

## **Psalm Fourteen**

Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."  
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;  
there is no one who does good.

The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind  
to see if there are any who are wise,  
who seek after God.

They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse;  
there is no one who does good,  
no, not one.

Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers  
who eat up my people as they eat bread,  
and do not call upon the LORD?

There they shall be in great terror,  
for God is with the company of the righteous.  
You would confound the plans of the poor,  
but the LORD is their refuge.

O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!  
When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,  
Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

A few weeks into the pandemic, a few friends from college and I decided to start a summer reading group. Each month, we would read and discuss one of C.S. Lewis' three science fiction novels, taking both July and August to finish the last and the longest in the series. This past week, we met online to share our thoughts on *Out of the Silent Planet*.

The basic plot, for those who have not read it, involves the protagonist, Dr. Elwin Ransom, being taken hostage and transported to the distant planet of Malacandra. Along with his two captors, he encounters and interacts with its various inhabitants.

The story functions in a number of ways. One of them, which we talked about, was that, in describing this journey to an unfamiliar place and the exchanges with the alien species that live therein, Lewis holds up a kind of mirror for his readers. Our world is meant to be seen for what it is in contrast to this other, idealized world. Humanity's depravity (being "bent" in nature, as these otherworldly creatures describe it) comes to be seen, as in a reflection.

The book was written and published in 1938, as the world was on the brink of the Second World War. In a way that is both playful and prophetic, it engages some of the most difficult questions of Lewis' day. He had lived through one international conflict, and along with others, saw evidence of another coming. He describes the perils of colonialism, violence done to others in the spirit of the "survival of the fittest," and an insatiable appetite for natural resources - all disguised in the name of "progress."

And so the words of Psalm Fourteen come to mind: "The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind, to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no not one." (vv. 2-3) The ancient poet is, like Lewis, overwhelmed by the wickedness that they witness in the world, such that their language is repeatedly presented in all-encompassing terms: "They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; *there is no one who does good*" (v. 1b).

For both the Hebrew psalm-writer and British author, the underlying problem is seen to be related to a failure to recognize and live under Divine rule (v.1). The wise one, who could not be found in that moment, is the one who acknowledges and yields their life to God.

During one of Dr. Ransom's conversations with his extraterrestrial hosts, we are told that "they were astonished at what he had to tell them of human history – of war, slavery, and prostitution." *It is because they have no ruler as our planet does*, one of the Malacandran beings suggests. Another chimes in, saying that *it is because every one of them wants to a little ruler him or herself*. "There must be rule," they together observe, "and yet how can creatures rule themselves?"

To live as creatures who seek to rule ourselves is to impose forms of power on others without submitting to a higher power. It is to be driven by consumption without considering commands placed on our lives. It is to dehumanize, to "eat up people as one eats bread," rather than "calling on the name of the Lord" (v.4). This was the world of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world of the Ancient Near East, and this is our world which is breaking and burning today.

Without giving too much away, *Out of the Silent Planet* becomes a story about unseen spiritual forces and beings that inhabit and are at work throughout the cosmos. Those that remain benevolent (not "bent") come to be seen, as with God in these verses, to side with the oppressed, and to be at war and at work restoring creation (vv. 5-7). With this Psalm, readers are invited to consider and follow the unlikely example of the faithful (Ransom, in the case of the novel) who resist what so many days seems to be the dominant pattern, and instead "seek after God" (v. 2). - NS