OTSEM, LONDON 2019:
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VINDICATING VENGEANCE AND VIOLENCE: CONTEMPORARY EXEGETICAL APPROACHES TO PS 58

ABSTRACT:

Using Ps 58:10 (NRSV; v. 11 in MT) as a stepping-stone, with its acclamation of vengeance and violence, this paper aims to engage in a critical discussion of two frequently used generic (i.e. applicable to more than one psalm) interpretative strategies that can be used as arguments against the custom of omitting imprecatory psalms from contemporary liturgy and theological reflection.

The discussion is divided into two steps. First, the meaning of the root *nqm* is outlined from a biblical (HB) perspective, with the primary focus of establishing how 'vengeance' relates to (retributive) justice and the use of violence as means of establishing said justice from a historical/biblical perspective. Subsequently, a comparison is made between the biblical notion of 'vengeance' and its contemporary (negative) connotations in order to establish what, more specifically, has led to the hermeneutical challenge that 'vengeance' constitutes for many modern readers.

The second step is to approach a selection of contemporary commentaries of Ps 58:10 to see what interpretative strategies are currently applied to such a 'difficult' text where violence is called for and vengeance venerated. As could be expected, the way that Ps 58 is approached correlates with how 'vengeance' and 'justice' is generally perceived within the context of the Hebrew Bible. This historical and exegetically based understanding of 'vengeance' is combined with – and encouraged by? – the contemporary hesitance amongst many readers towards this term and the use of vindictive actions to establish (retributive) justice – resulting in mitigating interpretative strategies applicable to imprecatory psalms in general and Ps 58 in particular.

The paper ends with a short summary and reflection on some possible ethical implications of circumventing 'difficult' psalms of vengeance by referring to them as psalms concerned with justice (more or less in opposition to 'vengeance' and acts of violence) and the immensely popular strategy of reading psalms cathartically.

Key words/themes: Ps 58; *nqm;* vengeance; justice; retribution; liturgy; violence; imprecatory psalms/cursing psalms; interpretative strategies.