

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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## The Psalms: Popular and Troubling

In Psalm 58, the psalmist petitions God for a vividly violent display of His wrath. He asks God to "break the jaws" and teeth of his adversaries, and writes that the righteous man will "wash his feet in the blood of the wicked." In his commentaries to the psalms, Renaissance theologian John Calvin admits that the psalmist's invocation in 58 seems to lack mercy. However, he reminds his readers that "there is nothing absurd in supposing that believers, under the influence and guidance of the Holy Ghost, should rejoice in witnessing the execution of divine judgments."

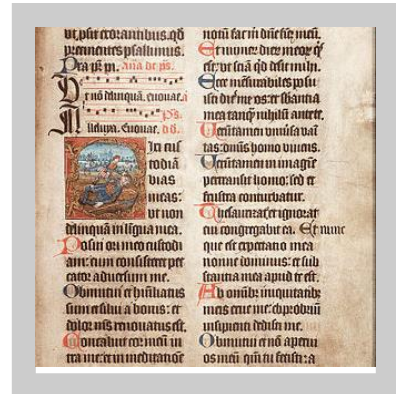
Furthermore, Calvin stresses that those who feel "cruel satisfaction" when they witness the destruction of their enemies are possessed not by holy zeal, but by "unholy passions of hatred, anger, or impatience, inducing an inordinate desire of revenge." However, those who are truly filled with a righteous spirit receive the "fruit" of God's wrath: it is therefore "only natural that they should rejoice to see it inflicted, as proving the interest which God feels in their personal safety."

Here, Calvin draws a distinction between the "unholy passions" of human beings and what he elsewhere refers to as the "pure and well-regulated" anger inspired by the Holy Spirit. Because the psalmist is unquestionably a vessel for the Holy Spirit, his words are not blasphemy, but righteousness. In taking such pains to explain this to readers, however, Calvin necessarily admits how easily one might mistake the psalmist's holy anger for the sinful human variety. Calvin thus also recognizes the perils of misconstruing the psalmist's satisfaction in bathing in his enemies' blood.

This sort of reveling is permissible to the psalmist, because his main concern is God's glory. Those distracted by more personal concerns are in danger of "inducing an inordinate desire of revenge."

The ease with which one might misappropriate this psalm is, in fact, what made the psalms themselves so popular. In the preface to his commentary on the psalms, Calvin describes the Psalter—the Biblical book of Psalms—as "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul" because "there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror." The psalms are, Calvin argues, such a rich source of inspiration because they reflect the breadth of human emotion, providing prayers appropriate for times of joy, despair, glory, shame, and anger. It was this wide appeal that led to a massive dissemination of vernacular translations of the psalms.

Nearly every major writer of the English Renaissance penned translations of Psalms, including Thomas Wyatt, the Earl of Surrey, George Wither, Sir John Oldham, Sir Philip Sidney, Sir John Harington, King James I, and John Milton, just to name a few.



Among these psalms, some of the most popular—and, most troubling—have been the ones like Psalm 58: the imprecatory or "cursing" psalms. Often filled with vividly violent language, the imprecatory psalms implore God to barrage the psalmist's enemies with His wrath. Although heathen nations such as Babylon are a frequent target, the psalmist sometimes has more specific concerns. Psalm 55, for example, is a bit more personal, as the psalmist asks the Lord to "let death seize" a friend who has betrayed him.

The main concern most Christians have with these psalms is, of course, that they seem quite antithetical to Christ's commands to love and forgive enemies. For centuries, theologians attempted to reconcile Christ's teachings with the imprecatory psalms in a variety of ways. Some translators softened the language, while others interpreted the violence allegorically or simply deleted the most brutal lines. Notwithstanding these efforts to sanitize the psalmist's words, the imprecatory psalms

serve as evidence that God accepts prayers of anger and calls for vengeance just as He accepts prayers of praise, thanksgiving, or supplication. It is perhaps this legitimization of revenge that made the imprecatory psalms so well-received by the early moderns. The vogue for revenge plays, coupled with the political and religious turmoil of the time made prayers for vengeance quite appealing.

The danger, then, lay not in the wrath itself, but in the universal applicability of these psalms. Although theoretically only "righteous" anger is warranted, who could help but read himself into the psalmist's situation? The psalmist's problems are not just with heathen nations, but with deceitful friends, slanderous rivals, flattering courtiers, and unjust authority figures. Any reader could feel justified in praying for his own enemies to be flung into pits or eaten by lions. And, if the Lord is slow in exacting vengeance, one might perhaps then feel justified to help speed things along. Unlike other parts of the Bible, the psalms are explicitly human language—they are meant to be prayed or sung by human beings to the Lord. Furthermore, unlike other Biblical texts, the psalms are a unilateral conversation; readers see the prayers, but not the Lord's replies. This one-sidedness creates another array of problems for interpreting the imprecatory psalms. Without God's response, the psalmist's anger is sanctioned for both himself and the reading audience. Moreover, there is no differentiation between divine wrath and human anger. There is ample evidence elsewhere in scripture that God is angered by injustice, but the psalms presume that He is angered by the private indignities suffered by one man rather than the irreverence of heathen nations or the transgressions of the Israelites. In Psalm 59, for example, the psalmist exclaims: "God will let me see my desire upon my enemies." In this sense, the psalms are anthropopathic, as they suppose the Lord feels the same way the psalmist feels. This assumed homogeneity between heaven's reaction and one man's response to personal injustice could—and did—create a variety of moral and religious dilemmas when it came to exacting personal vengeance in the Renaissance.

1) This passage would most likely be found in

- A. the text of a website that features daily prayers or inspirational passages
- B. an encyclopedia article about Psalms
- C. a biography about John Calvin
- D. a scholarly journal about religion
- E. a Christian-interest magazine

- 2) According to the passage, John Calvin reconciles the psalmist's violent desires with traditional Christian theology by arguing that
- I. Christians should feel joy when God enacts righteous judgment upon the wicked
  - II. the righteous will not be motivated by intemperate cruelty, but by holy zeal
  - III. when God inflicts harm upon an enemy, the righteous can believe that God is personally interested in their well-being
- A. I only
  - B. II only
  - C. I and II only
  - D. II and III only
  - E. I, II, and III
- 3) Paragraph 2 functions primarily to
- A. provide further explanation and analysis of the ideas presented in the first paragraph
  - B. suggest an alternate interpretation to the psalm that counters many of Calvin's arguments
  - C. inform readers about the historical context that informed the composition of Calvin's commentaries
  - D. discredit Calvin's argument by claiming that Calvin was motivated by "unholy passions"
  - E. highlight a few logical inconsistencies in Calvin's argument, but reaffirm the validity of his major points
- 4) As used in paragraph 3, which is the best synonym for **dissemination**?
- A. censoring
  - B. destruction
  - C. circulation
  - D. misunderstanding
  - E. overestimation
- 5) In Psalm 137, the psalmist asks God to dash the heads of Babylonian children against rocks. All of the following would constitute an example of a writer attempting to "sanitize" this psalm as discussed in paragraph 5 EXCEPT for which one?
- A. In his translation of Psalm 137, John Oldham adds the lines: "their Skulls and Bones shall pave thy Streets all o'er / And fill thy glutted Channels with their scattr'd Brains & Gore."
  - B. In his commentary on Psalm 137, St. Augustine writes that the Babylonian children symbolize "evil desires at their birth."

- C. Edwin Sandys' translation substitutes the words "cursed seed" for the word "children."
- D. One anonymous translator of this psalm removes any mention of violence against children.
- E. In his commentary on this psalm, Calvin argues that the children of Babylon represent forces that oppress the righteous.

6) As used in the final paragraph, which is the best antonym for **homogeny**?

- A. anger
- B. difference
- C. confusion
- D. collaboration
- E. misinterpretation

7) In the final paragraph, the author argues that the unilateral—one-sided—nature of the imprecatory psalms makes interpretation potentially dangerous, because

- A. there are no similar examples in scripture of God being angered by injustice
- B. an early modern audience could not understand the historical context that informed the psalms, which were written thousands of years in the past
- C. unlike other Biblical texts, the psalms are written in "human" language
- D. readers assume that God approves of the psalmist's anger
- E. God is only likely to be angered by heathen nations

8) Explain what an "imprecatory psalm" is in your own words.

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## Answers and Explanations

1) D

Core Standard: **Integration of Knowledge**

In paragraph 3, the author writes, “The ease with which one might misappropriate this psalm is, in fact, what made the psalms themselves so popular.” The formal tone of this selection, along with high level vocabulary like “misappropriate,” make it fitting for a scholarly journal. Following the above selection, the author gives a detailed, argumentative analysis of the way a piece of scripture was interpreted during the Renaissance. Given the focus and approach, we can tell that this analysis is written for an audience of religious scholars who are likely to be familiar with the texts and the religious ideas behind the scripture and the commentaries on scripture that run throughout the passage. Using this information, we can see that this passage would most likely be found in a scholarly journal about religion. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

The information in this passage is too specific for an inspirational website. In addition, much of the passage focuses on “the imprecatory or ‘cursing’ psalms,” which are quite troubling and not fit for a website featuring daily prayers and inspirational passages. Using this information, we can see that this passage is not likely to be found in the text of a website that features daily prayers or inspirational passages. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect.

The information in this passage is too specific for an encyclopedia article. Encyclopedias prize breadth of information over depth of analysis, meaning they are likely to give a good, general overview of a variety of topics. The author gives us a very detailed, argumentative analysis of the way a specific type of scripture was interpreted during the Renaissance. Using this information, we can see that this passage is not likely to be found in an encyclopedia article about Psalms. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect.

While John Calvin is mentioned in this passage, his commentary is the focus, rather than important events from his life. This is evinced in paragraph 1, when the author writes, “In his commentaries to the psalms, Renaissance theologian John Calvin...” A biography focuses on an individual’s life rather than merely their literary commentary, as we see here. Using this information, we can see that this passage is not likely to be found in a biography about John Calvin. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect.

Even if a magazine is written for an audience of Christians, it is unlikely for a magazine article to feature this level of detail or academic discussion. A magazine with a target audience of Christians would isolate many of its readers with an article this specifically focused. Magazine articles are meant to pull in the interest of a more general population, so it is unlikely that this passage would be found in a Christian-interest magazine. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

2) E

Core Standard: **Key Ideas and Details**

In the first paragraph, the author cites Psalm 58 as a particularly violent example of a psalm, writing, “He asks God to ‘break the jaws’ and teeth of his adversaries, and writes that the righteous man will ‘wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.’” The author states that Calvin recognizes the cruelty of these lines, but reminds us that Christians “should rejoice in witnessing the execution of divine judgments.” Using this information, we can see that John Calvin reconciles the psalmist’s violent desires with traditional Christian theology by arguing that Christians should feel joy when God enacts righteous judgment upon the wicked. This supports **option (I)**.

In the first paragraph, the author notes that Calvin does warn that those who are motivated by cruelty or hatred are possessed not by holy zeal, but by “unholy passions of hatred, anger, or impatience, inducing an inordinate desire of revenge.” This implies that, on the other hand, the righteous are motivated by holy zeal. Using this information, we can see that John Calvin reconciles the psalmist’s violent desires with traditional Christian theology by arguing that the righteous will not be motivated by intemperate cruelty, but by holy zeal. This supports **option (II)**.

In the first paragraph, the author notes that Calvin argues that it is “only natural” for the righteous to “rejoice” when they see God’s wrath enacted on their behalf, as it proves “the interest which God feels in their personal safety.” This means that the righteous, according to Calvin, should rejoice—feel happy—when they see God’s wrath enacted, since it shows God’s interest in their well-being. Using this information, we can see that John Calvin reconciles the psalmist’s violent desires with traditional Christian theology by arguing that when God inflicts harm upon an enemy, the righteous can believe that God is personally interested in their well-being. This supports **option (III)**. Therefore **(E)** is correct.

**3) A**

Core Standard: **Key Ideas and Details**

Paragraph 2 gives us a more detailed analysis of Calvin’s quote that the author cites at the end of the first paragraph: “it is therefore ‘only natural that they should rejoice to see it inflicted, as proving the interest which God feels in their personal safety.’” This quote serves as a cliff-hanger at the end of the first paragraph, and we want to continue reading to get an explanation behind Calvin’s perplexing logic. In paragraph 2, the author rephrases Calvin’s wording and offers us an explanation as to why Calvin might have thought it necessary to warn readers about “misconstruing the psalmist’s satisfaction in bathing in his enemies’ blood.” Here the author provides us with further analysis of Calvin’s ideas, so paragraph 2 functions primarily to provide further explanation and analysis of the ideas presented in the first paragraph. This means **(A)** is correct.

In paragraph 2, the author gives us a more detailed analysis of Calvin’s quote, which is cited at the end of the first paragraph. Paragraph 2 does not provide information to suggest that it functions primarily to suggest an alternate interpretation to the psalm that counters many of Calvin’s arguments. Instead, the author provides us with further analysis of Calvin’s ideas from the first paragraph. This lets us know that **(B)** is incorrect.

A paragraph that provides historical context would include background information like important dates or events leading up to the topic of focus. Paragraph 2 does not provide information to suggest that it functions primarily to inform readers about the historical context that informed the composition of Calvin’s commentaries. Instead, the author provides us with further analysis of Calvin’s ideas from the first paragraph. So **(C)** is incorrect.

Paragraph 2 does not provide information to suggest that it functions primarily to discredit Calvin’s argument by claiming that Calvin was motivated by “unholy passions”. Instead, the author provides us with further analysis of Calvin’s ideas from the first paragraph. Choice **(D)** is incorrect.

Paragraph 2 does not provide information to suggest that it functions primarily to highlight a few logical inconsistencies in Calvin’s argument, but reaffirm the validity of his major points. Instead, the author provides us with further analysis of Calvin’s ideas from the first paragraph. This means **(E)** is incorrect.

4) C

Core Standard: **Craft and Structure**

**Dissemination** (*noun*): distributing or spreading something—especially information—widely.

In paragraph 3, the author argues that the wide appeal of the psalms led to “a massive dissemination of vernacular translations of the psalms.” We can use context clues to determine a close definition for dissemination. Since, as the selection notes, many different writers published translations of the psalms, this would indicate an increase in their distribution. This means that the information the psalms present is likely to be spread widely about. After examining the context, we know that we are looking for a word that means widely distributed or spread about. *Circulation* means the transmission from place to place or person to person, which is nearly the same thing as widely distributed or spread about. From this, we can tell that the best synonym for dissemination, as it’s used in paragraph 3, is circulation. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

*Censoring* is the repression of ideas, impulses and/or feelings. Using the above information, we know that we are looking for the word that most nearly means widely distributed or spread about. Something that is censored—or repressed—is not widely distributed or spread about, so we can tell that censoring is not the best synonym for dissemination as it’s used in paragraph 3. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect.

*Destruction* is the act of wrecking or demolishing. Using the above information, we know that we are looking for the word that most nearly means widely distributed or spread about. Something wrecked or demolished is no longer in good enough quality to be spread about or widely distributed since things cease to exist in useful form after experiencing destruction. From this, we can tell that destruction is not the best synonym for dissemination as it’s used in paragraph 3. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect.

*Misunderstanding* means failure to grasp correct meaning. Using the above information, we know that we are looking for the word that most nearly means widely distributed or spread about. Something that is misunderstood would not be likely to be widely distributed or spread about, since most people would not see the value in passing on information that is hard to interpret or nonsensical. From this we can tell that misunderstanding is not the best synonym for dissemination as it’s used in paragraph 3. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

*Overestimation* means to estimate at high value. Using the above information, we know that we are looking for the word that most nearly means widely distributed or spread about. Since an overestimation reflects a hypothetical amount, and does not refer to the actual nature of distribution, we know that overestimation is not the best synonym for dissemination as it’s used in paragraph 3. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

5) A

Core Standard: **Key Ideas and Details**

In paragraph 5, the author notes that the violent language, imagery, and desires in the psalms were troubling to many readers. To remedy this, the author explains that, “some translators softened the language, while others interpreted the violence allegorically or simply deleted the most brutal lines.” We can see that elaborating on the use of the skulls, bones and scattered brains of the children is not a softening of the language, or allegorical interpretation of the psalm. Instead, it is a quite literal continuation of the violence established in the original language of Psalm 137. Using this information, we can see that John Oldham’s addition of the lines “their Skulls and Bones shall pave thy Streets all o’er / And fill thy glutted Channels with their scattr’d Brains & Gore” do not constitute an example of a writer attempting to “sanitize” this psalm. Because the question asks for the exception, this means that **(A)** is correct.

In paragraph 5, the author notes that the violent language, imagery, and desires in the psalms were troubling to many readers. To remedy this, the author explains that, “some translators softened the language, while others interpreted the violence allegorically or simply deleted the most brutal lines.” St. Augustine’s interpretation, that the children symbolize “evil desires at their birth,” is an example of an allegorical interpretation of the violence in the original that would be considered a sanitization. Since we’re looking for the choice that does not sanitize the original, we know that **(B)** is incorrect.

In paragraph 5, the author notes that the violent language, imagery, and desires in the psalms were troubling to many readers. To remedy this, the author explains that, “some translators softened the language, while others interpreted the violence allegorically or simply deleted the most brutal lines.” Edwin Sandys’ translation, which substitutes the words “cursed seed” for the word “children” is an example of changing language—deleting the most brutal lines—that makes the original less violent. This would be considered a sanitization, and we’re looking for the choice that is does not sanitize the original, so we know that **(C)** is incorrect.

In paragraph 5, the author notes that the violent language, imagery, and desires in the psalms were troubling to many readers. To remedy this, the author explains that, “some translators softened the language, while others interpreted the violence allegorically or simply deleted the most brutal lines.” If an anonymous translator of this psalm removed any mention of violence against children, it would be an example of deleting language that makes the original less violent. This would be considered a sanitization, and we’re looking for the choice that is does not sanitize the original, so we know that **(D)** is incorrect.

In paragraph 5, the author notes that the violent language, imagery, and desires in the psalms were troubling to many readers. To remedy this, the author explains that, “some translators softened the language, while others interpreted the violence allegorically or simply deleted the most brutal lines.” Calvin’s argument, that the children of Babylon represent forces that oppress the righteous, is an example of an allegorical interpretation of the violence in the original that would be considered a sanitization. Since we’re looking for the choice that does not sanitize the original, we know that **(E)** is incorrect.

## 6) B

Core Standard: **Craft and Structure**

**Homogeny** (*noun*): the quality of sameness or equivalence.

In the final paragraph, the author writes, “the psalms are anthropopathic, as they suppose the Lord feels the same way the psalmist feels. This assumed homogeny between heaven’s reaction and one man’s response to personal injustice...” We can use context clues to determine a close definition of homogeny, which will then allow us to find the best antonym—or opposite—for the word as well. The word “This,” in the second sentence refers back to the first sentence. We can assume that “This...homogeny” is parallel to the phrase that directly precedes it: “..the Lord feels the same way the psalmist feels.” From this, we can tell that homogeny must mean sameness or equivalence. In looking for the word that most nearly means the opposite, we need to find a word that means not the same or not equivalent. *Difference* means not the same or not equivalent; therefore it is the best antonym for homogeny and **(B)** is correct.

*Anger* is a strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence. Using the information above, we know that we are looking for the word that most nearly means the opposite of sameness or equivalence. Since anger is an emotion, and not a description of unlike things, we can tell that it is not the best antonym for homogeny. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect.



*Confusion* is a lack of clarity. Using the above information, we know that we are looking for the word that most nearly means the opposite of sameness or equivalence. Since confusion could occur with similar or equivalent objects, we know that it does not necessarily imply the sort of difference that an antonym for homogeneity should reflect. Therefore, we can tell that confusion is not the best antonym for homogeneity, and **(C)** is incorrect.

*Collaboration* means working together. Using the above information, we know that we are looking for the word that most nearly means the opposite of sameness or equivalence. Since collaboration refers to how people work together, and not a general difference, we know that collaboration is not the best antonym for homogeneity. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

*Misinterpretation* means to interpret incorrectly. Using the above information, we know that we are looking for the word that most nearly means the opposite of sameness or equivalence. Since misinterpretation refers to how something is interpreted, and does not adequately describe qualities of difference, we know that misinterpretation is not the best antonym for homogeneity. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

7) D

Core Standard: **Integration of Knowledge**

In the final paragraph, the author writes: “Furthermore, unlike other Biblical texts, the psalms are a unilateral conversation; readers see the prayers, but not the Lord’s replies .... Without God’s response, the psalmist’s anger is sanctioned for both himself and the reading audience.” In this selection, the author explains that the unilateral—one-sided—nature of the psalms prevents its readers from seeing God’s response. We can infer that because God does not respond with support,

a rebuttal, or a correction, the readers are thus likely to assume that God approves. Using this information, we can see that in the final paragraph, the author argues that the unilateral—one-sided—nature of the imprecatory psalms makes interpretation potentially dangerous because readers assume that God approves of the psalmist’s anger. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

The passage does not provide any information for us to infer that in the final paragraph the author argues that the unilateral—one-sided—nature of the imprecatory psalms makes interpretation potentially dangerous, because there are no similar examples in scripture of God being angered by injustice. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect.

The passage does not provide any information for us to infer that in the final paragraph, the author argues that the unilateral—one-sided—nature of the imprecatory psalms makes interpretation potentially dangerous, because an early modern audience could not understand the historical context that informed the psalms, which were written thousands of years in the past. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect.

While it is true that in the final paragraph, the author writes, “Unlike other parts of the Bible, the psalms are explicitly human language,” this fact is used to support how they are meant to be prayed or sung. The passage does not provide us with any information to infer that in the final paragraph, the author argues that the unilateral—one-sided—nature of the imprecatory psalms makes interpretation potentially dangerous, because unlike other Biblical texts, the psalms are written in explicitly “human” language. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect.

The passage does not provide any information for us to infer that in the final paragraph, the author argues that the unilateral—one-sided—nature of the imprecatory psalms makes interpretation potentially dangerous, because God is only likely to be angered by heathen nations. Because this choice does not speak to how the unilateral nature of the imprecatory psalms made their interpretation dangerous, **(E)** is incorrect.