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DOI: [http://dx.doi.
org/10.18820/23099089/actat.
Sup32.16](http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Supp32.16)

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2021
Supp 32:275-292

Date received:
25 November 2020

Date accepted:
07 December 2020

Date published:
10 December 2021

Embracing the Psalter's imprecatory words in the 21st century¹

ABSTRACT

This article surveys the imprecatory words in the book of Psalms and examines and questions their place in the faith life of the third decade of the 21st-century world, one that is fraught with the impact of a global pandemic, political uncertainties, and racial injustices. The first section of the article examines the vitriolic words and sentiments found in the Psalter and in other places in the Old and New Testaments. It then suggests that we, as readers of these texts, in the words of Phyllis Trible, wrestle with such words and demand a blessing from them, much as Jacob did at the Jabbok with his mysterious wrestler. The second section of the article discusses various 20th- and 21st-century scholarly and ecclesial understandings of the Psalter's imprecatory words. Next, the article discusses the form and scriptural status of the Psalter's imprecatory words, emphasising the poetic and metaphoric characteristics of the Psalter's words. Finally, the article addresses the ethics and appropriation of the Psalter's imprecatory words in the 21st century. It concludes that, without the languages of absolute lament against injustice and violence that these biblical words provide, our dialogue with and our cries to God are empty and lifeless.



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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1 This article is a revision of "Human violence in the imprecatory psalms", which appears in *Ex Auditu: An International Journal for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* 34 (2018):19-36.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word “imprecatory”, derived from the Latin *imprecor* and meaning “to pray to, to invoke, to curse”, conjures up images of revenge, violence, and anger.

Laney (1981:35) defines “imprecation” in the Bible as “an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one’s enemies, or the enemies of God.” Scholars identify Psalms 12, 58, 69, 83, 94, 109, 129, and 137 as the imprecatory psalms (Zenger 1996),² although many other psalms include imprecatory language. The singer of Psalm 31:17b-18, for instance, implores God:

let the wicked be put to shame (or, disgraced);
 let them go dumbfounded to Sheol (or, lie silent in Sheol).
 Let the lying lips be stilled;
 that speak insolently against the righteous
 with pride (or, arrogance) and contempt.³

Note these words in Psalm 35:4-6:

Let them be put to shame (or, humiliated) and dishonor (or, disgraced)
 who seek after my life.
 Let them be turned back and confounded (or, frustrated)
 who devise evil against me.
 Let them be like chaff before the wind,
 with the angel of the LORD driving them on.
 Let their way be dark and slippery,
 with the angel of the LORD pursuing them (or, the one who does the chasing).

The words of Psalm 69:22-25 [Heb. vv. 23-26] and 27-28 [Heb. vv. 28-29] are particularly vitriolic:

Let their table be a trap for them,
 a snare for their allies.
 Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
 and make their loins (or, insides) tremble continually.

2 Zenger states that Psalms 12, 58, 83, 109, and 137 are imprecatory. I add Psalms 94 and 129 to Zenger’s list.

3 All scripture quotations are from the NRSV (with annotations), unless otherwise indicated.

Pour out your indignation (or, fury) upon them,
 and let your burning anger overtake them.
 May their camp (or, home) be a desolation (or, be devastated);
 let no one live in their tents.

...

Add guilt to their guilt;
 may they have no acquittal from you (or, don't let them go free).
 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;
 let them not be enrolled (or, recorded) among the righteous.

Day (2002:169) maintains that over 100 verses in the book of Psalms contain imprecatory words.

1.1 Imprecation in other places in the biblical text

Lest we think that words of imprecation are found only in the book of Psalms, such words occur in various places in the texts of both the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament. In Numbers 10:35, Moses speaks words of imprecation each time the ark of the covenant sets out during the wilderness journey: "Arise, O LORD, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you." In Judges 5:31, Deborah sings:

So perish all your enemies, O LORD,
 But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might.

In Jeremiah 18:21, the prophet implores God to take vengeance on his oppressors:

... give their children over to famine;
 hurl them out to the power of the sword,
 let their wives become childless and widowed.
 May their men meet death by pestilence,
 their youths be slain by the sword in battle.

The author of Lamentations (3:64-66) writes of those who participated in the destruction of Jerusalem:

Pay them back for their deeds, O LORD, according to the work
 of their hands!
 Give them anguish of heart; your curse be on them!
 Pursue them in anger and destroy them
 from under the LORD's heavens.

The writers of the New Testament quote from the imprecatory psalms and provide their own words of imprecation against enemies. In Acts 1:20, Peter quotes from Psalms 69:25 and 109:8:

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

In Matthew 10:14-15, Jesus sends out the disciples with specific instructions:

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

In 1 Corinthians 16:22, Paul writes: "Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord." In Galatians 1:8, Paul writes: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!"

1.2 The 21st century question

As I write this article in the autumn of 2020, the world finds itself in an unprecedented time of fear, turmoil, and unrest. A devastating pandemic has crippled the world's economy, healthcare systems, and trust in governments. In the USA, tensions between African Americans and the police have reached a boiling point, and the political climate has most of the world on edge. Lockdowns, protests, pandemic fatigue, and economic hardships seemingly invite imprecatory words from all of us. How are we to read and interpret the harsh and vindictive words that we find in the biblical text, particularly in this day and time? How do they inform our understanding of God and God's relationship with humanity? Ought we to embrace them? And if we do, what words do we use, against whom, and for what action do we call? Recall that the imprecatory words of the biblical text are cries to God against violence or injustice that demand such violence or injustice to others on behalf of the psalm singers (Zenger 1996:11). They ask for and demand violence or injustice as an answer to violence or injustice.

We can choose to ignore the cries of vengeance expressed in the psalmic words – perhaps in this difficult time in our world, perhaps in all difficult times. They are, however, part of the scriptural text that guide the ethical and faith expressions of so many. I believe that Phyllis Trible, a

Baptist feminist scholar, offers some insight into coming to grips with these troubling words in the Psalter and indeed throughout the biblical text. In an article titled “Take back the Bible” (2000), she recounted that, during her academic journey through college and graduate school, she came to embrace feminism as an interpretive tool for studying the Bible, something that was very foreign to her conservative Baptist upbringing. But she was also disturbed that “feminists were faulting the Bible for patriarchy, faulting it for promoting the pernicious paradigm of male dominance and female subordination” (Trible 2000:428), yet she could not let go of her love of the Bible. Trible (2000:428) reflects:

I was of all women most wretched – or whatever adjective seems fitting: schizophrenic, misguided, conservative, or just plain wrong. So my predicament grew as I heard the challenge of feminism.

Then Trible read anew the story of Jacob’s encounter at the Jabbok. Jacob struggled with an uncertain future and demanded a blessing, saying in Genesis 32:36 to the one with whom he wrestled, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” Trible (2000:428-429) writes:

That declaration became my challenge to the Bible from the perspective of feminism. I will not let go this book unless and until it blesses me. I will struggle with it. ... I shall hold fast for a blessing.

She adds:

I am under no illusion that the blessing will come on my terms – that I will not be changed in the process. After all, Jacob, the blessed man, limped away (Trible 2000:425-431).

In this article, I will thus “wrestle with” the imprecatory words of the Psalter (and perhaps gain some insight into the imprecatory words we find elsewhere in the biblical text). I will first offer various scholarly and ecclesial understandings of the Psalter’s imprecatory words, prior to discussing the scriptural “status” of the imprecatory psalms and psalmic words. I will then consider the ethical dimensions of such language and offer suggestions for how the faithful in the 21st century can embrace and even sing the Psalter’s imprecatory words.

2. ECCLESIAL AND SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PSALTER’S IMPRECATORY WORDS

Throughout the years, scholars have presented mixed assessments of the Psalter’s imprecatory words. Some chose to contrast a violent and

vengeful God of the Old Testament with a loving and forgiving God of the New Testament, thus rendering a discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity. With regard to Psalm 58:6-8,

O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
 tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!
 Let them vanish like water that runs away;
 like grass let them be trodden down and wither.
 Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime; like the untimely
 birth that never sees the sun,

Weiser (1962:432), in his Old Testament Library commentary, states:

The psalm ... shows the undisguised gloating and the cruel vindictiveness of an intolerant religious fanaticism; it is one of those dangerous poisonous blossoms which are liable to grow even on the tree of religious knowledge and clearly shows the limits set to the Old Testament religion.

In the 1955 edition of *The interpreter's Bible*, Poteat (1955:88) says of Psalm 83:

This psalm is an unedifying and tedious catalogue of bloody violence ... these factors are largely responsible for the consensus that regards this psalm as one of the least religious of all the poems in the Psalter.

In his 1958 work, *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis (1958:20) wrote about the imprecatory words in the psalms:

We must not either try to explain them away or to yield for one moment to the idea that because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious. ... The hatred is there – festering, gloating, undisguised – and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it.⁴

Regarding the imprecatory words in the Psalter, the musings of Hinricher, the prioress of a Carmelite convent in Dachau, Germany – an important stop for pilgrims who travel the paths of the Nazi annihilation of the Jewish people – provide a very “human” insight into the difficulty of reading them in public. In 1965, the nuns were given permission to “pray the Office” (the daily prayers of the church) in German rather than in Latin. After a trial period of reciting the psalms in German, Hinricher (1980:55) wrote:

4 It is interesting to note that Lewis wrote this before the death of his wife, Joy, in 1960.

This vernacular prayer, which had become necessary and requisite for the sake of the tourists, also brought with it serious problems with our recitation of prayer in choir, because of the so-called imprecatory or vengeance psalms, and the cursing passages in a number of the psalms. We were soon tempted to return to Latin, for no matter how much the vernacular brought home to us the riches of the psalms, the Latin had at least covered up the weaknesses of the psalms as prayer. In the immediate vicinity of the concentration camp, we felt ourselves unable to say out loud psalms that spoke of a punishing, angry God and of the destruction of enemies, often in hideous images, and whose content was the desire for destruction and vengeance, in the presence of people who came into our church agitated and mentally distressed by their visit to the camp. ... Our church is the only calming influence in the camp compound. ... Our prayer should be such that it can encourage people to reconciliation, forgiveness, and love. ... Calls for vengeance and destruction, and similar utterances, are unbearable in public utterance, and for those who pray the psalms together out loud. ... the texts of cursing and calls for vengeance also introduce special psychological difficulties when there is prayer in common.

Lewis (1958:20) seems to agree with the Prioress of Dachau when he says of the imprecatory psalmic words: "In some of the Psalms, the spirit of hatred is like the heat from a furnace mouth."

Grant (2018:4-5) posits:

Clearly, at least within contemporary Western brands of Christianity, we are uncomfortable with the imprecations ... our contemporary brand of Christian spirituality finds it difficult to accommodate such a manner of approaching God.

The "spirit of hatred" like "the heat from a furnace mouth" is perhaps no better exemplified than in Psalm 137, where the psalm singers cry out in verses 8 and 9:

O 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!

In *Continental commentary*, Kraus (1993:504), writes of Psalm 137:

The Christian community – in situations of oppression and sadness – will take up the lament of Israel; but only with reservations and critical deliberation will it be able to agree with the tenor of vv. 7-9.

In *Text and truth: Redefining biblical theology*, Watson (1997:121) states the following about the psalm:

Christian victims of oppression could never legitimately appropriate this psalm in its entirety, however extreme their sufferings, and its use in Christian liturgical contexts can in no circumstances be justified.

Goodall (2020), a renowned English composer of musicals, choral works, and television music, produced an album of psalmic choral pieces in 2010 called “The pelican in the wilderness”, which includes Psalm 137. It is interesting to note that the composition includes only verses 1-7 of the psalm, omitting the imprecatory words of verses 8 and 9. Spurgeon (2004:627) however, wrote concerning Psalm 137:

Let those find fault with it who have never seen their temple burned, their city ruined, their wives ravished, and their children slain; they might not, perhaps, be so velvet-mouthed if they had suffered after this fashion.

McCann, Jr. (1993:119-120) adds:

In the face of monstrous evil, the worst possible response is to feel *nothing*. What *must* be felt is grief, rage, and outrage. In their absence, evil becomes an acceptable commonplace. To forget is to submit to evil, to wither and die; to remember is to resist, be faithful, and live. For survivors of victimization, to express grief and rage and outrage is to live – to remember is to bear the pain of reliving an unutterable horror – a cross. But to remember is also to resist the forces of evil in the hope of living again – resurrection.

The *Revised Common Lectionary* does not include most of the Psalter's imprecatory passages (for example, Pss. 12, 58, 83, 94, 109, and 129), but a few do appear, including Psalm 79:1-9, in which the psalm singer cries out to God in verses 6-7:

Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.

For they have devoured Jacob
and laid waste his habitation.

All of Psalm 137 is also included in Year C in the season of Pentecost. I will return to the question of whether we ought to banish the imprecatory words of the Psalter to the “outer bounds” of the canon in the final section of this article, in which I will explore the ethical dimensions of the psalmic imprecatory words and offer suggestions for why and how faithful communities in the 21st century can embrace these words. First, I will address another aspect of the issue, namely the form and scriptural status of the Psalter’s imprecatory language.

3. THE FORM AND SCRIPTURAL STATUS OF THE PSALTER’S WORDS OF IMPRECATION

The psalms are poetry, and like poetry in any language, it is important for readers to understand the unique characteristics of this genre of literature. First, poetry is rhythmic. While we read the psalms that were originally composed in Hebrew in various English translations, reading a transliterated form of a psalm can demonstrate its rhythmic nature. The introduction to this article quoted Psalm 69:23-25 (Heb. 24-26):

Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and make
their loins tremble continually.
Pour out your indignation upon them,
and let your burning anger overtake them.
May their camp be a desolation;
let no one live in their tents.

While the “rhythm” is somewhat hidden in this translated rendering, it is far more evident in a transliterated rendering as follows, with the accented syllables in bold type and underlined.

teh-shak-nah ey-ney-hem mer-oth
u-math-ney-hem ta-miyd ham-ad
she-phak-‘a-ley-hem za’-me-ka
va-ha-ron ‘ap-pe-ka yis-siy-gem
te-hiy-tiy-ra-tam ne-sha-mah
be-‘a-ha-ley-hem ‘al-ye-hiy yo-shev

Hebrew poetry further shares some of the universal characteristics of poetry in general. First, its extensive use of metaphors and similes. In Psalm 69:14 and 15, the psalm singer pleads with God

rescue me from the sinking mire ... and from the deep waters. Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me.

In verse 25, the psalmist refers to the “camp” and “tents” of the persecutors. The metaphors in poetry convey a depth of meaning that simple prose cannot. The singer of Psalm 69 is not speaking literally of floods, the deep, the Pit, or camps and tents, but of what those images convey to the reader or hearer. In *The art of biblical poetry*, Alter (1985:151) maintains:

Poetry is not just a set of techniques for saying impressively what could be said otherwise. Rather, it is a particular way of imagining the world ... its own ways of making connections and engendering implications.

Furthermore, Firth (2005) reminds us that the imprecatory psalms are not visceral, bile-laden outpourings of rage; rather, they are carefully crafted poems, reflecting an accepted poetic style, and they must fall within specific parameters, in order to be included in the canon. This leads me to the issue of the scriptural status of the Psalter's imprecatory words.

The communities of faith who shaped the texts into what have become known as the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, incorporated the whole of the book of Psalms, with all of its imprecatory words, into their canons of scripture.⁵ In addition, the Septuagint includes all of the imprecatory psalms as do the various Psalters discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁶ In the act of incorporating the imprecatory psalmic words as part of their canons of “scripture”, those who shaped the scriptures acknowledged their value for understanding the relationship between God and humanity. In an article titled “Canonical context and canonical criticism”, Sanders (1987:166) writes:

There has been a relationship between tradition, written and oral, and community, a constant, ongoing dialogue, a historical memory passed on from generation to generation, in which the specific relationship between canon and community resided.

5 'Canon' is a word first applied to scripture by the Christian Council of Carthage in 397. When speaking of the Hebrew Bible corpus of literature, it is better to use the phrase 'authoritative literature'.

6 All the imprecatory psalms are attested in the DSS, except Psalm 58. Psalm 12 is included in 11QPs^c and 5/6 HevPs; Psalm 83 in MasPs^a; Psalm 94 in 4QPs^b and 1PPs^a; Psalm 109 in 4QPs^e, 4QPs^f, and 11QPs^a; Psalm 129 in 11QPs^a and 4QPs^e, and Psalm 137 in 11QPs^a (Vanderkam & Flint 2002:419-22).

The Psalter's imprecatory words are integral to an understanding of the relationship between God and humanity; thus, we cannot summarily banish them to the periphery of the canon, even in the extraordinary times in which we find ourselves. They form an integral part of the biblical text, embraced by millennia of the faithful as part of scripture, and we must "wrestle with" them, and "demand a blessing" from them.

4. THE ETHICS OF THE PSALTER'S IMPRECATORY WORDS AND APPROPRIATING SUCH WORDS INTO THE FAITH LIFE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In this third decade of the 21st century, are the imprecatory words of the Psalter appropriate, helpful, and life-giving, or are they simply more vitriolic words meted out in a world already filled with fear, hatred, and downright ugliness? Each word, each verse, each psalm, though, is a heartfelt cry to God, asking for God's justice to be meted out in the face of absolute despair and hopelessness. Each psalm is a song of revenge sung on behalf of the victims of cruelty, despair, and destruction. Zenger (1996:66) provides a helpful insight:

The cries for help or vengeance in the psalms are not about lesser or greater conflicts that could be resolved by wise generosity on the part of the one praying, or through "love of neighbor." Instead, those who pray these psalms are shouting out their suffering because of injustice and the hubris of the violent. They confront their own God with the mystery of evil and the contradiction represented by evil persons in a world that is in the care of God.

Grant (2018:9) points out that God created a world that was good, indeed very good (Gen. 1), and that those things that take place counter to God's "good" are, in some sense, counter-creational:

They are inherently anti-God. The imprecatory psalms force us to describe evil as evil and to publicly declare that there are actions which are simply abhorrent to God. Reading the imprecatory psalms forces us to question our thought processes: Why do we shy away from proclaiming actions to be wrong, evil and abhorrent in God's eyes – a flagrant breach of his creational norms? ... Why do we tend to reject these poems that give us a vocabulary of approach to God in the context of the experience of this evil?

Brueggemann maintains that words of lament (and imprecation) are a call to action to God from those who have been grievously wronged.

In an article titled "The costly loss of lament", Brueggemann (1995:107) challenges the reluctance of communities of faith to embrace such words:

A community of faith that negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise ... if justice questions are improper question[s] at the throne ... they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justice questions disappear into civility and docility.

In "Saying Amen to violent psalms: Patterns of prayer, belief, and action in the Psalter", LeMon (2011:93) cites a dictum in the Christian theological tradition that states *lex orandi lex credenda* – "the pattern (or rule) of prayer is the pattern of belief".³¹ The violence, against which the psalm singers are protesting, is the kind of violence they are asking God to carry out on their behalves. Thus, if one prays in this way, what effect does it have on one's moral imagination? In other words, as LeMon (2011:93) asks: "What is the relationship between *lex orandi* and *lex agendi* when it comes to violent prayer?"

Murphy (1977:29) suggests that, when violent wishes are "heard in prayer, they illumine our own feelings, and even ... accuse us of our own acts of vengeance". Murphy also cites Ellen Davis and Erhard Gerstenberger, who ask: "Might the imprecatory words of the Psalter help faith communities identify *themselves* as perpetrators of violence?" Can they act like a mirror for readers to bring about introspection regarding the nature of vindictiveness and readers' involvement in such sentiments?

An examination of three characteristics of the Psalter's imprecatory words may provide some insight into their value for the 21st-century church. The Book of Psalms, not merely the imprecatory psalms, is filled with references to "the enemy" and "the oppressor". The people who pray the psalms feel themselves surrounded, threatened, and engaged in battle by an army of oppressors; they feel like animals pursued by hunters and trappers, or they view themselves surrounded and attacked by rapacious wild beasts, trampling bulls or poisonous snakes. In *Feinde und Gottesluegner*, Keel (1969:93-131) lists 94 words used in the Psalter to describe the psalmists' enemies. The "enemies", "foes", and "oppressors" in the Psalter are rarely named specifically.⁷ The references are general, leaving the readers or hearers to "fill in the gap" of identity, so to speak:

7 Notable exceptions are Psalms 83 and 137, but even these "named" oppressors and enemies may be understood metaphorically.

Psalm 7: "Oh Lord, lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies."

Psalm 58: "O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!"

Psalm 129: "May all who hate Zion be put to shame."

Grant (2018:9) writes:

Most of us would not consider ourselves as having "enemies" *per se*. Therefore the language of enmity seems alien ... [but] there are many people throughout this world who experience the reality of enmity in ways unimaginable to the majority of us. The imprecations give us a prayer language to address such evil. ... The imprecations force us to side with the persecuted and to call for cosmic justice.

Most of the psalms that are identified as "imprecatory" are community psalms that express the voice of the gathered community of faith; they are not individual psalms that express the voice of an individual. Psalms 12, 58, 83, 129 and 137 all express the voice of the community.⁸

The cries for vengeance in the Psalter's imprecatory words are not about lesser or greater conflicts that could be resolved by generosity on the part of the ones praying, or through "turning the other cheek". Those who pray these psalms are shouting out their suffering because of the overwhelming injustices and abject indifferences of their foes, their enemies. Zenger (1996:66) writes:

The psalmists confront their God with the mystery of evil and the contradiction represented by evil persons in a world that is in the care of God.

Brueggemann (2007:64-65) reminds us that

[t]he real theological problem ... is not that vengeance is there in the Psalms, but that it is here in our midst ... The capacity for hatred belongs to the mystery of personhood.

How do we appropriate the imprecatory psalms into our life of faith, into our theology, into the fabric of our communal being as the people of God? In an article titled "The hermeneutics of imprecation", Miller (2000:162) states that a congregation, who regularly hears sermons and lessons on psalms, will find the imprecatory psalms easier to appropriate into their life of faith. According to Miller (2000:162), the imprecatory psalms and verses are:

8 Psalms 69, 94, and 109 are categorised as individual laments.

placed in a larger context ... they are abrasive pieces of a larger whole and not lifted up to a special place or made a point of focus by reading them by themselves. The rage is clear, but it is set in the context of all the psalms and in the constant listening of the congregation to the images, the deep emotions, the hyperbole – to all the strong and intense language of the Psalms.

Strawn (2013:414) echoes Miller's sentiment, maintaining that

[t]he continued and simultaneous praying of the Psalms and the praying of many different psalms means ... the pray-er is given a full grammar of prayer, one that is as brutally honest as it is heart-wrenchingly beautiful. ... The larger Psalter exhibits that there are more ways to deal with one's enemies than just cursing them or making war against them (see, e.g., Ps 35:13-14) ... [thus] the harshest of psalms ... will be balanced by [in the words of C.S. Lewis] "the most exquisite things".⁹

Positing or suggesting historical settings for the imprecatory words will help congregations ground them in a world of real-life story. They provide "initial hooks" for readers/hearers – a reminder that the cries for vengeance in the psalms are not about lesser or greater conflicts that could be resolved by generosity on the part of the one praying, or by "turning the other cheek". The singers of these psalms are shouting out their suffering because of the overwhelming injustices and abject indifferences of their oppressors. Recall the words of Spurgeon (2004:627) regarding Psalm 137:

Let those find fault with it who have never seen their temple burned,
their city ruined, their wives ravished, and their children slain.

In addition, the imprecatory psalmic words are words of giving over as much as they are words of crying out. As McCann reminds us, monstrous evil *does* take place in our world. We must speak out against injustice and violence, and in that speaking out, we give the anger and rage over to God. Zenger (1996:48) maintains that Psalm 137, for example, is an attempt, in the face of the most profound humiliation and helplessness, to suppress the primitive human lust for violence in one's own heart by surrendering everything to God, a God whose word of judgement is presumed to be so universally just that even those who pray the psalm submit themselves to it.

9 Grant (2018:12) adds: "It would be wrong to appropriate the imprecatory psalms in public worship without first teaching what they are and how they work."

When we sense the need for retaliation, should we say it? Because if we say it, we challenge the veneer of cultural propriety. But if we do not say what is real to us, then the rage goes unacknowledged and unanswered, and it continues its unnoticed destructive force in our lives and the lives of our neighbors (Brueggemann 2014:97).

Giving the anger and the rage over to God, however, does not absolve humanity of the responsibility of confronting the source of the anger and rage. When and to what extent do we act ourselves and what do we commit to the safekeeping of the God of all creation? Giving the outrage over to God does not mean giving the responsibility of the community over to God. With giving over comes not, in the words of McCann, acceptance, capitulation, and indifference. With giving over comes moving past the need for human vengeance and on to working to ensure that the source of what brought on the imprecatory words never happens again. If people are angry and vengeful against the leaders of countries whose selfish policies deprive their citizens of the basic human needs of essential food, clean water, and safe shelter, we will never have the energy to find ways to provide all people with such basic needs. If we are angry and feel vengeful against those who commit crimes against humanity such as child and spousal abuse, human trafficking, racism, sexism, and senseless killings, we will never have the energy to move out into our communities and work to eradicate the root causes of such crimes. If we harbour absolute and abhorrent hate for those who commit acts of terrorism, we will never have the energy to build bridges across the great divides of our 21st-century world views. Grant (2018:13) provides apt concluding words to this article:

All of the psalms provide us with a spiritual vocabulary for encounter with God in every circumstance. The psalms of enmity provide the Christian reader with the means of dealing with the evils of human experience in a way that true to the divine abhorrence of social injustice and to our own loathing of the moral abominations that are all too present in our world. Far from removing ourselves from these psalms, given the world in which we live, we should embrace them as our own.

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Keywords

Psalms

Imprecatory

Lament

Metaphor

Trefwoorde

Psalms

Onbeskaamd

Klaaglied

Metafoor