The Costly Loss of Old Testament Spirituality

As a manifestation of their being imbued with the Spirit, Ephesians urges people to speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, to sing and make music to the Lord, and to give thanks to God for everything (Eph 5:18-20). It goes on to urge them to pray in the Spirit, to keep on praying for all the Lord’s people, and to pray for Paul to have the words and the courage he needs in order to proclaim the revelation of the gospel (Eph 6:18-20). Whereas praise songs like Mary’s and Zechariah’s (Lk 1:46-79) and other praise songs in the New Testament indicate that the early church’s praise was not confined to the Psalms, it also indicates that it stood in their tradition and followed their models. When Ephesians speaks of psalms, then, it may not have in mind only the praise and prayer songs in the Book of Psalms, but it surely includes them. Placing Ephesians and the Book of Psalms alongside each other invites the inference that the Psalms do model the nature of worship, thanksgiving, and prayer. The implication is that we should not assume we know how to pray or that we can simply trust to the Spirit’s inspiration. The Psalms are there to guide our praise and prayer. It has been suggested that the Psalms is where Christians always learned to pray.[[1]](#footnote-1) If it was once so, the church has largely abandoned that model. When I listen to Christians pray, I hear little evidence of our praying being shaped by Scripture. We could do worse than learn from the Psalms, along with other prayers in the First Testament, in Lamentations, Ezra-Nehemiah, and elsewhere. The loss of their influence is a costly one.

# Intercession

There is other aspect of the protest psalms that has developed that troubles people and gives food for thought.

This year is the tenth anniversary of the partial genocide of the Darfuri people in Sudan, which involved the death of several hundred thousand people. Many of the Darfuri who escaped that atrocity, perhaps another two hundred thousand, fled to Chad and have been living 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 plight of the Darfuri and to take some action on their behalf. When I married Katie-Jay’s mother, Kathleen, three years ago, we started making prayer for the Darfuri part of our prayer routine. When we are home for dinner, we use the Episcopal form of prayer for early evening before we eat, and we added to it a psalm that we said on behalf of the Darfuri people. We started at the beginning of the Psalter, and simply prayed the psalms one after each other, one a day.

The idea came from my own previous experience of praying the Psalms. Before I came to the United States, I taught in a Church of England Seminary, where we were in prayer and worship every day and followed the Church of England lectionary for the reading of Scripture, and read through the Psalms one-by-one. We were not choosing a psalm to read each day on the basis of its corresponding to our current situation. We were reading (say) Psalm 47 because we read Psalm 46 yesterday and we will read Psalm 48 tomorrow. That practice made me ask what on earth we were doing, and I came to two conclusions. One was that by reading the entire Psalter we were shaping our habit of thinking about praise and prayer. The other was that in praying prayers or praises that did not correspond with 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 the psalm prayed. In other words, we were involved in intercession.

This realization provided me with an answer to another question about the Psalms that had puzzled me. It seemed obvious that the Psalms modeled the nature of supplication—of praying for oneself. But how did the Old Testament community pray for other people—how did it intercede? There are a few intercessory prayers in the Old Testament, but no explicitly intercessory prayers in the Psalter. But some of those intercessory prayers elsewhere in the Old Testament, particularly in the Prophets, pray in the first person. There, someone was praying for other people, but identifying with them, so that one did not pray for *them*, but for *us*. Intercession involved putting oneself in other people’s place. This practice fits with the fact that etymologically “intercession” links with “intervention” and involves acting as a “go-between.” Intercession implies interposing between two parties in a particular situation 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 perhaps meant that actually 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 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 pray not directly 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 features of the Psalms is then that they virtually never speak of taking violent action to put down oppressors (the major exception is some 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.[[2]](#footnote-2) I suspect that two other considerations underlie the Psalms’ stance. One is the simple practicality that the people who prayed the Psalms were often 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 and not to take action to safeguard it. The Psalms’ stance fits with that emphasis. “Praying the Psalms is an audacious act of trust.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

# Worship

I used to describe what I do on Sundays as “leading worship,” but the meaning of that expression has changed, along with the meaning of the word “awesome” (the two changes are not unrelated). Leading worship used to refer to the role of a pastor who would preside over a congregation’s praising, praying, confessing, interceding, and listening to Scripture. It now commonly refers to the role of someone who may be called a worship minister or music minister, who simply presides over and facilitates a block of singing that occupies one of the two major parts of a service—the other being the sermon.

This past Sunday the Old Testament reading prescribed by our lectionary happened to come from Jeremiah 2:

Yahweh has said this:

What wrongdoing did your ancestors find in me,

that they went far away from me?

They went after emptiness and became emptiness,

and didn’t say “Where is Yahweh,

The one who brought us up from the country of Egypt

and enabled us to go through the wilderness,

Through a country of steppe and pit,

a country of drought and deep darkness,

A country through which no one passed

and where no human being lived?”

I enabled you to come into a country of farmland

to eat its fruit and its good things.

But you came and defiled my country;

you made my possession an outrage.

The priests didn’t say, “Where is Yahweh?,”

the people controlling the Teaching didn’t acknowledge me.

The shepherds rebelled against me,

the prophets prophesied by Ba‘al

and followed beings that couldn’t achieve anything.

Therefore I shall contend with you more (Yahweh’s declaration),

and contend with your grandchildren.

Because cross over to the shores of Cyprus and see,

send off to Qedar and observe well,

see if something like this has happened.

Has a nation changed its gods,

when those are not gods?

But my people have changed my splendor

for what doesn’t achieve anything.

Be devastated at this, heavens,

shudder, be utterly desolate (Yahweh’s declaration).

Because my people have done two bad things:

they’ve abandoned me, the fountain of running water,

To dig themselves cisterns,

breakable cisterns, that can’t hold water.

People sometimes speak of the church in the United States as being in exile. That assessment seems quaint to someone from Europe—if you want to see what a church in exile looks like, look there. The church in the United States is weaker and less influential than it used to be, and it is subject to attack, but Jerusalem has not fallen yet. We are rather living at a moment like Jeremiah’s in the decades before the exile, and Jeremiah’s analysis of Judah’s situation is transferable to ours.[[4]](#footnote-4)

# What Worship Has Lost

Jeremiah asks the question, “Why are we in a reduced state, why are we a shadow of our former self?” The first reason is that they have forgotten their gospel, the good news, the story of what God did for them, the story about the God who brought them out of Egypt and gave them the land, and they have not asked where God was when things went south. The second reason is that they have given up on God’s written word. “The people controlling the Teaching, the Torah, didn’t acknowledge me,” Yahweh says. The written word of God was not shaping their relationship with God and their lives. Instead, thirdly, they have turned to other spiritual resources. They have abandoned the fountain of running water, in order to dig themselves cisterns that cannot hold water. The background to Jeremiah’s metaphor is the fact that the best water supply is a spring or a well from which people can get fresh water, but sometimes people have to make do with a tank to collect water in the winter for use during the summer. A leak in the tank then has deathly implications. How stupid to give up a spring and choose to rely on a tank, specifically a leaky tank? Yet Israel has done so in turning from Yahweh.

It happened because they thought the culture around them had the answer to their key needs, and they assimilated to the culture in their turning to Ba‘al as a deity who could meet their needs. Perhaps they continued to call God Yahweh, but they had so changed Yahweh’s nature to that of Ba‘al that in effect Ba‘al was the one they were worshiping.

Parallel factors affect the church in our context. As a church we have assimilated to our culture, and worship is a key way in which we do so, as it becomes the way we deal with our emptiness and our isolation. Worship is designed to make us feel good. The point about God is to make us feel good. So churches may give up the reading of Scripture in worship, because the reading of Scripture is not very engaging. Likewise they may give up much reference to the gospel story, because those events happened a long time ago, and don’t look as if they speak directly to people’s lives. So it is possible to go through a whole worship service without hearing any reference to the gospel events – to the way God created the world, delivered Israel, sent Jesus to live and die for us, and raised him from the dead. As Israel had forgotten the gospel and given up on God’s written word because it was so concerned with its personal needs, so it has happened to us.

What we need is to be brought out of ourselves by seeing our lives set in the context of a bigger picture, a bigger story, the gospel story (in the context of this book, it will be clear that by the gospel story I mean the whole story that comes to a climax in Jesus but that is not confined to his story). Yet we are so overwhelmed by our emptiness, isolation, and insignificance that we don’t pay attention to this bigger story. All we want inside church as outside church is to think about ourselves in our need. So we turn God into someone whose focus is on meeting those needs. In worship we use many of the same words our forebears used, the words God and Lord and Jesus, but the content we read into them comes from the contemporary context. We are scratching where we itch. But when people have a serious itch, they need more than scratching to put it right. We are trying to short-circuit the process whereby God gives content and meaning to our lives. We make God a quick fix for our needs. But quick fixes don’t work. The only fix that works is the gospel story and the Scriptures where we find that story. But in worship we have given up on those.

We have devised a religion to enable us to give expression to our individual sad selves and we hope it will make us feel better, but it doesn’t do so. We leave worship just as sad as when we arrived. We think that more of the same is the solution. If we make the worship livelier, it will work. But we’re trying to get a drink from a tank with no water. We have focused on our immediate felt needs and given up on the gospel story that made us what we are. We are focused on me, rather than on God, on Scripture, on the church, on the gospel, and on our calling on God. We have assimilated to the culture, as Israel did, and forgotten the big picture. We think the gospel is just about me and God—especially about me. The worship the Psalms commend and model is one that focuses on God.

# Testimony

Once every month or so, I sit in front of the congregation instead of preaching, we re-read one of the Scripture lessons together, and I ask people whether there was a verse that jumped off the page for them (our congregation numbers only thirty or forty, so it is a practicable procedure). The second passage of Scripture that we read in church last Sunday came from Hebrews 13, and we looked at this passage together. Almost before I had asked the question about what had jumped off the page, a woman came out with some lines from this chapter that happen to be mostly taken up from Deuteronomy 31 and Psalm 118:

He has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”… Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

We knew the tough year she had been through as the victim of abuse and fraud. Our knowledge gave great power to her testimony about God’s presence with her and God’s proving that she did not need to be afraid. It is the kind of testimony that builds up the trust of other people in a congregation. We do have a time every week in worship when people have chance to give thanks for things, but ironically, they rarely produce such testimony at that time. Yet when there is something special to testify to, it comes out.

The woman’s testimony fulfills the function of testimony psalms such as Psalm 30. They are usually termed thanksgiving psalms, and they do give thanks, but they characteristically interweave thanksgiving addressed to God with testimony addressed to the other people in the congregation. They commonly tell a story along the lines of the one presupposed by that woman’s testimony, a story of how things were okay and how thing collapsed one way or another and how the person prayed and how God answered. It might see puzzling that Ephesians 5:19 speaks of singing to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, but perhaps one clue to the rationale for such a way of speaking comes here. Our worship, and specifically our thanksgiving, addresses other people as well as God. It builds them up.

There Is a paradoxical or ironic extra comment to be made about praise and testimony. Israelite worship was costly. Whereas we can go to church with empty hands and expect to leave having received something, Israelites often went to worship taking a lamb from their flock or a bull from their herd. A wise Jebusite who saw which way the wind was blowing when David showed up at his threshing floor offered David the threshing floor as a gift so that David could build a sanctuary there, but David declined, declaring, “I will not offer up to Yahweh my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing” (1 Chron 21:24). Christians are inclined to think that their no longer having any obligation to offer sacrifices to God marks their faith as superior to that of the Old Testament. At the very least, things are more complicated than that inferences implies. Ironically, Jeremiah (like other prophets) told people that Yahweh loathed their sacrifices—they thought that sacrifices pleased God whether or not their lives outside worship matched who Yahweh is. In our context, Jeremiah’s message would be the opposite. He would be expecting us to find ways of offering God worship that cost us something.

# Protest and Confession

The phrase I use as the title of this chapter comes from an article on “The Costly Loss of Lament.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1945, a nineteen-year-old German soldier called Jürgen Moltmann was taken prisoner by the British and eventually placed in a camp in Sherwood Forest, not far from where I used to teach, where the Nottingham YMCA set him going on the theological study which eventually took him to being one of the great twentieth-century theologians. Having lived through the horrors of the Second World War, the collapse of an empire and its institutions, and the guilt and shame of their nation, many German prisoners collapsed inwardly and gave up all hope, some of them dying. “The same thing almost happened to me,” Moltmann says, were it not for a “rebirth to a new life” which turned Christian faith into reality rather than formality. The experience of misery and forsakenness and daily humiliation gradually built up into an experience of God.

It was the experience of God’s presence in the dark night of the soul: “If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.” A well-meaning army chaplain had given me a New Testament. I thought it was out of place. I would rather have had something to eat. But then I became fascinated by the Psalms (which were printed in an appendix) and especially by Psalm 39: “I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred” (but the German is much stronger—”I have to eat up my grief within myself”)... Hold thou not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.” These psalms gave me the words for my own suffering. They opened my eyes to the God who is with those “that are of a broken heart.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

I am not sure I believe that the Psalms were really the place where people always used to learn to pray; certainly it has not been the case in my lifetime. They invite us (as someone put it) to let church be the place where you can talk about things that you cannot talk about anywhere else, but I wonder whether we are more inclined to view church as a place where we can shut those things outside for an hour (but then discover that they are still real when we leave church). In a great scene in a movie or sitcom a while ago, a rather dumb girl was telling another girl about a problem. Her friend asked her if she had told her therapist about the problem. “Oh no, it’s personal,” she replied. She hadn’t got the point about therapy in a way that we often don’t get a point about church. The Psalms invite Israel to get this point about their prayer in the temple, or in their local sanctuary or in their homes ( most Israelites lived too far away from Jerusalem to pray there, so I guess they prayed in those other contexts).

The significance of the psalms of lament or psalms of protest (which seems to me a better description) has come home to many people over the past twenty or thirty years, and they have found some freedom in prayer and protest. Admittedly I am concerned by a couple of aspects of this development. It is an odd feature of the Psalms of prayer that they rarely focus on the waywardness of the person praying. If they talk about a failure to keep covenant commitment, it is likely to be God’s failure, not ours. They assume that in order to pray the way they do, people need to be able to claim that they are basically committed to God’s ways, and this claim can make us feel uncomfortable. We are more sued to being pressed to acknowledge that we are sinners. Yet if it is not the case that our lives are characterized by a basic commitment of this kind, it is that fact that we need to talk to God about (and that fact rather than the minor peccadilloes that we may be willing to acknowledge).

# Praying Against the Superpower

The imprecatory Psalms, then, provide people who are 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 includes the awareness 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. Joseph takes that stance. Thus Zephania Kameeta’s reworked version of Psalm 137, prayed in the midst of Namibia’s struggle for independence from South Africa, asks that the apartheid system may be smashed on the rock, but not that white South African politicians may have that experience.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It may then be the responsibility of people who care about the victims of wrongdoing and who care about the vindication of right in the world to pray for God to put wrongdoers down and deliver their victims. The imprecatory psalms are for us to pray, who are not victims. Indeed, if we do not want to pray them, it raises questions about the shallowness of our own spirituality, theology, and ethics. Do we not want to see wrongdoers put down and punished?

One reason for our not wanting to see it happen 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 Raatafarians.

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 given 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.”[[8]](#footnote-8) “Babylon” comes to mean the West and its economic system.

The most notorious imprecatory Psalm is 137. The reggae version of this psalm is called “Rivers of Babylon”; it actually omits the closing verses that Western Christians find offensive. 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, and 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 of course 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 later)—we British 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 and if God listened and responded.

Christians commonly justify their opposition to the use of such Psalms by suggesting that these psalms 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 (e.g., John 2:17; Acts 1:20), which as a whole is more extensively imprecatory. Further, Revelation 6:10 reports an imprecatory prayer on the part of 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 will soon come. Since it has not done so, 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 declares curses on various people (1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9).[[9]](#footnote-9) 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…. 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.

There are many dangers in allegorical interpretation, and Lewis here illustrates several of them. Its problem is usually not that it leads us to make declarations that are in themselves 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 Scripture, in order rather to focus on something that we are more interested in, 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* in the 1950s, the decade when people from different parts of the British Empire (not least Jamaica) were being encouraged to immigrate into Britain to drive buses, work in factories, staff hospitals, and so on. Lewis’s book thus came out two years before the speech in South Africa by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan about the “wind of change” blowing through Britain’s empire in Africa. 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), but an allegorical interpretation of the psalm avoids these implications.

The other scholar is David C. Steinmetz. In a classic text for the 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, 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.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Steinmetz’s comments stimulate several comments. 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 can easily become 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. The point applies also to the inclination to read a modern concern with non-violence and peacemaking into Jesus’ agenda.

# Prayer and Ethics

The problem with allegorical interpretation is usually not what it says but what it fails to say. A Christian who undertakes allegorical interpretation is 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 also to prevent the text from saying something that conflicts with that understanding.[[11]](#footnote-11)

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 readers into the shoes of other people in an emotional and not merely a rational way, (d) help readers identify themselves as perpetrators, (e) do so by sneaking up on readers rather than relating to them as if they were people taking part in a court of law or even as people listening to a story, (f) give readers a way of expressing their desire for redress, (g) give readers a way of seeking redress without actually taking action, (h) nevertheless give readers God’s point of view on their lives, and (i) show readers a path from anguish to healing.

The paper does not confine itself to the imprecatory psalms, but these psalms do illustrate those insights particularly forcibly. My own two chief points were first, that 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, but just as crucial when we *are* in a position to do something, because they remind us that what we do is not decisive. And then second, that 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 mouth, we are yoked to moral principles and concerns that come from beyond us. They 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 them out, 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. Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 50. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together/Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 53-58.\* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It has been argued that the Essenes were pacifist, but the chief evidence seems to be Philo’s that they were not involved in the manufacture of weapons (*Quod omnis probus liber sit* 78): see Joan E. Taylor, “Philo of Alexandria on the Essenes,” *The Studia Philonica* *Annual* 19 (2007), pp. 1-28 (p. 15), where she also notes that Josephus (*Jewish War* 2.125) says that the Essenes carried weapons for self-protection, which implies they were not pacifist. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Augsburger, “Foreword,” in Daniel M. Nehrbass, *Praying Curses* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), pp. ix-xii (p. x). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This section on Jeremiah adapts material from my paper “As a Commentator, One Might Ask, ‘What Would Jeremiah or John Say?” to appear in a Festschrift in 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995, pp. 98-111); the phrase was taken up by Rolf Jacobson, “The Costly Loss of Praise,” *Theology Today* 57 (2000), pp. 375-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences of God* (London: SCM, 1980), pp. 6-9. I have adapted these teo paragraphs from my *Praying the Psalms* (Bramcote, UK: Grove, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Zephania Kameeta, *Why, O Lord?* (Geneva: WCC, 1986), p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Tuning Hebrew Psalms to Reggae Rhythms,” *Cross Currents* 50 (2000-1), pp. 525-40 (p. 528). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See further Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 137-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” in *Theology Today* 37 (1980), pp. 27-38 (pp. 29-30, 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM/New York: Harper, 1966), pp. 108-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)