Baal that seems to be similar to Psalm 65 and not as I have argued in a polemical sense.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Kraus, *Psalmen* 2, 453.

## D REFLECTION ON THE CONTRASTING IMAGES ON CREATION

What started off as an observation of two contrasting texts on creation resulted in challenging theological questions about God. It seems from the two passages that, to my thinking, God played contradictory roles as creator. On the one hand he is the one who blesses creation, but on the other the one who curses it. The theological problem is that God is portrayed by these two testimonies of Israel as responsible for good as well as bad, when it comes to his involvement with creation.<sup>41</sup>

The theological issue raised here is not easy to address and answers differ according to religious and faith convictions. Whereas Brueggemann is more bold in his judgement on the negative aspects of Yahweh by saying that “there is a profound disjunction at the core of Yhwh’s life,”<sup>42</sup> Goldingay argues that “good and bad are thus not moral categories but relational ones that point to what seems good or bad from the perspective of our desires and perceptions.”<sup>43</sup> We should, however, acknowledge that we speak about God in terms of our systems of understanding and that this “talk” does not have ontological status.

When looking at Psalm 65, the poet or songwriter created a tone of praise and joy. The psalm celebrates God on the throne in the temple on Zion from where he distributes his goodness in terms of forgiveness, salvation, security and bestowal of his blessing on the land. In terms of God’s role as creator, he is portrayed as positive and beneficial to the people. It is a picture of God who has established the mountains, contained the roaring seas and is constantly involved in securing everything. The song portrays a gracious God who, on an ongoing basis, provides the trust, security and hope that people need. However, he is not just a local God, but his power, might and awesome deeds reach as far as the ends of the world and serve as a sign to the nations of the world.<sup>44</sup> The impression created is that of a creator God who is constructively involved in

<sup>41</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006), 156-170 discusses what he calls the two sides of YHWH’s person and activity in some detail. Although Goldingay acknowledges the positive and negative sides of Yahweh, he argues that the positive side is his dominant side and the “exercise of anger issues from God’s circumstantial will, which will always stand in service of God’s absolute will for life and blessing” (167).

<sup>42</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 268.

<sup>43</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 169.

<sup>44</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 220 ends his discussion of this psalm by emphasising that the focus is on God who should be praised and not on us as humans who benefit from his goodness. He also makes the important point that thanksgiving is placed in a universal context and therefore breaks the exclusive focus on our national interests and identities.

the earth in imparting his goodness and by such means shows his power and might. This is more like the pictures we have of God the creator as portrayed in the Genesis creation accounts. He creates, but also provides the ability and opportunity for growth and prosperity not only for his people and the land they live in, but for the peoples of the world.

But besides the pictures of goodness, grace and blessing on the part of God as the creator, this psalm in passing also acknowledges the existence of aspects that negatively impact on people's lives. Verse 3 already admits that there is a need for prayers to be answered, to be followed by verse 4 which speaks of the heavy load of deeds of iniquity which threaten to overwhelm people. The same verse refers to transgressions that require forgiveness to contain the potentially negative effects these can cause the people in relationship with God. To continue along this line, verse 6 acknowledges that at some stage God had to intervene with acts of deliverance and salvation to rescue his people from threatening situations. A final aspect to be added to this is raised in verse 8 where God's ability to silence the chaotic and threatening waters and to contain the uproar of the nations is acclaimed. Again, it is not only a reference to the beginning of creation, but he is continually active in containing the chaotic forces of nature and the nations. From the first eight verses of the Psalm, the goodness of God is celebrated because of his positive and gracious response to negative realities which threatened the existence of the people from time to time. The second section of the psalm (vv. 10-14) focuses on God imparting his blessings in abundance by providing the means for growth and prosperity. He gives ample rain, provides grain, makes the flock fertile and even provides pastures that turn the desert into a place which provides grazing for the animals. Joy is experienced because of God's goodness and willingness to impart blessing to the land and the people.

The looming negative aspects in the psalm are deliberately highlighted because of an observation that was made by Levenson<sup>45</sup> with regard to the sovereignty of God. Psalm 65 verse by verse emphasises the sovereignty of God as the deliverer and creator. In the rhetoric of Israel we often hear the praise of God as sovereign, as is the case in Psalm 65. But as Levenson<sup>46</sup> has observed, it seems that God could never, even for a moment, display his sovereignty and, to use a modern depiction, sit back and enjoy the ensuing results. The opposing forces were always threatening in the background as was indicated in the psalm under discussion. Therefore it seems that God, on an ongoing basis, had to contain, suppress and subdue the negative forces in the appearance of sin, rebellion, transgression, chaotic forces in nature and tumultuous nations with their abuse of power.

<sup>45</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row), 1988.

<sup>46</sup> Levenson, *Creation*, 47.

In spite of the above observation, Psalm 65 succeeds in instilling faith and trust in God who delivers, sustains and blesses his creation. In this psalm salvation and creation meet in the same praise song.

When it comes to Jeremiah 23:9-15, a surprisingly negative depiction of Yahweh is given with regard to his role in creation. There is no need to repeat the details of this passage except to highlight the aspect of God placing a curse on the land. As mentioned above, the theological issue of linking Yahweh with the bad that is happening is a disturbing reality for many. In Jeremiah 23:9-15 Yahweh is the author of a curse on the land because of evil deeds such as adultery.<sup>47</sup> This most probably indicates a reference to the worship of Baal. According to this passage, the creator God causes the land to mourn, quite the opposite of Psalm 65.

In a very enlightening discussion Brueggemann<sup>48</sup> raises the issue of this duality in creation in that God not only blesses, but also at times curses his creation. He makes the following important observation which ties in with what the study of the two passages under discussion has revealed. He says “YHWH is the guarantor of blessings; but where the power of blessing is not concretely enacted and guaranteed, the undoing of creation takes place.”<sup>49</sup> In the Jeremiah passage we have an example of the undoing of creation. The severe drought has struck the land because – as I have argued – the people, in particular the prophets of Judah, were unfaithful to Yahweh by not obeying the covenant. For that reason the creator brought calamity upon them and caused the land to mourn. Jeremiah 14:4-6, which shows a close resemblance to Jeremiah 23:9-14, is another example of Yahweh putting a curse on the land because of evil and covenant disobedience (cf. also Amos 4:6-11).<sup>50</sup> In the rhetoric of the Jeremiah tradition, the enraged Yahweh had reached the end of his patience, resulting in a curse of the land and calamity for the people. Jeremiah 23:9-15 testifies to the undoing of creation and a negative display of the power of the creator God.

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Deroche, “The Reversal of Creation in Hosea,” *VT* 31, 4 (1981): 402-408, has convincingly demonstrated that there is a direct link between Israel’s faithfulness to the covenant and the well-being of YHWH’s created order. Sin and transgression which violates the covenant relationship can lead to the reversal of creation, the “un-creation” of creation.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 143-147.

<sup>49</sup> Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, 146.

<sup>50</sup> Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, 151 says of Lev 26, Jer 14:4-6 and Amos 4:6-11: “This entire sequence of texts bespeaks YHWH’s terrible and ready capacity to enact curses on the earth, which disrupt the system of blessing and fertility and make the world unlivable. Just as Israel’s doxologies celebrate the world when it is under the blessing of YHWH, so the various narratives and poems of Judgment witness to the capacity of YHWH to place the whole earth under the power of curse, which produces only death.”

From the immediate context of the passage under discussion in Jeremiah, it is not possible to conclude anything that hints at the countering of total destruction or grace. The outcome of Yahweh's negative display of power has resulted in the exile of the Judaeen people. From a canonical context we know that the exile was not the final act in the history of Judah, but a phase of preparing the people for a new beginning and the possibility of a new period of blessing. In a section entitled "*The World Beyond Nullification*", Brueggemann<sup>51</sup> refers to three narratives from the Pentateuch which also testify to the destructive power of the creator God. These narratives are the flood narrative (Gen 6:5-7:24), the Sodom story (Gen 19) and the story of the plagues against Egypt (Exod 9-12). But, the important point he notices in all three cases is that the outcome of the stories was not the end of it all. From each of the narratives a positive outcome arose. This observation of Brueggemann ties in with the bigger picture of the return from exile, not so obvious from the passage in Jeremiah 23:9-15, which is all doom and gloom.

## E CONCLUSION

Psalm 65 and Jeremiah 23:9-15 have shown two realities from the testimonies of the people of Israel and Judah of the creator God. Both passages concern the awesome power of God in his interaction with people and the land. Psalm 65 has illustrated on the one hand the fine balance between sin, forgiveness, grace, goodness and blessing of people and land by the creator God. The natural consequence of all of this is the expression of joy and praise. On the other hand, the fine balance is illustrated between sin (evil), non-forgiveness, curse, undoing of creation, mourning and calamity for people and the land (Jer 23:9-15). We are faced in these passages with two realities of the creator God deriving from the testimonies of Israel and Judah. We simply have to deal with them, unsettling as they may be.

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<sup>51</sup> Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, 153-155.

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