

Violent Vengeance in the Psalms: Can It Possibly Preach?

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"I can't preach that!" Who can read a prayer for God to bash some babies' heads and not be struck with horror? How did these things get in the canon, anyway? Both the Old and New Testaments are peppered with texts which are difficult to confront. While the problematics are varied, perhaps the largest group consists of those passages which seem to exclude certain groups or individuals from a full and good relationship with God. There are examples throughout the entire Bible, but the most consistent and pointed expression of the human desire to separate the sheep from the goats comes in the book of Psalms. References to the enemies of God's people pervade the collection, and in many instances, calls for their destruction or rejoicing over their downfall are explicit and graphic, as in Psalms 109 and 137. The result is that certain Psalms are regarded as objectionable because they do not seem to point to a "preachable kingdom."¹ Against the background of a pluralistic age, it is especially difficult for people convinced about the ubiquitous efficacy of God's great love to entertain the possibility that the Lord might choose some to the exclusion of others, or even wreak vengeance on some at the request of others. Thus, the offensive texts are either ignored altogether in preaching and liturgy, or stripped of their most polemical elements.²

The theme of God's punishment and destruction of enemies crosses every category commonly recognized by Psalms scholars. While enemies are a preoccupation of the individual laments, divine wrath is also invoked in communal laments and royal psalms. Even Brueggemann's functional category of psalms of disorientation is not broad enough to include all the key examples, because rejoicing over judgments already carried out is also found, again in the royal psalms, and in various hymns of thanksgiving. It is possible, however, to define a content-based group of "destruction of enemy" psalms in which a principle theme is God's victory over the foes of God's people, and in which divine action is explicitly cited,³ rather than having a bad end appear as the natural, assumed outcome of wickedness.⁴

The exact root of the apparent squeamishness about dealing with the psalms of destruction is not certain. Very likely, it stems from hesitation to worship a God who can be portrayed as withholding the effects of divine grace from anyone, since that could result in that inscrutable Justice putting the wrong people (us!) on the outside. Reluctance to assign to the Lord violent actions born of human hatred may also be operating. These psalms do not merit this kind of reaction. Rather than representing arbitrary judgments or disproportionate punishment by God, they portray blatant human wilfulness in defiance of the Lord's righteousness. Nothing happens to the enemies which

they did not bring on themselves by their mockery and intentional scornfulness against righteousness, as represented by God's chosen people. Pleas for violent vengeance are affirmations of faith in God's ultimate power to eliminate every last vestige of evil; human efforts will be insufficient, so the matter is turned over to God.

Responsible reading of the Psalms requires sympathy for the deep human reality they seek to portray. This is especially true where the specter of the enemies is evoked. The people who cry out here ". . . are mad as hell and are not going to take it anymore."⁸ They have faith bold enough to call on God by name, and they expect a response.⁹ The psalm writers simply ". . . will not tolerate a faith in which human well-being is not honored. They are impatient with any God who thinks or acts otherwise."⁷ There is no pie in the sky spirituality here. If the Chosen People with whom God has made covenant are feeling pushed around, then they are going to make some definite suggestions about what the Deity ought to do to fix it! The utter destruction called for in Psalm 109, for example, is thus no less human than cries for the execution of a mass murderer. Even those adamant against penal killing may find desperate emotions within themselves in certain cases, and these psalms give voice to those very emotions, honestly and freely. The action urged may be immoral and inhumane, but the presence of the emotion is undeniably human. The Psalmists are convinced that to attempt to hide any human feeling from the Mighty One belittles both the divine-human relationship, and the power and searching knowledge of the Lord.

To find in the destruction psalms only a violently honest outpouring of human emotion would be to sell them short. The Psalms as a whole are not primarily about the spiritual feelings or experience of Israel, but rather about the glorification of God's name in everything.⁸ These are not simply the cries of people yearning for their own survival. Here are desperate words to convey a plea to God to continue a relationship ordained not in human hearts, but by Godself, for good. Both that dynamic and the nature of the enemies who threaten God's covenant people are crucial to understanding the psalms of destruction. Covenant is critical. Israel simply does not exist apart from the Lord's choosing. Adonai is unquestionably the God of Israel, in an inseparable bond. The Psalms still hold the Lord's mighty deliverance in the exodus to the foundational.⁹ The cornerstone of that liberating relationship is the point from which the rest of history is measured.¹⁰ Moreover, Israel understands itself to be the human representation of the Lord's desire for righteousness, so that an attack on the Chosen People is an attack against God's own being.

The identity of the enemies who threaten God's people is never made specific. The Psalms have enduring power partly because they are never so particular about details as to prevent identification with their emotional content. With very few exceptions, their specificity is limited to describing the kinds of people who interact with the Lord, and the nature of the Lord's response. Historical references are seldom used. It is clear, however, that the enemies evoked in the Psalms are real human beings. Whether they are the national foes of the royal psalms, or individual adversaries found in personal laments, they are portrayed as subject to particularly human kinds of punishment.¹¹ Just as Israel

understands itself as representing God's righteousness, so these very human enemies also take on dimensions of evil much larger than their own finite natures. They "... present a picture of the utmost degree of godlessness and violent evil..."¹² Some have held that the words generally translated as "evil doers" (*po'eley awen*)¹³ mean to portray something so sinister as the practice of magic and the occult against the workers of God's righteousness. While this may be extreme, it is clear that the enemies are meant to be portrayed with "... eerie, demonic attributes."¹⁴ From the perspective of human attempts at righteousness, such an enemy is one who "... to my horror is engaged before my very eyes in the performance of objective unrighteousness. ... the enemy attains BEFORE GOD a stature which is almost absolute. ..."¹⁵

The Israel of the Psalms sees itself as the potential casualty of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. The God of Sinai is good, and trusted as the ultimate victor. The adversaries of God's people are seen as the human representation of the cosmic forces of evil. In the destruction psalms, Israel vents its fears that the battle is going the wrong way. This is not merely anxiety over self-preservation. If Adonai's righteous representatives are destroyed, the question of Adonai's existence will be moot. Not only will it be doubted whether this deity is worthy of praise, but the only people who were dedicated to glorifying this God will be gone. Just as Israel does not exist apart from the Lord, Israel has a sense that it proclaims before the nations who God is, and apart from that proclamation, God's glory may very well be forgotten.¹⁶

It is important to understand that the deep passion of the Psalms is not initially for Israel as such, but rather for the righteous, and for the poor and needy.¹⁷ Israel became identified with God's redeeming choice when the enslaved Hebrews were liberated from Egypt, and sees the identification continuing in its own attempts at righteousness. The Psalms acknowledge that the Chosen People may still slip from their high place if they forget just what God did for them and why.¹⁸

It is also important to understand just how Israel conceives righteousness. It is this concept of how one stands before God which enables God's people to call out for vindication and vengeance in Psalm 137, even in full knowledge that the setting for the Psalm was exile imposed on them as divine judgment.¹⁹ Righteousness is not measured by degrees of adherence to the Law, and is not generally to be equated with innocence. Instead, it comes from appearing honestly before God and confessing one's guilt, whereupon God may elect to bestow righteousness. Therefore, "... one should no longer speak of *assertions* of innocence, but logically of *confessions* of innocence."²⁰ This matter of standing honestly before the judgment of the Most High is so critical that the Psalms put it in a kind of "... supernatural illumination ... the either-or of good or evil: *either* someone is perfectly righteous, *or* godless—with all that means."²¹ The claim of righteousness is not a matter of moral self-aggrandizement,²² but rather, a grateful response to the steadfast mercy (*hesed*) of the Mighty One.

It is a sign of the greatness of the divine mercy that the division between the righteous and the wicked seems so absolute. No matter how horrendous the offense, the Chosen People find mercy and righteousness again and again when they recognize their guilt and confess it. When their prayers invoke God's

wrath on their enemies, it is, again, not a matter of moral self-valuation or personal affront leading to a labelling of the foes as godless.

It is only through the word pronounced in the cult, proclaiming the will of God as it has already been revealed in the sacred history of the nation, and bringing it to each individual, that [one] recognizes these enemies as 'absolute' evil-doers hated by God [God]self, and it is not till then that [one] recognizes the mortal danger which they represent for [one]. It is only this same authoritative word—and *not*, therefore, [one's] own moral self-valuation—which shows [one] that [one] is a righteous [person], in the complete and absolute sense of which the Psalms speak.²³

One of the enduring issues in Psalms research is over the differences in origin and intention between the "individual" and "communal" psalms. Certainly the question of the relation of the Psalms to Israel's cultic practice will continue to affect this discussion. Without settling those larger concerns decisively, it is fair to say about the psalms of destruction something that could be said almost in general. Surely part of the reason that the Psalms are so lacking in historical and personal specificity is to allow the broadest possible identification with their concerns and emotions. The concerns of the whole of God's people may be appropriated to some extent as the concerns of each individual believer, and vice versa. This principle is illustrated by the hymn, "Amazing Grace," whose lyric is devoid of historical or personal references, even though the hymn is linked very directly to the mid-voyage conversion of a slave ship captain. The result is that hosts of Christians have adopted the hymn as one of their favorites, finding it highly descriptive of their own lives. Seen in this way, it does not much matter what the particular offenses of any of the enemies in the Psalms are, or whether the conflicts concern individuals or whole nations. The basic, underlying concern is the challenge to God's glory which is borne in any threat against God's own people.

Psalms 109 and 137 are probably the most graphic and pointed of the destruction of enemy psalms. They are notable for their complete unwillingness to preserve any humane regard for the adversaries. Yet the closing verses of 137 bring the key dynamics underlying this genre to a climax, and should be understood in that way. To impute happiness to one who dashes children against rocks seems utterly inhumane, but that is precisely the point. The Psalmist is concerned here not primarily with the human substance of the enemies, but with the continuing cosmic evil which they represent. Israel has sometimes known of punishments affecting several generations of progeny, and has also seen in itself worrisome backsliding which could be redeemed only by God's continuing mercy. The wish here is that the generations of wickedness might be destroyed forever. The annihilation of the children of Israel's enemies would be symbolic of Adonai's ultimate victory over the forces of evil.²⁴

In addition to portraying the great struggle for Adonai's glory, the Psalms serve an important socio-psychological function which is particularly helpful in interpreting the destruction psalms. Words have immense power to shape worlds, and even more so if the words are carefully crafted together. This creative power of language is why totalitarian regimes "... are most fearful of the

poet.”²⁶ Rather than perpetuating pietistic and politically subservient other-worldly spirituality, the Psalms, properly understood, are “. . . subversive literature. They break things loose. They disrupt and question.”²⁶ The Psalms together serve as a kind of polemical, world-making doxology which “. . . asserts ‘this world and no other,’ ‘this God and no other.’” “. . . Israel sings that the world of justice, mercy, equity, righteousness, peace is the real world, even if not yet available in a polity.”²⁷ What Brueggemann writes about Second Isaiah is also helpful in understanding Psalm 137, written sometime after the end of the Babylonian Exile.

. . . this poet knows that homecoming is possible only when the powerful grip of Babylon on the imagination of Israel is overcome. To cause the nullification of such a powerful grip on imagination, a social scientific analysis is neither needed nor effective. What is needed is imaginative, liturgic world-making that enacts a world more credible than the world of the empire.²⁸

In this way, the destruction of enemy psalms serve forcefully to strengthen the conviction of the Chosen People that the God of Sinai will be the ultimate victor over wickedness and vindicator of righteousness. To be apart from this God is to be ultimately separated from life.

The destruction psalms carry a very sharp double-edged sword. Just as they proclaim to the nations “Our God and no other,” so they have elements which serve as sobering reminders to the Chosen People that God chose them, and not vice versa, and that ultimately it is God who dictates the terms of righteousness and judgment.²⁹ Psalm 106 shows this awareness clearly. Even Psalm 137, directed primarily against the Babylonians, gives evidence of the understanding that certain things are required of the Lord’s people to bear witness to God’s primacy even in circumstances where the Mighty One’s providence is sorely doubted. The implication should be reinforced: at some deep level, the Psalms understand that the passion and providence of God are for the poor and needy, and for justice and righteousness, and not for the genetic descendants of the exodus. They try to shape the world according to those terms.

Finally, proper interpretation of the destruction of enemy psalms requires recognition that in every case, the desire for vengeance is handed over to God. Either the Lord’s victory over the foes is celebrated as already accomplished, or the urgent desire for relief is raised up. In no case do the people pray about accomplishing vengeance by their own devices. There is no credit taken for battles won, or plea for permission to avenge wrongs. The full range of “. . . rage and bitterness is *yielded to God’s wisdom and providential care.*”³⁰ It is a move of faith and confessing righteousness³¹ to present this bitter vindictiveness to the Lord, and not directly to the enemies. Thus “. . . the cry for vengeance is not resolved. The rate is not removed. But it has been dramatically transformed by the double step of *owning* and *yielding.*”³² “The real theological problem . . . is not that vengeance is *there* in the Psalms, but that it is *here* in our midst. . . . The Psalms do ‘tell it like it is’ with us.”³³ God should not be blamed for these vile imaginings of human hearts. Neither should their writers

be blamed, but rather praised, for the depth of faith which dares to offer such deep human emotion up to the Lord as honest confession, rather than playing Titan against Titan³⁴ by launching at the enemy rockets fueled by this hot slime from our souls.

When interpretation moves to the point of preaching on the psalms of destruction, squeamishness will not be helpful; honesty will. It should be less than difficult for the preacher to identify emotions parallel to their vengefulness in a contemporary congregation. The greater struggle will be to avoid the "wagging finger" syndrome. The feelings which propel the graphic violence of some of the Psalms have neither vanished nor changed in the intervening centuries, but continue as part and parcel of human nature. The other continuing factor is the threat of enemies who can diminish our own glorification of God. Some enemies may seek to woo the affections of the faithful, coercing apparently trivial compromises: it would have been easy enough, after all, for the Exiles to sing some of the old-time hymns for their captor's amusement. Other foes may present more direct threats of destruction, whether through loss of personal resources or by attacking the community as a whole in some way. The final key to sermons on this sort of text will be to evoke a response parallel to the Psalms' outpouring to God. While the weaponry of the twentieth century A.D. is much more potent than King David's arsenal, the emotional impulses to use or restrain it are no different. One might illustrate, for example, that while the NATO powers and the Warsaw Pact nations did pose a degree of military threat to one another over many years, the jingoistic psychology of the Cold War years erected a much greater obstacle to righteousness than any missile in anybody's silo. The critical, and often overlooked, movement of the destruction of enemy psalms is this yielding of vengeance to God, and this will have to be the driving idea behind the sermons they spawn. There will be no "que sera, sera," spiritual resignation, but rather, an honest assessment of who may legitimately exercise which powers. The greatest faith finally yields all powers to the Lord, and trusts that God will ultimately keep covenant in God's own way.

NOTES

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1982), 63. In this regard, Brueggemann cites Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966, 67), 232-3.

² A brief survey of sermon collections and general works on the Psalms revealed a severe paucity of references especially to 109 and 137; and the funeral service in the Presbyterian *Worshipbook* (1972) omits vv. 19-22 from Psalm 139.

³ The type clearly includes Psalms 3, 5, 9, 17, 18, 35, 83, 94, 109, 110, and 137. Others which might be included are 7, 21, 28, 107, 139, 140, 144.

⁴ E.g., 1:4ff., 20:7-8, 141:10.

⁵ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 13.

⁸ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 13.

⁹ 105:43; 114:1; 136:11, 14, 21; etc.

¹⁰ Kraus, 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹² Cristoph F. Barth, *Introduction to the Psalms*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 46.

¹³ 5:5; 6:8; 14:4; 28:3; 36:12; 59:2; 92:7, 9; 94:4, 14; 101:8; 141:4, 9.

¹⁴ Kraus, 131-3, where he discusses Mowinckel's finding of magic and occult powers in the enemies in *Psalmen Studien I*. (Oslo, 1921), 1-58. Cf. Kraus, 135.

¹⁵ Kraus, quoting Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 471-2.

¹⁶ E.g., 79:9-10; 106:8-12, 47.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 64, 74-5. See Ps. 94:1, 3, 6; 9:18; 12:5-7; 34:6; 35:10; cf. Lk. 1:51-3; 4:18-9.

¹⁸ Psalms 78, 106.

¹⁹ While this suggests that Psalm 137 must have had a Judean origin, "Israel" will continue to be used here and throughout in its more inclusive sense.

²⁰ C. Barth, 40-2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, in *The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 796.

²⁵ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁹ Cf. Brueggemann's discussion of the role of the king vis-a-vis the Psalmic liturgy, *Israel's Praise*, 55-87.

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 71.

³¹ See discussion of righteousness above, 5-6.

³² Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, *loc. cit.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁴ Cf. Kraus, 133, quoting K. Barth, *Romans*, 471-2.