# Violence, Justice, Advocacy, and Intercession in the Psalms

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Violence, justice, advocacy, and intercession are interrelated topics in the Psalms, each of them having some ambiguity attaching to it. This paper seeks to clarify the ambiguity and the interrelationships and notes how psalms protest the violence that is done to justice, disavow taking up violence for the sake of justice, seek God's violence on behalf of justice, and affirm the responsibility of the king to take up that responsibility.

### Violence

In a sense, there is no problem about defining violence. In discussing violence in the Scriptures, J. Cornelis de Vos quotes a World Health Organization definition of violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation,” and then appends a simpler dictionary-type definition of violence as “the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Violence is clearly a notion with ethically negative connotations. But de Vos then adds in a telling footnote that “there are also forms of violence that are commonly seen as allowed or even necessary, such as self-defence and ‘just war.’” The footnote opens up the fact that actually some systematic ambiguity attaches to the word *violence*.

The profile of related words in Hebrew differs from that in English, and Hebrew has less problem in this connection. The word *ḥāmās*, the term conventionally translated *violence*, fits those definitions without needing the telling footnote, because it invariably denotes violence that is ethically indefensible. As the English word is related to the word *violation*, so the wrongness of *ḥāmās* lies at least in part in its involving a violation of the community’s norms for human relationships. Words such as *lawlessness* are thus NJPS’s default translation.

The Hebrew word occurs fourteen times in the Psalms, more than twice as many as in any other book (there are six each in Proverbs, Ezekiel, and Habakkuk). It characteristically refers to the attacks of deceivers and aggressors on people who are faithful and upright (Ps 7:8–11 [9–12]; 11:5; 18:48 [49]; 25:19; 27:12; 35:11; 55:9 [10]; 58:2 [3]; 72:14; 73:6; 74:20; 140:1, 4, 11 [2, 5, 12]). On only two occasions in the Scriptures is Yahweh said to be engaged in *ḥāmās*; the two occurrences test but prove the rule. On one occasion, Job cries out “Violence” (Job 19:7). While he might be referring to the actions of other people, in general he talks more about God as the one who has acted fiercely towards him. To speak of Yahweh as engaged in *ḥāmās* is a way of accusing God of behaving in a fashion that does not befit God. And Lamentations 2:6 uses the verb *ḥāmas* to refer to what Yahweh has done to Zion, again as a forceful form of protest against Yahweh’s action.

In a way that is related in substance to that talk of God’s violence but does not involve using the word *ḥāmās*, Psalm 69:26 [27] speaks on behalf of someone whom God has struck down, hit, and made suffer (the verb *nākâ* hiphil, the adjective *ḥālāl*, and the noun *makʾôb*). They are words from three roots that the psalm has in common with Isaiah 53:3–5. For *struck down*, the psalm uses the more common Hebrew word for forceful hurtful physical action. When used with a human being as object, *nākâ* commonly implies killing, though it does not always do so (see, e.g., Exod 21:18); nor does the related noun *makkâ* (e.g., Jer 10:19; 15:18). A psalm uses this verb to refer to Yahweh (simply) striking wicked people on the jaw (Ps 3:7 [8]). The verb occurs commonly in narrative books to denote the action of Yahweh, of Israel, or of individuals such as Joshua or David, and thus it generally refers to action that is assumed to be ethically proper. In the Psalms, Yahweh strikes down Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines (78:51, 66; 105:36; 135:8, 10; 136:10, 17). Elsewhere, the verb does occasionally refer to wrongful action (e.g., 2 Sam 12:9). In itself, then, it is ethically neutral.

Given the prominence of violence (in the broad English sense) in the Psalms, *nākâ* is relatively infrequent here. It is mostly a prose word, and the Psalms are more inclined to use imagery that is vivid and concrete instead of this prosaic verb. So Yahweh commissions or promises the king, “You will smash them with an iron club, shatter them like an object made by a potter” (2:9). Someone under attack declares a confidence in God that “if a person does not turn back, he whets his sword; he has directed his bow and fixed it. He has fixed deadly weapons for himself; he makes his arrows into flames” so that their *ḥāmās* rebounds on them (7:12–16 [13–17]). “He rains coals of fire and sulfur on the faithless people” who are devoted to *ḥāmās* (11:6).[[2]](#footnote-2)

As the Psalms see it, then, wrongful violence (*ḥāmās*) means human action that violates accepted standards and norms by violating and harming people who do not deserve it (e.g., 27:12; 35:11; 74:20–21). Proper violence includes action that God takes against people who are engaged in wrongful violence, to deliver their victims (e.g., 17:13; 35:1–2; 140:1–4, 11 [2–5, 12]). It includes action that God takes as a punitive measure against such people (e.g., 5:6 [7]). And it includes action that God takes against peoples other than Israel in the course of pursuing his purpose for Israel, and that Israel and its leaders take in that same connection (e.g., 2:9; 78:51), though the broader context of the Torah and the Psalms indicates that this purpose is also concerned for other nations. Such proper violence includes action that the king takes to get deliverance from attackers who are engaged in *ḥāmās* (18:37–48 [38–49]). And it includes punitive action that the people as a whole take (e.g. 149:5–9).

There are thus several links between violence and justice in the Psalms. Wrongful violence is an offence against justice, and divine violence often aims to counter such violence against justice and to buttress or restore justice. The king as God’s agent can also be engaged in proper violence against injustice and in buttressing or restoring justice. The Psalms do not refer to human violence in self-defense when one is treated unjustly, though the unjust treatment they describe implies the action of the powerful against the powerless; the reason why one is turning to God is that one is powerless to take action for oneself.

### Justice

A seminary colleague of mine in the United States once reflected on a contrast over against the time when he himself had been a student twenty or thirty years previously. In those days, he said, no one talked about justice, but nowadays you wouldn’t get anywhere with millennials unless you talked about justice. His observation fitted an impression I had formed on the basis of a change in assumptions about the nature of Christian commitment that appeared in student papers. An aspect of my own reflection was the fuzzy way that students referred to justice. Indeed, an Ethics PhD student had also remarked on students’ “tremendous unfocused passion for social justice”[[3]](#footnote-3) which links with their eagerness to “make a difference.” I decided to email a class and ask them what the word *justice* meant to them, or what they thought it meant to other people who use the word. Here are some of the answers, slightly edited:

Justice involves retribution or fair compensation for a wrong committed. It means that there is a moral code most people follow that determines what is right and what is wrong.

Justice is the lifting up of the voices that have been crushed through unholy acts of greed and oppression, and the putting down of the voices that have been doing the crushing.

Justice is consideration and care for the poor and oppressed; people in power making and enforcing equitable laws for all people; loving our neighbor as much as we love ourselves; not allowing harmful exploitation of people and resources.

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 Justice is upholding the rights of everyone in a particular society according to the agreed justice system, which is enforced by approved legal enforcement, the court system, and sometimes monitored by the community.

Justice is fairness. Fairness is everyone getting what they deserve according to their status and deeds.

There is some variety in notions of justice here that coheres with the thesis of Alasdair MacIntyre’s study *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[[4]](#footnote-4) This classic work analyzes the meaning of justice in different traditions through Greek and subsequent Western history, starting from the Homeric notion of *dikē*. It notes the close association between the Greek idea of justice and the maintenance of order in society, with which the last of those student definitions links; dictionaries are also inclined to define justice in terms of fairness.

Neither my students’ understanding of justice nor the meanings MacIntyre traces bear much direct relationship to scriptural thinking.

In the King James Version of the Scriptures, *justice* usually translates *ṣәdāqâ* or *ṣedeq* (e.g., *ṣedeq* in Ps 89:14 [15]; 119:121); for the purposes of the present study we can treat these two Hebrew words as synonyms. But KJV’s default translation of both words is *righteousness*. It uses the word *justice* especially when the Hebrew words appear in association with the term *mišpāṭ*, for which its default translation is *judgment*. The two words thus form the hendiadys *judgment and justice* (so in the Psalms passages just noted). In the RSV, however, the default translation of *mišpāṭ* came to be *justice* and the hendiadys becomes *justice and righteousness* (again, so in the two psalms passages, and in others such as 33:5; 97:2).

This variation is instructive. KJV’s translation *judgment* corresponds to the fact that *mišpāṭ* is an action word. It signifies the taking of authoritative and decisive action by someone who has power and responsibility. It compares with the English word *government*. Someone who used the word would assume that ideally *mišpāṭ* would be exercised in a just way, like *government*, but the word itself does not make the point explicit. Indeed, Job 8:3 can refer to the perversion of *mišpāṭ*, which reflects the fact that *mišpāṭ* is not inherently a word with ethical connotations. It refers to the process whereby justice is administered, which may or may not be just. Part of the significance of its frequent accompaniment by *ṣәdāqâ* or *ṣedeq* is to make those connotations explicit. The implication is that *mišpāṭ* in itself does not mean justice, and the default English translation is misleading.

However, the KJV translation *judgment* was also misleading in a different direction, in that this English word commonly has negative connotations. And in its last occurrence in the Psalms, for instance, the implementing of *mišpāṭ* on nations and kings (149:9) is indeed bad news for them. Yet even this example presupposes that the implementing of *mišpāṭ* is generally something encouraging—here, it is good news for Yahweh’s own people. And generally *mišpāṭ* denotes a positive action, as does the verb *šāpaṭ*. So KJV’s hope that God intends “to judge the fatherless” (10:18) surely can’t be right; the psalm’s hope is rather that God intends “to champion” or “to do justice for” the fatherless (NJPS, NRSV). In KJV, the word *justice* comes in the Psalms on one other occasion that we have not yet noted (82:3), where KJV’s “do justice to the afflicted” translates that verb *šāpaṭ*. Judging or executing *mišpāṭ* implies taking positive action on someone’s behalf. In this sense, the move to the translation *justice* was a constructive one. On the other hand, the move lost touch with the fact that *mišpāṭ* and *šāpaṭ* are action words, and it gets bogged down in that fuzziness of the English word *justice*.

RSV’s move to a more consistent translation of *ṣәdāqâ*/*ṣedeq* as righteousness brought a contrary loss. Another Ethics PhD student has told me that many Christian ethicists and activists have called for justice as the primary obligation of Christian communities, often disparaging charity, generosity, or hospitality as a shield for injustice or the privatization of morality. In other words, justice needs to be a community and structural concern, not just one for individuals. Now actually, one’s commitments do need to be personal and individual. But even if one questions the ethicists’ and activists’ critique, the translation of *ṣәdāqâ*/*ṣedeq* as *righteousness* is problematic, in that it suggests a commitment within an individual’s life that might not have implications outside that life.

Actually, neither *justice* nor *righteousness* conveys the significance of *ṣәdāqâ*/*ṣedeq*. Important in this connection was the work of Hermann Cremer, who argued that *șәdāqâ* is a relational concept in the First Testament that was then influential on Paul's Greek usage, which was Cremer’s own interest.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to Cremer, *șәdāqâ* is not conformity to a norm, but the fulfilling of the demands inherent in a relationship, to which one must be true. It is in fact closer to faithfulness than to justice or righteousness.

In combination, then, *mišpāṭ* and *șәdāqâ* suggest using power and authority to take action on behalf of people to whom one is bound in faithfulness. And that is the nature of “justice” in Israel. The need for justice to be a community and structural concern actually finds expression in the combination of *mišpāṭ* and *ṣәdāqâ*/*ṣedeq*.

Now admittedly, one might question any declaration that justice is this one thing and not that other thing—namely, that it is a matter of fulfilling the demands of a relationship rather than conformity to a norm. Gerhard von Rad, who drew attention to the significance of Cremer’s work for the First Testament, pointed out that fulfilling relational demands is itself a norm.[[6]](#footnote-6) Further, the First Testament surely does treat *șәdāqâ* as a norm.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Justice is not something one can define like a tree or Australia or incarnation. Maybe if I were more postmodern I would acknowledge that there is no way of defining a tree or Australia or incarnation. But things like justice, love, community, relationship, eschatology, and apocalyptic (and violence) are even less open to being given a definition than a tree or Australia or incarnation. One needs rather to say that the kind of justice, love, community, relationship, eschatology, apocalyptic, or violence that one is talking about is *this* kind or *that* kind*.* Even more important, one has to keep reminding oneself that on another person’s lips “justice” (like love, community, relationship, eschatology, apocalyptic, or violence) is likely to mean something different from what it means on one’s own lips. It is not that the other person’s definition is wrong; it is just not the definition one is working with. In recognition of this difficulty and in order to try to keep things clear, I am inclined to avoid the words love, community, relationship, eschatology, apocalyptic, violence—and, for the most part, justice.

This point is complicated and underlined by the fact that it is possible to forget that there is a difference between words and concepts, and further complication emerges when we are talking about words in different languages. MacIntyre notes that translating *dikē* in Homer as “justice,” for instance, is quite misleading.[[8]](#footnote-8) The different words in the two languages have different meanings. Likewise, indeed, one has to keep in mind that the word “justice” does not come in the Scriptures, because the Scriptures are not written in English. Recently I noticed a scholar referring to “Paul’s understanding of the word ‘apocalyptic.’” But “apocalyptic” is an English word. Paul does not use it. Indeed, it has no Greek equivalent that he could have used. Apocalyptic is a modern European construct, not a word or even an idea that features in the Scriptures.

When we talk about “the Old Testament understanding of justice,” then, we may too simply equate this notion with its use of the words *șәdāqâ* or *mišpāṭ*, or the hendiadys *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ*, forgetting both the consideration about languages, and the consideration about words and concepts. In Hebrew, *șәdāqâ*  is a word not a concept. The First Testament does have the concept of what Cremer calls fulfillment of the demands that are inherent to a given relationship, but that concept can be present when the word *șәdāqâ*  is not used. The book of Jonah does not use the word, but the story has been suggestively described as “a parable about the nature of justice” and the relationship between justice, judgment, and mercy.[[9]](#footnote-9) Conversely, *șәdāqâ*  can be used in way that does not relate to that concept, closely if at all. All these considerations also apply to the concept of violence, the word *violence*, and the Hebrew word *ḥāmās.*

Further, it is significant that the First Testament also has a number of genres in whose context it uses a word such as *șәdāqâ* or treats a theme such as active faithfulness. The same applies to its treatment of violence. As with many issues that they deal with, the Scriptures tell stories about them, in the narratives; they issue rules about them, in the Torah; they confront people about their attitude to them and issue promises and warnings about them, in the Prophets; they reflect on them, in the Wisdom books; and they pray about them, in the Psalms. The point is not merely a formal one about genre. It has theological implications. It means the issue in question requires different sorts of articulation and different sorts of responses.[[10]](#footnote-10)

So the Scriptures tell stories about the exercise of *șәdāqâ.* Significantly, the stories often concern its non-exercise: examples are David’s dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam 12), or Ahab’s appropriation of Naboth’s vineyard by falsifying a charge against him (1 Kings 21), or the Jerusalem community’s involvement in servitude (Neh 5). Incidentally, none of these stories use *șәdāqâ* language. The Scriptures issue rules about *șәdāqâ*, in the Torah. There are top-down rules such as the laws to regulate the position of servants (who have become “slaves” in another misleading development in most recent translations) and bottom-up rules about personal behavior, in the Torah and also in Proverbs. Once again, there are rules of this kind that use *șәdāqâ*  language and rules that don’t. The Scriptures include critiques, promises, and warnings about *șәdāqâ*, especially in the Prophets, with an emphasis on *șәdāqâ* being one of God’s key characteristics. They include reflections about *șәdāqâ* , especially in Job and Qohelet. Here the striking feature is the recognition that the problem about *șәdāqâ*  is not merely that human beings fail to implement it on particular occasions. Yahweh fails to implement it for someone like Job. About Job’s own *șәdāqâ* there is no doubt; but the *șaddîq* has become a laughing stock (Job 12:4). Bildad may regard his own question about whether God perverts *șәdāqâ* as a rhetorical one, but in the book it is not self-evidently so. Further, when human beings make *șәdāqâ* their commitment, they discover that they cannot do much to put it into effect. Yahweh makes this point to Job (Job 40 - 41, spelling out a response to the question about Yahweh’s *șәdāqâ* in 40:8). Qohelet makes this same point most poignantly. He can see clearly how faithlessness occupies the place in the world that ought to be occupied by *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ*, but he can also see that efforts to change that situation are doomed to failure (Qoh 3:16—4:3).

### Advocacy

Then in the Psalms there are prayers and praises about *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ*, about the contravention of it that commonly involves violence, and about the proper violence that should therefore be associated with *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ* and should respond to such contravention.

Redress for your servants’ blood that has been poured out

should be made known among the nations, before our eyes. (Ps 79:10)

The martyrs in Revelation want to know when God will judge or make a decision (*krinō*, the equivalent of *šāpaṭ*) for them (Rev 6:9–11). When will he take redress on the people who have blood on their hands? The martyrs take up the language of the psalm. The people with blood on their hands will be the Roman superpower, though they may also include other leaders. One might have wondered whether a prayer for redress of this kind is one that God couldn’t be expected to answer positively. One might expect God or Jesus or some other heavenly voice to tell the martyrs to pray for God to forgive the people who killed them, not to pray against them. The actual response is to tell them just to rest a bit longer until the full number of the martyrs is complete. Then God will take redress, as they ask. The kind of prayer for violent redress uttered in Psalm 79 receives its positive answer.

The prayer and the promise match a story Jesus tells about a widow who kept urging a judge to give her redress against her opponent in a legal case (Luke 18:1–8). In light of the First Testament, we might picture her as someone who is being swindled or maneuvered out of her land after her husband has died. As a result, she will hardly have any way to keep going as a human being, and will have no way to maintain her proper position as a member of the chosen people with a share in the land of Israel. She will be even less fortunate than Naomi. So she is pressing a judge to take her side and give her redress. He doesn’t want to, but her plea eventually overwhelms him, and he rules for her. That story gives you a picture of God’s attitude to you, Jesus tells his disciples. His chosen people Israel are subjugated and downtrodden under the domination of a powerful empire. They are invited to pray to God day and night against their adversaries. Jesus declares that God will rule for his people and rule against the superpower. His people will have redress.

So Jesus’s disciples and the people martyred because of their commitment to him can pray in the manner of the appeals for violent action that come in a prayer such as Psalm 79.

Now if people who are oppressed don’t want to pray for justice for themselves in this way, one might not necessarily want to tell them that they should, though one might want them to think about why they don’t want to accept these invitations from God or Jesus. What of people who aren’t oppressed? Do they pray for other people who need him to intervene in their lives to bring them justice? One might want to argue with people who don’t pray in the manner of Psalm 79, on behalf of the oppressed.

Our present reflection on violence in the Psalms is a further development in a process of reflection on and appropriation of the psalms of lament or (as I prefer to call them) psalms of protest that has gone on over several decades. Many people have come to find release in the freedom that the Psalms give them in protesting to God about their pains and suffering. An amusing example is Psalm 137, which naturally horrifies with its enthusiasm at the prospect of someone smashing the Babylonians’ babies on rocks. The example makes one smile because the Babylonians became the Romans and then more recently became the modern imperial powers, and the psalm singers became the victims of the modern imperial powers. Representatives of these victims therefore sang about “The Rivers of Babylon” (discretely omitting the psalm’s closing lines) and British pop music enthusiasts sang along with them in the 1970s without realizing that the joke was on us because we ourselves were the Babylonians. In Psalm 137 singers hold before their own eyes and their people’s eyes the prospect of God’s exercise of *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ* on Babylon that will involve an exercise of a violence to counterbalance the violence shown to them when their babies were dashed on the rocks. The psalm makes no assumptions and expresses no hopes about the oppressed enacting redress themselves, which might be realism. But it also indicates that engaging in responsive violence is not key to the spirituality of the psalms that focus on violence. And it is neat to be able to note that the fall of Edom, Babylon, and the European empires happened with much less violence than might have been expected.

Many people who cry out in the Psalms’ fashion, then, not least the people who pray Psalm 137, do so in the midst of horrifying tragedy. But Westerners in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who appreciate this freedom in prayer are generally not in that position. They are people who belong to the privileged segments of the privileged nations of the world. They have food, clothes, a roof over their head, and freedom. They are indeed Babylonians rather than exiles. And again, one would not want to argue against their crying out to God in the Psalms’ way, out of the inner pain that contrasts with their outward prosperity or comfort. But for most people in the West, the psalms of protest and their reappropriation has a significance in another direction. These psalms are a key resource for the way we plead with God on behalf of the oppressed. They are an invitation to advocacy.

People who are concerned for justice are often keen on advocacy, and rightly so. But we fail the people who need justice if we are not advocating their cause with God as well as with human agencies. The psalms model a way to protest to God about other people’s oppression and suffering. Partly because news can nowadays pass with such efficiency and speed all over the world, we are relentlessly confronted by abuse and oppression from all quarters, about which we can do nothing. The Psalms are a weapon for use in this connection. To pray the Psalms may be all we can do, but it is a most powerful thing we can do, by way of calling on God not to stay aloof but to act.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Seeing the protest psalms as prayers we pray on behalf of people whom we cannot help raises a further question. Praying the Psalms for ourselves, and thus giving expression to our pain rather than keeping it inside, offers release. Indeed, people may feel that the major point about the protest psalms lies in our freedom to let it all hang out. If that is their significance, then this release would come even if God is not there. But this dynamic will not apply as we pray the Psalms for other people. When God is one whom we are urging to get involved in the world again instead of behaving like someone who has gone away or fallen asleep, it does little good if God is not a reality outside the text.

We live in a culture that risks paying more attention to its own inner experience, assumptions, agenda, and convictions than to the text, and/or uses the text as a mirror on which to project its own experience, assumptions, agenda, and convictions, and/or is interested in the text only insofar as it speaks to the agenda that we bring to it. When Karl Barth was about to leave Germany as a result of his opposition to the National Socialist government, he gave an exposition of Psalm 119:67 (entitled “Now I keep your word”) and declared, “And now the end has come. . . . So listen to my piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis, and yet more exegesis! . . . Keep to the Word, to the Scripture that has been given us.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In prayer for other people (as for oneself), we immerse ourselves in the text and believe (for instance) that when it models for us ways of praying for God to act, we use it to pray for God to act.

Justice is something humanity should be actively involved for. The Torah and Proverbs make the point and illustrate what it means, both top-down and bottom-up. But the Torah and Proverbs are realistic about what we may achieve, with the realism that becomes overwhelming in Qohelet. Some of the prophets, Jesus, and Revelation then adopt a perspective of which Qohelet would not have approved, because of the lack of evidence for it. The prophets look forward to the day of Yahweh. Jesus speaks of the day when the Son of Man comes. And the martyrs are in effect praying “Come Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20) or “Come, Lord,” *Marana tha* (1 Cor 16:22). They see the achievement of *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ* as God’s achievement on that day, which may not necessarily be related to anything we do. What we do is pray the psalms in advocating for it to come.

To pray for the coming of the day of Yahweh or for Jesus’s coming is to pray for God to bring about *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ*. That will be when prayers for justice are answered. And it will involve the exercise of violence. Paul thus associates the prayer *Marana tha* with a curse, and Jesus speaks of the Son of Man sending his angels to throw evildoers into the furnace of fire (Matt 13:42).

In the intervening period, the oppressed are encouraged to pray for the End as the time when justice will become a reality, the time when God acts in violence to punish oppressors. The friends of the oppressed will join in this prayer, as their advocates. And insofar as God answers that prayer before the final End, it will be because the final End receives one of its interim embodiments this side of the End.

Praying for the coming of Yahweh’s day or for the coming of Jesus is thus a serious prayer. And it’s a worrying prayer, because of that fact that most of the people who write and read symposia on the Psalms are not in the position of the martyrs, or in the position of a subordinate nation like the Jewish people in Jesus’ day, or in the position of a little Christian community like the ones in Laodicea and Colossae to which Revelation was written. We are more in the position of the Roman imperial superpower that controlled the everyday destiny of God’s people. We are the superpower. We are the people whom the psalms pray against, whom the widow prays against, whom the martyrs pray against. Praying for that coming is to pray for violence to be enacted against us. Whereas the prayers in the Psalms did not need to exhibit much repentance because they were the prayers of victims, our prayer has to be prayer of repentance. We cannot help it if we are members of a superpower. But we had better plead for mercy.

On that day God will indeed answer the prayer for *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ* that the elect pray. Jesus’s question is, will they be praying? One hears more people expressing their fervent concern for justice and wanting to work for justice than one hears fervent praying for justice. Such prayer might lead to a difference in our action. Yet it is important that we don’t think of prayer in utilitarian or instrumental fashion, as if prayer is designed to change us. Prayer may change us, but it is more directly designed to change God, and it needs to change God because only God can bring in the reign of justice.

### Intercession

Justice belongs to the End with a big E, and prayer for justice needs to be prayer for the End—or rather it *is* prayer for the End—and it needs to be accompanied by striving for justice. At the same time, people who affirm the faith expressed in the Scriptures not only look forward to what God will do at the End and commit themselves to justice now. They also take into account the fact that God is active now.

Psalm 72 is prayer about justice and violence. The phrase “It’s the economy, stupid” once played a key role in a presidential campaign in the United States. Its presupposition was that ordinary people are not finally much interested in foreign policy but rather in whether they are feeling financially secure. It is the basis on which they evaluate their government. The phrase also encapsulates much of the dynamic of the Arab Spring. Ordinary people wanted to put down their dictators not so much for the sake of introducing a democratic system but because they wanted jobs. It is a key feature of justice for them. Psalm 72 recognizes that fact.

God, give the king your decisions,

the royal son your faithfulness.

May he govern your people with faithfulness,

your lowly ones with your decision.

May he decide for the lowly among the people,

deliver the needy, crush the extortioner….

May he come down like rain on mowed grass,

like downpours, an overflowing on the earth….

May all kings bow down to him,

all nations serve him.

Because he saves the needy person crying for deliverance

 and the lowly person who has no helper….

From viciousness and from violence

may he restore their life….

so that people may pray to be blessed through him;

may all nations count him fortunate.

The kind of prayer that one may describe as advocacy is a form of intercession, for the needy and the oppressed. Psalm 72 embodies another form of intercession on behalf of the needy and the oppressed as it models how one may pray for the government that has the power to do something for the needy and the oppressed. It thus offers another take on prayer for people who are the victims of violence and injustice. Here, one prays for the victims of injustice and violence by praying for the government. The psalm’s assumption is that people in authority have responsibility for *mišpāṭ* *ûșәdāqâ*, and therefore their people had better pray for them. Israelite leaders gave in to the temptations of power that Samuel described (1 Sam 8), and Solomon did so more spectacularly than anyone. That fact underscores the magnificent irony in the fact that Psalm 72 is *lišәlōmōh*. It belongs to Solomon.

Covertly, Psalm 72 is a political statement to the government. I like to imagine the king showing up at worship in the temple and hearing this psalm sung by the choir, and I particularly like to think of the psalm as written for Solomon or to Solomon or about Solomon; it is the only psalm that refers to him. The Scriptures portray Solomon as the most economically successful of the kings but also as someone who puts many people to tough conscript labor, so it is nice to imagine him feeling embarrassed at the way he betrays the scriptural vision for kingship that is expressed here.

The psalm expresses a vision for kingship because that was the form of government that Israel had, but its vision applies to any form of government. It simply involves the exercise of authority or the taking of decisions with faithfulness in relation to God and to the people. Governance is thus concerned with the good of the people as a whole. If this governance has a concern for particular groups, they should be not the people who are wealthy and powerful, which includes the members of the government themselves, who are also people who can look after themselves. The government’s job is to be concerned for the lowly, the needy, and the poor, for people like the widow in Jesus’s parable, and for their protection from the vicious, the violent, and the extortioner who find ways of robbing them of their crops and animals. The people in power are in particular able to be the extortioners, so there is further bite to the psalm’s words about what people in power are supposed to be and to do.

The government thus has a threefold obligation in connection with violence. It is to be concerned to deliver and protect the actual and potential victims of violence. It is to be concerned to be willing to take action against the perpetrators of violence. And it is to be willing to use proper violence to both those ends. The temptation of governments is to operate in the opposite way: to indulge in wrongful violence, to collude with people who are wrongfully violent, and to be passive rather than active over putting down wrongful violence. The psalm confronts those temptations. But it more directly summons Israel to intercede with Yahweh for him to push the government in those directions.

Sandwiched in the midst of these emphases is the reference to the land producing well-being as an expression of God’s faithfulness, with the implication that the government’s giving priority to faithfulness and to a concern for the lowly will issue in God’s ensuring that prosperity follows for the country as a whole. The faithful will flourish. Both in governing with faithfulness and in opening up the possibility of this prosperity, the king will be like rain on the land. Also alongside this emphasis is the note about people revering God through the ages; the exercise of authority in faithfulness will be an expression of obedience to God. Foreign policy, the vision implies, will then look after itself in the same way as the flourishing of the crops does. A king who works with these justice priorities will experience the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham; foreign peoples will see the way God blesses him and will pray for similar blessings.

Indirectly, then, the psalm lays before the government God’s vision for how government should work, and it makes promises about where implementing the right priorities will lead. But directly the psalm is a prayer. Given that there is nothing in the psalm that does not also appear in the Prophets, we do not need it for its theological or ethical content. But it is unique because it is a prayer. What it directly does is set before people an agenda for prayer for the government, an activity that may be even more important than advocating with the government for the poor, the need, and the lowly.

In a book called *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms that Summon You from Self to Community*, Eugene Peterson studies the psalms as a book that is in part about how to pray for your nation.[[13]](#footnote-13) In this book he takes the view that prayer is political action. In some churches’ prayer books, the form of worship involves praying every week for governments and people in authority, and Peterson suggests that in some countries our not having collapsed into anarchy may be due more to prayer than to the police. We must not fall for what he suggests is the single most widespread misunderstanding of prayer, that it is private. If the best school for prayer continues to be the Psalms, it is significant that the book of Psalms also turns out to be an immersion in politics. In the book, he thus studies “psalms that shaped the politics of Israel” and can shape the politics of any nation. Though writing about prayer, he also notes, is not prayer; neither is reading about it. Prayer is, well—prayer.

So he suggests gathering a few friends who will commit themselves to meet together for the “unselfing” of their nation. When they meet, they will pray a psalm; discuss its application to their nation; pray it again; spend time in silence letting it soak in; and pray it a third time. They should then look for God to draw them into action. But (one might be wise again to add) they should not think that prayer is subordinate to action, or think of prayer for justice in utilitarian fashion (it would be the intercessory equivalent to thinking that the point about lament psalms is to let it all hang out). Prayer is not enough without action. But the opposite danger is to think that action is al-important, and to engage in action without its being interwoven with prayer for God to act. In being concerned for justice, the Scriptures remind readers that justice requires the activity of God and that its achievement belongs to the End with a big E. Action may achieve little if it is not accompanied by as much energy given to the kind of prayer the widow prayed and the kind of prayer the martyrs pray and the kind of prayer the Israelites prayed in the prayer about Solomon.

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2. In this paragraph and through the paper, translations of the Psalms follow John Goldingay, *The First Testament:* *A New Translation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018) and the exegesis of the Psalms follows John Goldingay, *Psalms* (3 volumes; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006, 2007, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He attributed the phrase to Bethany Hoang of the International Justice Mission. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Cremer. Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhange ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1899). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. See the critique in Charles Lee Irons, The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation, WUNT 2. Reihe 386 (Tübingen: Mohr, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Whose Justice? pp. 13–14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. So Benjamin L. Berger, “Poetry, Mercy, and the Phenomenology of Justice,” in Ehud Ben Zvi and others (eds.), *Poets, Prophets, and Texts in Play* (Francis Landy Festschrift; London/New York: Clark, 2015), pp. 175–90 (p. 178). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See John Goldingay, “Modes of Theological Reflection in the Bible,” *Theology* 94 (1991): 181–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See further John Goldingay and Kathleen Scott Goldingay, “The Sting in the Psalms,” *Theology* 117 (2014): 403–20; 118 (2015): 3–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As quoted by Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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