

Studying the Psalms

Conversations

About some Psalms

Which are called “Imprecatory”

Or

“What you need to know about imprecatory psalms”

**Now is the time to get your Bibles. Turn
to Psalms 137 and 109**

We used these resources:

- The Interpreter's Bible
- Papers by Walter Brueggemann
 - an American Protestant Old Testament scholar and theologian who is widely considered one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of the last several decades. Age: 87
- Wikipedia

Bruegemmann says:

“The Psalms are a strange literature to study. They appear to be straightforward and obvious. They are not obscure, technical, or complicated . Yet, when one leaves off study of them, one is aware that the unresolved fascination endures.

Any comment upon them is inevitably partial and provisional There is simply more than can be touched and handled. So one finishes with a sense of inadequacy, of not probing enough. That, of course , is why the Psalms continue to nourish and nurture long after our interpretation has run its course . We are aware that the claims of the literature have not been exhausted.”

To help us get started...

- What are the Psalms?
- When were they written?
- How are they organized? Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting, Amen and Amen. 41:13,(72,89,106)
- What do the superscriptions mean? Names, liturgical instructions, genres
- Things to remember
 - “the psalms are humanity’s word to God, and God’s word to humanity”
 - Psalms are deeply rooted in the Hebrew tradition: They are Old Testament documents. However, the theological heart of the Psalms is that “God reigns”, which was precisely the fundamental good news that Jesus announced from the beginning of his public ministry.

How are the Psalms categorized?

- Hermann Gunkle, early in the 20th century, developed “Form criticism” which divided the psalms into ten categories.
- Claus Westerman, in 1965, reduced Gunkle’s categories to two: Hymns of praise, and songs of complaint and lament.
- Brueggemann, in 1985, wrote about psalms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.
- Your favorite categorization?
- Bottom line: There are many categorizations.

Imprecatory Psalm(s)

- According to Wikipedia: Imprecatory Psalms are those that invoke judgment, calamity or curses upon one's enemies or those perceived as the enemies of God.
- Example: Psalm 69:24-25 states toward God, "Pour out Your indignation on them, and let Your burning anger overtake them. May their camp be a desolation; let no one live in their tents."
- Psalms 137 and 109, which we will study in detail.
- Wikipedia lists 19 more psalms which tend to be imprecatory.
- Gunkle considered Psalm 109 to be the only purely imprecatory psalm

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Old Testament context for imprecatory psalms

- Deuteronomy sets the stage:
- Deu. 19:16-21 (this passage anticipates psalm 109)
- Deu. 27:15-19
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Psalm 137 – a “mixed” psalm

- 1 † By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.
- 2 On the willows there we hung up our harps.
- 3 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- 4 How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
- 6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
- 7 † Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"
- 8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
- 9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Psalm 109 first section v. 1-5

- 1 Do not be silent, O God of my praise.
- 2 For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues.
- 3 They beset me with words of hate, and attack me without cause.
- 4 In return for my love they accuse me, even while I make prayer for them.
- 5 So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love.

Second section v. 6-19



- ¶ **They say**, "Appoint a wicked man against him; let an accuser stand on his right.
7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty; let his prayer be counted as sin.
8 May his days be few; may another seize his position.
9 May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow.
10 May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.
11 May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.
12 May there be no one to do him a **kindness**, nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.
13 May his posterity be cut off; may his name be blotted out in the second generation.
14 May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the LORD, and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.
15 Let them be before the LORD continually, and may his memory be cut off from the earth.
16 For he did not remember to show **kindness**, but pursued the poor and needy and the brokenhearted to their death.
17 He loved to curse; let curses come on him. He did not like blessing; may it be far from him.
18 He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones.
19 May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself, like a belt that he wears every day."

Third section v. 21-31

- 20 May that be the reward of my accusers from the LORD, of those who speak evil against my life.
- 21 ¶ But you, O LORD my Lord, act on my behalf for your name's sake; because your **steadfast love** is good, deliver me.
- 22 For I am poor and needy, and my heart is pierced within me.
- 23 I am gone like a shadow at evening; I am shaken off like a locust.
- 24 My knees are weak through fasting; my body has become gaunt.
- 25 I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads.
- 26 Help me, O LORD my God! Save me according to your **steadfast love**.
- 27 Let them know that this is your hand; you, O LORD, have done it.
- 28 Let them curse, but you will bless. Let my assailants be put to shame; may your servant be glad.
- 29 May my accusers be clothed with dishonor; may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle.
- 30 With my mouth I will give great thanks to the LORD; I will praise him in the midst of the throng.
- 31 For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death.

Reflections from the Interpreter's Bible on Psalm 109

- Morally inferior? Not since most Christians seem to believe that the punishment should fit the crime. And even Hebrew justice: Eye for an eye.
- Brueggeman: “The real theological problem, I submit, is not that vengeance is *there* in the Psalms, but that it is *here* in our midst.”
- Psalm 109 not only tells it like it is with us, but it also tells us how it is with the world.
 - “Psalm 109 shows the natural result of injuring a human being.”
 - --C. S. Lewis
- The psalmist's submission to God of rage, hurt, and demand for justice is not only to be expected, but it is also to be accepted as a sign of health.

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- Psalm 109 teaches us not only about ourselves and the world, but also about God. It suggests that evil, injustice, and oppression must be confronted, opposed, and hated because God hates them.
 - We can pray Psalm 109 as a commitment to bear one another's burdens, to stand in solidarity and in suffering with the abused, the victimized, and the oppressed, because that is where God stands (v. 31).
 - New Testament reference to imprecatory psalms: Acts 1:20 quotes Psalm 69 AND Psalm 109.

Acts 1:20 "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and 'Let another take his position of overseer.'

Four reasons why imprecatory psalms are valid expressions of Christian faith traditions:

- They address the inevitable struggle between the faithful and their enemies
- They tend to be communal psalms expressing the concerns of a community of faith
- They reflect the struggle of theodicy and pervasive evil in the world
- They call upon God to make things right, not for the speakers to exact vengeance
 - --Nancy deClaisse-Wolford
 - Theodicy, (from Greek theos, “god”; dikē, “justice”), explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil.

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