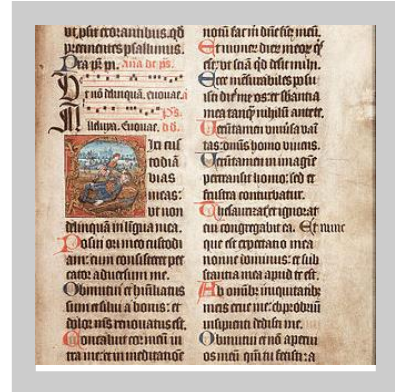


Name _____

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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.