The Contemporary Use of the Imprecatory Psalms

This year is the tenth anniversary of the partial genocide in Sudan, which involved the deaths of several hundred thousand of the Darfuri people. Many Darfuri who escaped that atrocity, perhaps another two hundred thousand, fled to Chad and have been in refugee camps there ever since. My step-daughter Katie-Jay and her husband Gabriel have spent most of these ten years seeking to get the West to recognize the Darfuri’s plight and to take action on their behalf. When I married Katie-Jay’s mother, Kathleen, three years ago, we started praying for the Darfuri as part of our prayer routine. When we’re home, we use the Episcopal form of prayer for early evening before we have dinner, and we added to that liturgy the saying of a psalm on the Darfuri’s behalf. We began at the beginning of the Psalter, and prayed the Psalms one after each other, one a day.

The idea came from my previous experience of praying the Psalms when I taught in a Church of England Seminary, where we worshiped together every day, following the church’s lectionary for reading Scripture, and reading through the Psalms one-by-one. We were not choosing a psalm to read each day because it corresponded to our current situation but reading (say) Psalm 47 because we read Psalm 46 yesterday and we will read Psalm 48 tomorrow. That practice made me ask we were doing, and I came to two conclusions. One was that by reading the entire Psalter we were shaping our habit of praise and prayer. The other was that in praying prayers or praises that didn’t correspond to our own circumstances, we were identifying with other parts of the Christian community, and the world community, whose circumstances corresponded to those out of which a particular psalm prayed. In other words, in our prayer we were involved in intercession.

This realization provided me with an answer to another question about the Psalms. The Psalms model the nature of supplication—of praying for oneself. But how did Israelites pray for other people—how did they intercede? There are only one or two explicitly intercessory prayers in the Psalter, and only a few elsewhere in the Old Testament. But some of those explicitly intercessory prayers pray in the first person, even though they are interceding. Someone is praying for other people, but identifying with them, so not praying for *them*, but for *us*. Intercession involves putting oneself in someone else’s place. This understanding fits nicely with the fact that etymologically “intercession” links with “intervention.” It involves acting as a “go-between.” It implies interposing between two parties so as to bring them together. It entails identifying with one party and representing it to another. For a prophet, intercessory prayer involved identifying with people and representing them before God. One therefore speaks as “we” or “I” not as “they” or “he” or “she.” I realized that the apparent absence of intercessory prayers from the Psalter meant that the “I” and “we” psalms could be used as intercessions as well as supplications. Perhaps Israel used them that way; certainly we might do so. In praying the psalms, one need not be praying for oneself.

Specifically, in praying the prayers in the Psalms that speak out of oppression, affliction, persecution, and tyranny, we might be praying not for ourselves but for people who experience oppression, affliction, persecution, and tyranny, with whom we identify. We pray for God to put down tyrants and oppressors. In connection with the Darfuri, one might think of President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, for whose arrest the International Criminal Court has issued a warrant on counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.

A feature of the Psalms is that they virtually never speak of taking violent action to put down oppressors (the major exception is the royal psalms which assume that God works via the human king in putting down resistance to God in the world). They do not give reasons for this omission. I am tempted to describe the Psalter as the most pacifist book in the Bible, though I try to resist the temptation because speaking in terms of pacifism is anachronistic; pacifism implies a framework of thinking that does not appear in Old Testament or New Testament. I suspect that two different considerations underlie the Psalms’ stance. One is the practicality that the people who prayed the Psalms were usually in no position to take action against their oppressors. Prayer was all they had. But what a powerful weapon they knew it was! That fact links with the other consideration. Prophets such as Isaiah frequently insist that the vocation of the people of God is to trust God for their destiny. Their vocation is not to take action to safeguard that destiny. The Psalms’ stance fits with that emphasis. “Praying the Psalms is an audacious act of trust.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Praying Against the Superpower

The imprecatory Psalms, then, provide the oppressed with a means of urging God to take action against evil in the world, and they give people who identify with the oppressed a means of praying for them. In this connection it is possible that they are more significant for the brothers and sisters of the oppressed than for the oppressed themselves. The Old Testament is aware that people who are wronged may recognize a call to turn the other cheek and not desire the punishment of the people who have wronged them. It is the stance Joseph takes in relation to his brothers. There is a version of Psalm 137 reworked by Zephania Kameeta in the midst of Namibia’s struggle for independence from South Africa. It asks that the apartheid system may be smashed on the rock, but not that white South African politicians may have that experience.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In contrast, perhaps it is the responsibility of people who care about the victims of wrongdoing and about the vindication of right in the world to pray for God to put wrongdoers down and deliver their victims, which is what Kathleen and I were doing. The imprecatory psalms are for praying by people lwho are not the victims of oppression. Indeed, if we do not want to pray them, it raises questions about the shallowness of our own spirituality, our theology, and our ethics. Do we not want to see wrongdoers put down and punished?

One reason for our not wanting it is that we may be on the receiving end of the putting down. That possibility is raised by another contemporary use of the imprecatory psalms, by Rastafarians.

Rastafarianism emerged in Jamaica nearly a century ago. Among its many biblical influences, it has especially used the imprecatory Psalms in protesting against colonialism and in striving for national identity and social change. In a paper at SBL in 1998, Nathaniel Samuel Murrell described the way Rastas used the imprecatory Psalms as a “linguistic political tool to chant down the enemy.”[[3]](#footnote-3) “Babylon” comes to mean the West and its economic system.

Psalm 137 is the most notorious imprecatory psalm. There is a reggae version of it called “Rivers of Babylon”; it actually omits the closing verses that Western Christians find offensive, and replaces them by the closing line from Psalm 19 that asks for our words to be pleasing to God. I imagine their point is to underscore the prayer and urge God to respond to its plea for freedom. The song was written and first recorded in 1970 by a Jamaican band called The Melodians, but it was covered in 1978 by a slightly manufactured European-based group called Boney M.[[4]](#footnote-4) This version was a long-running number one record in the U.K., though it was only a minor hit in the United States. The irony lies in the fact that we British who listened to and sang the song (it’s very hummable: if anyone wishes to hear me sing it, we can gather in the bar for a rendition in which I shall be joined by Richard Middleton, who made helpful comments on a draft of this paper)—we British who liked the song never realized that it was about us, that we were Babylon. Perhaps the BBC would have banned it if we had realized.

Scholars in countries such as Britain and the United States are therefore wise to support the view of ordinary Christians that nobody should use such Psalms. It would be dangerous if people prayed them. God might listen and respond.

Christians commonly justify their opposition to the use of such Psalms by suggesting that they are out of keeping with the New Testament, but that is hardly so. While the New Testament does not quote Psalm 137, it does utilize imprecatory parts of Psalm 69 which as a whole is more extensively imprecatory.[[5]](#footnote-5) Further, Revelation 6:10 reports an imprecatory prayer by the martyrs, who ask “How long, Lord, holy and true, will you not judge and take redress for our blood from earth’s inhabitants?” God’s response is not to point out that such a prayer is inappropriate in light of Jesus’ exhortation to forgive enemies; it is to promise them that the time of redress will soon come. Since it has not done so two thousand years later, perhaps this promise provides further reason for praying in imprecatory fashion and/or further reason to avoid doing so if you allow for the possibility that you will be its victims.

Jesus himself declares, “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!” for not responding to his teaching, and goes on to describe the terrible punishment that will come on the cities (Matt 11:21-24; cf. e.g., 23:13-32). Paul, too, declares curses on various people (1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9).[[6]](#footnote-6) It looks as if Jesus and Paul want to see wrongdoers put down and punished.

# Allegorical Interpretation

The New Testament thus suggests a critique of the comments of two well-known scholars who have been uncomfortable with Psalm 137. The first is C. S. Lewis, who wonders how a Christian can use the imprecatory psalms, and reverts to an allegorical approach:

We know the proper object of utter hostility—wickedness, especially our own…. From this point of view I can use even the horrible passage in 137 about dashing the Babylonian babies against the stones. I know things in the inner world which are like babies; the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments, which may one day become dipsomania [what we would call alcoholism] or settled hatred.... Against all such pretty infants... the advice of the Psalm is best. Knock the little bastards’ brains out.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Lewis here illustrates several of the dangers in allegorical interpretation. Its problem is usually not that it leads us to make declarations that are out of keeping with the direct teaching of Scripture. It is that it enables us to avoid seeing what the Holy Spirit was inspiring in particular texts. It enables us to focus instead on things that we are more interested in or more comfortable with, which will often be matters of individual spirituality rather than our outward lives. It enables us to avoid seeing what God wants us to see.

Lewis published his *Reflections on the Psalms* during the period when people from different parts of the British Empire were being encouraged to immigrate into Britain to drive buses, work in factories, staff hospitals, and so on. His book came out two years before the speech in South Africa by British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan about the “wind of change” blowing through Britain’s empire in Africa.[[8]](#footnote-8) There is a link between Lewis’s avoidance of the literal meaning of Psalm 137 and the postcolonial implications of the psalm (as we would now put it). An allegorical interpretation of the psalm avoids these implications.

The other scholar is David C. Steinmetz. In a classic text for recent interest in recovering the significance of pre-critical interpretation of scripture, he speaks of the difficulty raised for Christians by Psalm 137 with its talk of baby-bashing, the difficulty raise by the fact that we are “expressly forbidden” to avenge ourselves on our enemies. “Unless Psalm 137 has more than one meaning,” he says, “it cannot be used as a prayer by the Church and must be rejected as a lament belonging exclusively to the piety of ancient Israel.” Allegorical interpretation, he goes on,

made it possible for the church to pray directly and without qualification even a troubling Psalm like 137. After all, Jerusalem was not merely a city in the Middle East; it was, according to the allegorical sense, the church; according to the tropological sense, the faithful soul; and according to the anagogical sense, the center of God's new creation. The Psalm became a lament of those who long for the establishment of God's future kingdom and who are trapped in this disordered and troubled world, which with all its delights is still not their home. They seek an abiding city elsewhere. The imprecations against the Edomites and the Babylonians are transmuted into condemnations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. If you grant the fourfold sense of Scripture, David sings like a Christian.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Steinmetz’s comments stimulate several observations. First, we have noted that the early church had no difficulty with psalms such as Psalm 137, understood in their literal sense. Second, the psalm makes no reference to avenging oneself on one’s enemies. Indeed, its implication is the opposite. It is an expression of the regular Old Testament inclination to leave vengeance to God. Third, one significance of the psalm is that it is a prayer by an oppressed people for God to judge an oppressor. We have noted that most modern biblical interpreters belong to oppressor nations rather than oppressed peoples; being able to rule out its literal meaning makes it possible for the psalm to have no purchase on us. An oppressed people’s attitude to the psalm may be different. A fourth, related point is that what presents itself as interpretation that takes up the insight of the pre-critical period becomes a way of furthering what are actually modern concerns. That dynamic is characteristic of interpretation that focuses on the importance of peacemaking and non-violence, concerns that take their agenda from modernity. This fact does not make them wrong, but we need to be rescued from reading our modern concerns into the agenda of earlier interpreters as we need to be rescued from reading our modern concerns into scripture itself.

# Prayer and Ethics

I have noted that the problem with allegorical interpretation is usually not what it says but what it fails to say. Christians who undertake allegorical interpretation are unlikely to make the text say something that disagrees with Christian faith, with biblical faith. The problem is that allegorical interpretation makes it possible to rework the text’s meaning so that it says something that fits with the interpreter’s understanding of what counts as Christian and biblical, and to prevent the text from saying something that conflicts with that understanding.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The most worrying tropological implication of allegorical interpretation of the Psalms is that they stop the Psalms having an ethical impact on us. I was asked to present a paper elsewhere in this meeting on the link between poetry and ethics in the Psalms, but I could not think of what to say. I told Kathleen one night in a restaurant and she immediately produced a series of suggestions, which I hastily wrote on a napkin. Later I persuaded her that she must give the paper, for which she has barely forgiven me. She has entitled it “Fangs Dripping with Honey.” The insights as expressed in the outline for the paper were then that the Psalms illustrate the way poetry can (a) evoke an atmosphere and an emotion, (b) entice people into its midst before they find out what role they are playing, (c) put the users of the Psalms into the shoes of other people in an emotional and not merely a rational way, (d) help them identify themselves as perpetrators, (e) do so by sneaking up on them rather than relating to the Psalms as if they were people taking part in a court of law or even as people listening to a story, (f) give them a way of expressing their desire for redress, (g) give them a way of seeking redress without actually taking action, (h) nevertheless give them God’s point of view on their lives, and (i) show them a path from anguish to healing.

Kathleen’s paper does not focus on the imprecatory psalms, but these psalms illustrate those insights forcibly. The imprecatory psalms enable us to take up our role as intercessors for the victims of oppression. It is a role that is crucial when we are in no position to do anything about the oppression. It is just as crucial when we *are* in a position to do something, because they remind us that what we do is not decisive. Then second, the imprecatory psalms have the capacity to scare the pants off us as oppressors and pull us to a change of life.

Kathleen’s points undergird those two. Her thesis is that poetry makes a unique contribution to ethics because it performs moral correction on us as we perform it. The world of the Psalms is an ethical place, a place of truth. It defines the unfairness, instability, and despair of the world we live in. As the words of the Psalms come out of our mouths, we are yoked to moral principles and concerns that come from beyond us. The Psalms’ words are human words but they are human words that the people of God recognized as acceptable to God, as reflecting God’s perspective. Because we read the Psalms out loud, we are involved in them. Kathleen notes the suggestiveness of the verb *qara’*: when we read the Psalms out loud, literally we call them; and in the process they call us. In taking them on our lips, we are pulled along by God’s yoke, plowing a furrow of truth that we could not navigate alone but also that we cannot escape. During the singing of a psalm, God’s justice thrives. Evildoers who seem to flourish are actually doomed. We can look around at a situation where God’s justice is not thriving and say, “I want what I hear and see in the Psalms.” And when we meet an enemy, Kathleen likes to say, we can threaten them with, “Have I got a psalm for you!”

1. David Augsburger, “Foreword,” in Daniel M. Nehrbass, *Praying Curses* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), pp. ix-xii (p. x). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Zephania Kameeta, *Why, O Lord?* (Geneva: WCC, 1986), p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Tuning Hebrew Psalms to Reggae Rhythms,” *Cross Currents* 50 (2000-1), pp. 525-40 (p. 528). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is also a much more recent song by the Orthodox Jewish reggae/rap singer Matisyahu, called “Jerusalem,” which uses a reworked version of vv. 5-6 as its chorus. The song comes on his album “Youth” but it was also released as a single; at the time of writing, it is available on YouTube [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See e.g., John 2:17; Acts 1:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See further Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 137-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Bles, 1958; reprinted London: Collins, 1961), pp. 113-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The text is widely available on the internet in transcript and audio forms. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” in *Theology Today* 37 (1980), pp. 27-38 (pp. 29-30, 30-31); cf. Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM/New York: Harper, 1966), pp. 108-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)