The Sting in the Psalms

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In this paper we take up two overlapping aspects of the way the toughness of the Psalms can fulfill a constructive function. The first part (chiefly the work of Kathleen Scott Goldingay) looks at the way their poetic nature can have an ethical affect on the person who uses them. The second part (chiefly the work of John Goldingay) considers the significance of using the imprecatory psalms.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Fangs Dripping with Honey: Poetry Creating Ethics in the Psalms

We often go to the Psalms for the honey: for comfort, for poetic and musical words that will reassure us in times of pain. But what we also find there is fangs, fangs that grip us, chew us up, and spit us out. Psalm 94:“May their camp be a desolation; let no one live in their tents.” Or 140: “Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise!” Or to be really clear, 136: “O that you would kill the wicked.” The Psalms are red in tooth and claw.

What do these violent poems have to do with ethics? The Psalms are poetry, and their poetry makes a unique contribution to ethics because it performs moral correction on us as we perform it. As the words come out of our mouth, we are yoked to moral principles and concerns that come from beyond us. We are pulled along by God’s yoke, plowing a furrow of truth we couldn’t navigate alone but also that we can’t escape.

One night on a lonely business trip I was ambushed by a poem. I had been trying by sheer force of will to make things happen on a big project. The poem went something like this: “And suddenly I found myself all alone, with my body that can’t love me, and my will that can’t save me.” I sobbed. Until I read this line I had no idea that I had been attempting to do everything by myself. My need for God and others was exposed. But this single line did more than just remind me that on my own I could accomplish nothing. The line became my confession—to God—in the instant I read it.

My husband John and I had a similar experience with a project my daughter and son-in-law have taken on as their lifetime work, related to the attempted genocide of the people of Darfur. The International Criminal Court has convicted the leader of Sudan, the UN has made resolutions, several US presidents have said “not on my watch.” I have spent countless hours trying to figure out a way to get just one Darfur refugee girl to school in Uganda. I failed. For ten years no progress at all has been made in remedying these people’s situation. Eventually we decided to pray the Psalms for Darfur. Of course not every psalm fits their circumstances. Some speak of sin when the genocide does not arise from the sins of the Darfuri. But because of the way the poetry works in the Psalms we became aware of and acknowledged our sin as members of the nations who let this situation persist. We entered a world where history and the Darfur were in God’s hands. As we read we were petitioning the only actor that could do something about the situation. The Psalms’ poetry moved us from despair to confession to praising God.

What follows will be a look at how the poetry of the Psalter calls on us when we think we are calling on it, how it “yokes” us with the truth, and how it resets our moral compass as we sing.

## The Poetry of the Psalter Calls Us

First, the Psalter’s poetry actually calls on us when we think we are calling on it. I use the word “call” partly because the Hebrew word for “read,” *qara’*, means “call.” It denotes reading out loud, or in the case of the Psalms, singing. Psalms call on us because they evoke a particular emotional atmosphere. This setting is provocative and terrifyingly familiar. We are among bones shaking with terror in Psalm 6, trembling mountains and roaring seas in Psalm 46, a devouring fire and mighty tempest in Psalm 50, about to drown, with deep waters up to our neck, in Psalm 69. We enter these places and it is *there* that God speaks to us. The divine voice in Psalm 46 says, “Be still and know that I am God!” and after this command we hear that “the God of Jacob is our refuge.” The psalm leads us not just intellectually but emotionally to make a turn, a turn the psalm itself is in control of. This emotional atmosphere relates to ethics because the world of the Psalms is an ethical place, a place of truth, one that defines the unfairness, instability, and despair of the world we live in.

The Psalms call on us in an emotional atmosphere by means of their poetic devices. One device is the use of imagery in simile, metaphor, and symbol to describe an ideal or a tumultuous environment. Poetry also omits the syntactical and grammatical aids to understanding that the reader’s left brain usually relies on. Because of poetry’s density and the ambiguity created by fewer explanatory expressions, the right brain is forced to engage in the process of interpretation. Further, the poetry of the Psalms uses the device of the bicolon: the short sentences that form most lines divide into two parts in which the second part repeats, intensifies, clarifies, contrasts or completes the first part. The result is an enriched or highlighted meaning.

Besides creating an emotional atmosphere, psalms use poetic devices to create a particularly unambiguous view of justice. We even call it “poetic justice.” The first line of Psalm 1 is, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread.” It’s nice and clear. But next comes, “or sit in the seat of scoffers,” which may bring us up short as readers. The psalm goes on to reassure us that “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” By that point in the poem I am convicted and want to repent.

Psalm 1 defines poetic justice (you get what you deserve) and sets the tone for the entire Psalter. When you sing a psalm you are reinforcing this world of poetic justice, because you hear it, other people hear it, and God hears it as God’s truth. In the place the psalm portrays, God’s justice thrives. Evildoers may seem to flourish but they are doomed. It is acknowledged that suffering really is going on too long, but the righteous eventually flourish in God’s courts. The Lord’s righteousness and steadfast love endure forever. The wise are happy in their fear of the Lord. The foundations of the world are safely in God’s hands. The true sovereign and judge is the Lord, who will always maintain the cause of the poor, the needy, aliens, orphans, widows. All creation praises the Lord. Zion is built-up and restored to glory, and Israel is God’s faithful servant. God keeps promises and we are always met with grace and mercy.

This world informs us of our God-given rights. If we take its affirmation seriously we look around and protest that this is not what is happening. It is not what we are experiencing. We want what we hear and see in the Psalms. They evoke what it’s like to have a real home, a place where we live under real justice. The “place” of the Psalms is a world where God has searched us and knows us. We desire what they promise and this promise is what provokes us emotionally, makes us vulnerable. Once we take poetic justice seriously as the truth, we see the contrast between the empirical world and what is in another sense the real world, a place where it is safe to tell the truth because it is an ethical place.[[2]](#footnote-2) The refugees in Darfur had no idea they had any human rights. Once they found out they were excited, but also frustrated and angry. Insofar as poetic justice is not the world as people experience it, from the psalms we can hear a voice condemning *us*: “The way things are is not fair!” We cannot escape our own guilt, which stings especially when there is little we can do to change the situation. The psalms make our appeal to God to change life for the Darfur and others like them.

Once we enter the poet’s world, we have lost control. As Dylan Thomas put it, “the world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Our recognition or rejection of what we are singing is either a response or a reaction to the psalm, but we are no longer in charge of what is going on. This is why poetry is particularly suited to revolution. The truth is told and poets are sometimes the first to be arrested in a rebellion. But once the poem—the truth—Is out, the arrest of the poet is counter-productive.[[4]](#footnote-4) The poetry carries us into its own conclusion.

## The Poetry “Yokes” Us with the Truth

Second, the poetry “yokes” us with the truth. It reverses roles and hinders redress.

A student in Fuller Seminary chapel last March described taking a walk one evening. After a block or so, his danger radar went up. He sensed that a police cruiser he had passed was stalking him. He was guilty of “walking while black.” He said his “prayer pilot light” stoked up to high. The officers stopped him and yelled for all within earshot to hear, “Stop resisting the police!” Twisting his wrist behind his back they brought him to the ground. As he was hassled by them, he yelled out, but no neighbors gathered round.

A psalm came to his rescue, a psalm he knew by heart. I believe there is a rabbinic saying to the effect that a piece of Scripture is written on your heart so that it can fall in when your heart breaks. For this man it was Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” It goes on: “Now my head is lifted up, above my enemies all around me,” and it pleads “Don’t give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence…Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.” The psalm’s place of strength and light, of lack of fear and of patience, brought the man relief, but it did more. He waited and found the capacity for forgiveness. He said to the officer who dislocated his shoulder, “I forgive you, but you will have to go to your own priest for penitence.” He responded, not reacted, with peace and dignity to the injustice that was dealt him. Retelling the facts to the newspaper or the court might not have served him in the same way the psalm did.

We cannot know when a crisis will arise and we will need an automatic touchstone in order to prevent psycho-spiritual annihilation. Poetry repeated over and over, even if we are sometimes numb to the meaning of the phrases, is written on our heart. We can’t always summon our own words or an entire narrative but rote poetry is always there to call on us. God’s songs are there to embrace us.

Someone in a situation such as this student-pastor’s might later be angry. If I was his wife I certainly would have been upset and wanting to seek redress. We may come to the Psalter in resentment and anger or even rage. Sometimes when we go to the Psalms, it is to be reassured that poetic justice works, or rightly to express frustration at persecution or sickness, or simply to cry out in despair: help,help, help. There are at least sixty prayers in the Psalms that ask for relief from enemies or sickness. They crack us open with their emotional atmosphere, and in them we find that our own God-given emotions are expressed.

Do the Psalms mean to encourage the red in fang and claw they depict? In Psalm 94 we sing, “1O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth!” and we mean it. “Rise up, judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve!” We may be able to think of someone we want that plea to apply to, but we also don’t want it to be us ourselves who are “repaid for their iniquity.” How do psalms help us validate and actualize our unruly emotions without our becoming the perpetrator? The most extreme example of this is expression of emotion is Psalm 137, which ends, “Daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” We may feel this strongly about our enemy but we are appalled at the idea of killing babies. The psalm indicates how God knows us. The poem has used shock to split us open and show us the truth of what we are really thinking. It has made us vulnerable and exposed our raw emotions as dangerous. We are deep into the poem before we know what role we are playing. The dynamic contrasts with the process in a court of law where we come prepared to make our case. The psalm sneaks up on us. Once we have entered, it makes its case about our own bully-tinged emotions, yet it remains unyielding in its ethic of poetic justice: “they” deserve it!

God forbid that someone might take us up on our rebuke. Cursing (and for that matter also blessing) outside the context of God’s being the administrator of justice is fearfully dangerous.[[5]](#footnote-5) We can see in the baby-bashing Psalm 137 what horror can result from the powerless despair of the defeated. We have to face what turns us into perpetrators. Yet we don’t want to see ourselves in that role and we don’t want to be in that role. So what to do with that vicious anger, with our self-righteousness? The psalm has provided the outlet. By reading the psalm we have given our anger expression and validation, and also turned the injustice over to the one who can take action. This action opens up a way to real justice. It prevents us from committing the crime, by convicting us and turning us back to God as the prosecutor, judge, and executor of justice. God knows us and saves us before we can commit the crime. The format of cursing by means of psalms assures we do not forget to include God, and to hold God accountable, as the administrator of that justice. When we meet our enemies we can threaten them: “Have I got a Psalm for you.”

Psalm 55 is an example. It ends, “But you, O God, will cast them down into the lowest pit; the bloodthirsty and treacherous shall not live out half their days. But I will trust in you.” In the Psalms we learn from the inside out that there is no healing without healing the perpetrator, because the perpetrator is both us and them. We can trust that a psalm will call on us in our greatest need, before we get on the wrong side of justice.

## The Poetry of the Psalms Resets Our Moral Compass

Third, the poetry of the Psalms resets our moral compass. The Psalms do more than report “what is” or “what happened” or “what should be.” In the singing of a psalm, the psalm achieves its purpose: Yahweh is crowned your ruler (Ps 99), God is petitioned (Ps 22), the Lord is challenged to act (Ps 31), you find your place in history (Pss 78, 115), your heart is centered on gratitude for the Lord (Ps 103).

The poetry of the Psalms is thus performative; saying it does the thing it is intending, and does so immediately. The Psalms rely on different methods than court cases or morality tales. These act on us from outside; we are looking in at the scene, which is set up to convince us or convict us, but there is the possibility of a step between their action and our response or reaction, even if it is only a split second. Because of the performative nature and emotional atmosphere of psalms, they are intimate and able to sneak up on us as we sing. Formative words about our situation and beliefs are out of our mouths before we can react. We are yoked with God’s ethical truths which shape us instantly from inside. This dynamic also applies to the case where the psalm “calls” on us. Embedded in our memory, it waits to be activated by the Spirit when needed, to save us in moments of weakness.

We are thus not the same person as we were before we sang the psalm. Neuroscience helps us understand the dynamic. A psalm does more than express something; it can create the mode of practice—turning justice over to God. Human formation is a process that involves the transformation of day-to-day patterns of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. Formative practices such as singing the Psalms change our neurons and create the capacity to embrace a new world view. [[6]](#footnote-6)

The Psalms move us to see new sets of questions that we might not think of otherwise. Am I a perpetrator? Yes, I am. But they also reassure us that love reigns in God’s court. In a sense, in saying the Psalms we are shutting up and letting God’s words speak. Through the Psalms God tells us that which we can’t think of and blesses us with what we have no right to claim. Promises are made to us, covenants are sealed. If the poet could sleep under extreme duress, can I sleep too? Psalm 4 reassures me that I can: “I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.” Faith and trust are not dependent on outside circumstances but continue for the singer in the face of desperation. As we sing these same expressions of faith and trust, they calm us. God speaks to us when we cannot find the words. God sings us a divine lullaby.

## Conclusion

O Lord, you have searched me and know me…Even before a word is on my tongue (Ps 139). There is danger in depending on our own will to prepare our own personally tailored prayer. Like the student pastor accosted by the police, or a mother who has lost a child, or a people bombed from their home, we can be in such a state of trauma or crisis that our will and our creative analysis of the situation is no good to us. But what is stored in our memory can be used by the Spirit to reach parts of us that are unable to act in our behalf. The Psalter is evidence of the point that Psalm 139 makes, that God knows us.

In the Psalter as an entire book we enter the world of poetic justice, find our own conviction, confess, experience God’s nature, see the fate of the evil and of the righteous, and in the end, as we sing the last song (Ps 150), come out praising the Lord. A reading of the Psalter takes us through the entire cycle of life, of both individual and community. Poetic justice at Psalm 1 is bracketed at Psalm 150 with praise and thanksgiving, without skipping the full range of real-life punches in between. Using the entire Psalter we are bold in the way of the Lord. God allows wandering in the desert, but only for so long.

# The Contemporary Use of the Imprecatory Psalms

In Part 1, Kathleen has referred to the plight of the Darfuri people. This year is the tenth anniversary of the partial genocide in Sudan, which involved the deaths of several hundred thousand of the Darfuri. Many who escaped that atrocity, perhaps another two hundred thousand, fled to Chad and have been 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 Darfuri’s plight and to take action on their behalf. When I married Kathleen, three years ago, we started praying for the Darfuri as part of our prayer routine. When we are home, we use the Episcopal form of prayer for early evening before we have dinner, and Kathleen has noted that we added to that liturgy the saying of a psalm on the Darfuri’s behalf. We began at the beginning of the Psalter, and prayed the Psalms one after each other, one a day.

The idea came from my previous experience of praying the Psalms when I taught in St John’s College, Nottingham, where we worshiped together every day and followed the church’s lectionary for reading Scripture, and read through the Psalms one-by-one. We were not choosing a psalm to read each day because it corresponded to our current situation but reading (say) Psalm 47 because we read Psalm 46 yesterday and we will read Psalm 48 tomorrow. That practice made me ask what we were doing, and I came to two conclusions. One was that by reading the entire Psalter we were shaping our habit of praise and prayer. The other was that in praying prayers or praises that didn’t correspond to 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 a particular psalm prayed. In other words, in our prayer we were involved in intercession.

This realization provided me with an answer to another question about the Psalms. The Psalms model the nature of supplication—of praying for oneself. But how did Israelites pray for other people—how did they intercede? There are only one or two explicitly intercessory prayers in the Psalter, and only a few elsewhere in the Old Testament. But some of those explicitly intercessory prayers pray in the first person, even though they are interceding. In these, someone is praying for other people, but identifying with them, so not praying for *them*, but for *us*. Intercession involves putting oneself in someone else’s place. This understanding fits nicely with the fact that etymologically “intercession” links with “intervention.” It means acting as a “go-between.” It implies interposing between two parties 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 pointed to using the “I” and “we” psalms as intercessions as well as supplications. Perhaps Israel used them that way; certainly we might do so. In praying the 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 might be praying not 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 feature of the Psalms is that they virtually never speak of taking violent action to put down oppressors (the major exception is the 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.

I suspect that two different considerations underlie the Psalms’ stance. One is the practicality that the people who prayed the Psalms were usually 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. Their vocation is not to take action in order to safeguard that destiny. The Psalms’ stance fits with that emphasis. “Praying the Psalms is an audacious act of trust.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Praying Against the Superpower

The imprecatory Psalms, then, provide the 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. It may well be that there is a therapeutic value in expressing anger, though it is also possible that expressing anger may only feed the flame.[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps the question is whether the anger has truly been given to God. But the main point about imprecation is not to get things off one’s chest so that one feels better but to urge God to take action. And 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 is aware 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. It is the stance Joseph takes in relation to his brothers. There is a version of Psalm 137, reworked by Zephania Kameeta in the midst of Namibia’s struggle for independence from South Africa. It asks that the apartheid system may be smashed on the rock, but not that white South African politicians may have that experience.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In contrast, perhaps it is the responsibility of people who care about the victims of wrongdoing and about the vindication of right in the world to pray for God to put wrongdoers down and to deliver their victims, which is what Kathleen and I were doing. The imprecatory psalms are then for praying by people who are not the victims of oppression. Indeed, if we do not want to pray them, it raises questions about the shallowness of our own spirituality, our theology, and our ethics. Do we not want to see wrongdoers put down and punished?

One reason for our not wanting it 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 Rastafarians.

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. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell described the way Rastas used the imprecatory Psalms as a “linguistic political tool to chant down the enemy.”[[10]](#footnote-10) “Babylon” comes to mean the West and its economic system.

Psalm 137 is the most notorious imprecatory psalm. There is a reggae version called “Rivers of Babylon”; it actually omits the closing verses that Western Christians find offensive, and replaces them by the closing line from Psalm 19 that asks for our words to be pleasing to God. I imagine the point of that last line is to underscore the prayer and urge God to respond to its plea for freedom. 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.[[11]](#footnote-11) 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 lies in the fact that we British who listened to and sang along with the song never realized that it was about us, that we were Babylon. Perhaps the BBC would have banned it if they 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. God might listen and respond.

Christians commonly justify their opposition to the use of such psalms by suggesting that they 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 which as a whole is more extensively imprecatory.[[12]](#footnote-12) Further, Revelation 6:10 reports an imprecatory prayer by 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 of redress will soon come. Since it has not done so two thousand years later, 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 these cities (Matt 11:21-24; cf. e.g., 23:13-32). Paul, too, declares curses on various people (1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9).[[13]](#footnote-13) 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…. From this point of view 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.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Lewis here illustrates several of the dangers in allegorical interpretation. Its problem is usually not that it leads us to make declarations that are 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 particular texts. It enables us to focus instead on things that we are more interested in or that we are more comfortable with, 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* during the period when people from different parts of the British Empire were being encouraged to immigrate into Britain to drive buses, work in factories, staff hospitals, and so on. His book 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.[[15]](#footnote-15) There is a link between Lewis’s avoidance of the literal meaning of Psalm 137 and the psalm’s postcolonial implications (as we would now put it). An allegorical interpretation of the psalm avoids these implications.

The other scholar is David C. Steinmetz. In a classic text for recent 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, the 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.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Steinmetz’s comments stimulate several observations. 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 could not be faulted for taking a different attitude to the psalm. A fourth, related point is that what presents itself as interpretation that takes up the insight of the pre-critical period becomes 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. The modern origins of these concerns does not make them wrong, but we need to be rescued from reading our modern concerns into the agenda of earlier interpreters as we need to be rescued from reading our modern concerns into scripture itself.

## Prayer and Ethics

We have noted that the problem with allegorical interpretation is usually not what it says but what it fails to say. Christians who undertake allegorical interpretation are 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 to prevent the text from saying something that conflicts with that understanding.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The most worrying tropological implication of allegorical interpretation of the Psalms is that they stop the Psalms having an ethical impact on us. Kathleen has noted in the first part of this paper that the Psalms illustrate the way poetry can evoke an atmosphere and an emotion, entice people into its midst before they find out what role they are playing, put the users of the Psalms into the shoes of other people in an emotional and not merely a rational way, help them identify themselves as perpetrators, do so by sneaking up on them rather than relating to the Psalms as if they were people taking part in a court of law or even as people listening to a story, give them a way of expressing their desire for redress, give them a way of seeking redress without actually taking action, nevertheless give them God’s point of view on their lives, and show them a path from anguish to healing.

The imprecatory psalms illustrate those insights with particular force. These 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. It is just as crucial when we *are* in a position to do something, because they remind us that what we do is not decisive. Then second, 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 comments in expounding the thesis 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 mouths, we are yoked to moral principles and concerns. The Psalms’ words are human words, but they are human words that the people of God recognized as acceptable to God, as reflecting God’s perspective. During the singing of a psalm, God’s justice thrives, because God is in charge, not us. 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 attacker, we can threaten them with, “Have I got a psalm for you!”

1. Both parts are slightly revised versions of papers delivered at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Baltimore in November 2013. John Goldingay is grateful for Richard Middleton’s comments on his paper, which is due also to appear in a book called *Do We Need the New Testament?* to be published by SPCK and by Inter-Varsity in the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The writing and reading of poetry parallels art therapy, which creates an alternate safe world where abused children can tell the truth. See Malchiodi, C. (Today’s Year, Month Day), “Trauma-Informed Art Therapy (TI-AT) and Trauma-Informed Expressive Arts Therapy,” retrieved on 11/29/2013 from http://www.cathymalchiodi.com/Trauma Informed Art Therapy.html. See further at: <http://www.cathymalchiodi.com/art-therapy-books/trauma-informed-art-therapy/#sthash.v4sCs5uG.dpuf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *On the Air with Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Elliot Colla, “The Poetry of Revolt,” on the role of poets and poetry in Egypt’s oust of Mubarak <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/506/>. Aljazeera credits poetry and poets for the spark of the uprising in Tunisia: see <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/201283014193414611.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Blessings and curses, as well as oracles and prophetic sayings, are expressed in poetry in the Old Testament. Poetry is used to signal the significance and potency of the words, and to implement them. But also compare Matt 16:19 where Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom, and conveys to him “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth you will be loosed in heaven” (cf. the application more broadly to where two or more are gathered (Matt 18:18-20). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Findings in social neuroscience suggest that emotion is a more important element in understanding others than is usually suspected. Further, the operation of neural systems is embedded in ongoing interactions with our environments. We are being continuously programmed. Acting (including singing psalms) makes our neurons; it is not that our neurons “make us do things” (confirmed by Warren Brown in personal conversation; see further Nancey Murphy and Warren Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It: Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David Augsburger, “Foreword,” in Daniel M. Nehrbass, *Praying Curses* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), pp. ix-xii (p. x). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the discussion in Dominick D. Hankle, “The Therapeutic Implications of the Imprecatory Psalms in a Christian Counseling Setting,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38 (2010), pp. 275-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Zephania Kameeta, *Why, O Lord?* (Geneva: WCC, 1986), p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Tuning Hebrew Psalms to Reggae Rhythms,” *Cross Currents* 50 (2000-1), pp. 525-40 (p. 528). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Richard Middleton (who made helpful comments on a draft of this paper) has drawn our attention to a more recent song by the Orthodox Jewish reggae/rap singer Matisyahu [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See e.g., John 2:17; Acts 1:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See further Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 137-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Bles, 1958; reprinted London: Collins, 1961), pp. 113-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The text is widely available on the internet in transcript and audio forms. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” in *Theology Today* 37 (1980), pp. 27-38 (pp. 29-30, 30-31); cf. Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM/New York: Harper, 1966), pp. 108-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)