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**Ph.D. student:** Elisabet Nord, elisabet.nord@ctr.lu.se
Lund University, Sweden.

# 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.

## FOR THE SEMINAR:
The paper is not intended to be published anywhere as it now stands. What I've done is to take out part of an early draft for my chapter on Ps 58 [Step 2] (where I outline how a selection of commentaries address the topic of vengeance and violence. To this I've added a short summary on biblical and contemporary connotations to 'vengeance' and 'justice' and how this plays into the reception and interpretation of Ps 58 [Step 1].

My intention is to address possible issues and implications of re-labelling 'difficult' *psalms of vengeance* as *psalms of justice* in my dissertation, but in separate chapters and (of course - in a more in-depth manner). So, see this paper more as a (not so polished) "sneak-peek" into my work than a finished chapter or article. In other words, a test-case that I would appreciate general and spontaneous feedback on.

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

*Elisabet Nord*
Ph.D. student, Lund University 

# VINDICATING VENGEANCE AND VIOLENCE: CONTEMPORARY EXEGETICAL APPROACHES TO PS 58

What are your immediate associations when you encounter the words 'vengeance' and 'justice'? For many, 'vengeance' is an ethically loaded term with negative connotations, whereas 'justice' has a much more positive ring to it. This becomes especially apparent in commentaries of imprecatory psalms (and Ps 58 in particular) where the longing for violence and vengeance is commonly mitigated (more or less implicitly) by a juxtaposition – or interchange – of the words 'vengeance' and 'justice'. With such an interchange of terminology 'difficult' "psalms of vengeance" becomes less challenging – even highly relevant – for contemporary readers' liturgy and theology.[1] After all, prayers for 'justice' are easier to digest than calls for 'vengeance'.[2]

Using Ps 58:10 (NRSV; v. 11 in MT) as a stepping-stone, with its acclamation of both vengeance and violence, the present paper aims to engage in a critical (albeit condensed) discussion of the frequently used generic interpretative strategy of interchanging 'vengeance' with 'justice' in commentaries of Ps 58. 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, specifically, has led to the hermeneutical challenge that 'vengeance' constitutes for modern readers.

The second step is to approach a selection of contemporary commentaries of Ps 58:10 to see what interpretative strategies that 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 currently approached much correlates with how 'vengeance' and 'justice' is perceived within the context of the Hebrew Bible. This historical and exegetically sound understanding of 'vengeance' is combined with – and encouraged by? – the contemporary hesitance amongst many readers towards 'vengeance' as means of obtaining justice – resulting in mitigating hermeneutical approaches to imprecatory psalms in general and Ps 58 in particular. Two of which can be tied specifically to Ps 58:10 and used as arguments against the current custom of omitting imprecatory psalms from contemporary liturgy and theological reflections.

We begin our inquiry into the exegetical discourse on vengeance and violence in the psalms with a short review of how 'vengeance' and 'justice' relates to one another seen from a biblical (HB) perspective.

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[1] The curious reader can find a brief but enlightening introduction to the discussions surrounding the omission of imprecatory passages from the Roman Catholic liturgy in Silber 2013 and Holladay 1993, 304-311. As indicated in the summary of my doctoral project, this discussion forms the backdrop to this study.

[2] Cf. e.g. John N. Day's book entitled *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach Us about Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism.* An important caveat is needed here concerning the notion of imprecatory psalms being 'difficult' and that is that this understanding, of course, is much dependent on the context of the reader. Cf. e.g. Adamo and Ademiluka who write from a predominantly Nigerian perspective where imprecatory psalms represent protection, defense, liberation and healing. Adamo 2008, 575, 582-587 and Ademiluka 1995, 221-227.

## *Step 1: Understandings of 'vengeance' and 'justice' in the Hebrew Bible*

As noted by Peels in his extensive study on the root *nqm* (that I rely heavily on for this condensed outline), 'vengeance' is an ethically loaded term that brings forth negative connotations for many contemporary readers. Often, the Psalms' prayers for vengeance is associated with the love commandment in the New Testament, resulting in an antithesis where imprecatory prayers are understood as a "very human but intolerable expressions of personal vindictiveness."[3] However, this negative understanding of 'vengeance' stands in stark contrast to the positive connotation that surrounds the term in the context of the Hebrew Bible, where God is associated with vengeance and called upon to vindicate the oppressed in order to establish justice (e.g. in Ps 58). This gap constitutes a hermeneutical challenge calling for a closer look at the biblical connotations to vengeance and God's vindictive actions. Needless to say, this paper cannot provide an in-depth outline of the extensive discussion on the semantic and theological meanings behind the root *nqm* and/or the ways in which it is usually translated. However, a few and important points can be noted in relation to Ps 58 in particular regarding the biblical understandings and connections between 'vengeance', 'justice' and the use of violence.

First and foremost, as argued by numerous scholars commenting on Ps 58; "the imprecatory *prayer* implies the giving up of *personal* enactment of vengeance via the curses."[4] I.e., the psalmist does not curse anyone in a strict sense but submits vengeance (and the violent actions that comes with it) to God.[5] Imprecatory psalms can therefore, and in general, be said to provide means of simultaneously "letting go" and "holding back", as famously phrased by Miller when he discusses the pastoral relevance of imprecatory psalms.[6] This hermeneutical approach is adopted by Peels as he comments on Ps 58:10 and states that:

> […] it is questionable whether the interpretation of this verse as a negative emotional eruption is adequate. This initial impression is not supported whatsoever in the rest of the psalm; there is no mention of personal experiences or expressions of feelings, but the major question that stands central is whether there is still justice on earth […][7]

Moreover, it can be noted that out of the 79 times that the root *nqm* occurs, God is the subject in 45 of these instances – compared to the 11 times when the subject is undetermined or impersonal, and the 23 occurrences where the subject is a human being. Thus, in 85% of the cases where the root occurs, God is the subject, either directly or in a secondary sense. With this follows that the biblical material perceives the taking of vengeance as both legitimate and appropriate, especially when – and due to the fact that – God stands as the subject in the majority of cases where vengeance is mentioned.[8]

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[3] Peels 1995, 1-3 and 234-236.
[4] Peels 1995, 237.
[5] For this, and other valid reasons, the terms 'imprecatory psalm' and 'cursing psalms' have been questioned. It has (e.g.) been pointed out that few psalms (Ps 109 being the exception) are dominated by maledictions. Cf. e.g. Martin 1972/2008, 113 and Zenger 1996 , viii who questions this terminology since these psalms "do not curse; they present passionate lament, petition, and desires before God." Zenger 1996, viii. (Both referred to in Simango 2011, 1-2 and Simango and Krüger 2016, 583). I consider this as a valid critique but have not yet found any better terminology.
[6] Miller 2004/2007, 200. Also referred to by LeMon 2013, 99.
[7] Peels 1995, 215. Peel's reading relies on the interpretation of v. 2 as referring to "gods", just as in Ps 82 where the forensic situation is more clear and resembling extra-biblical parallels.
[8] Peels 1995, 274-276. Cf. Lipiński 1999, 9.

Secondly, 'vengeance' has a juridical colouring set in the context of God's liberating action and the covenantal relationship. Within this context, 'vengeance' equals punishing retribution (evil for evil) and the righteous, poor and oppressed are assumed to be the subject of the imprecatory prayers. The recipient, on the other hand, is whoever violates the covenantal relationship and God's supreme rule. Thus, obedience and disobedience to the covenant and its commandments stand in direct correlation with salvation and destruction, acquittal and judgement, blessing and curse.[9] Consequently, the wrath of the godless is not (only) a private matter but also an attack against God's supreme rule and order. 'Vengeance' is therefore closely associated with God's supreme rule and worthy of veneration – not aversion.[10]

The third point (important for the following critical reflection on the reoccurring interpretative strategy of interchanging 'vengeance' with 'justice') is implicitly correspondent to the two just mentioned, and that is the close correlation between 'vengeance' and (retributive) 'justice' seen from an HB perspective. In the extensive study by Peels, he concludes that only in a few instances does *nqm* have an evidently negative connotation. In the majority of instances where vengeance is mentioned it is with positive connotations. Therefore, according to Peels, the traditional translation to 'vengeance' can be maintained, as long as one understands this word in a *positive* sense and as a concept closely connected to (retributive) 'justice'. In the words of Peels:

> In general, the root נקם can be paraphrased as punishing, justified retribution. Thereby, נקם is characterized as one of the terms that belongs to the terminological field describing the thought of retribution […] In contrast to modern conceptions of the meaning of 'vengeance', נקם is determined by the notion of legitimate, righteous, even necessary enactment of justice by a legitimate authority. Sometimes this thought is explicit, while sometimes it is more latent. It is significant that the subject of נקם is almost always God, and, further, the legal authorities or the king. Whenever the context of legitimacy is absent, the root receives a negative sense ('vindictiveness', 'to act vengefully') and נקם then describes the conduct of a hostile individual or group.[11]

Moreover, Peels' extensive research on *nqm*-texts revels that vengeance (both divine and human) take place on mainly two terrains, the administration of justice and the conduct of war. Naturally, in this context of justice and battle, the metaphors of God as Judge and Warrior are particularly evident, as is also the case in Ps 58. Both metaphors are manifestations of the root metaphor of God as King. Therefore, God's vengeance is part of his divine rule and closely connected to God's authority to bring about punishing justice. Thus, 'vengeance' is both eligible and desirable as it forms part of God's liberation. "The vengeance of God is a manifestation of his justice."[12]

Consequently, the use of violence constitutes a vital part in God's reign and establishment of justice – as exemplified in Ps 58 where violence and vengeance is both called for and expected from God. The King is also a Warrior. The task of ruling and doing battle cannot be separated, neither can the use of violence be detached from the establishment of

[9] Peels 1995, 238-239.
[10] Peels 1995, 238-239, 242 and 284-287.
[11] Peels 1995, 265.
[12] Peels 1995, 276-283. Quotation from p. 280.

(retributive) justice through vengeance. Once more, Peels summarizes this intertwinement of vengeance, justice and violence well:

> Paired with the 'opus proprium' of God's justice is an 'opus alienum': the judgement and retribution. This side of God's justice receives less attention in the Old Testament, but it is undeniably present. In the demonstration of God's justice in deliverance of his own, the punishing retribution upon the oppressing enemy is implied. Similarly, the vengeance of God functions in a few passages more or less explicitly as the punishing instrument of God's justice.[13]

This 'negative' side of God's justice does not only receive less attention in the Old Testament, scholars commenting on imprecatory psalms also tend to circumvent it. As one reads through commentaries written for the 21st century it soon becomes evident what interpretative strategies that have developed in response to Ps 58 tend to focus on the longing for *justice* (more than vengeance), at the expense of the longing for – and use of – violence in the establishment of this (retributive) justice through God's vengeance. We will return to this below where two interpretative strategies aimed at Ps 58:10 are outlined.

Before then; having established that 'vengeance' has very positive connotations in the Hebrew Bible and that it corresponds closely to (God's) establishment of (retributive) justice – it is time to ask what it is that created this gap between the positive notion of 'vengeance' and contemporary negative understandings of the same term. What, really, is it that makes Ps 58:10 and its mention of vengeance as cause for celebration so difficult to comprehend? What was it that turned the tables?

## *Vengeance gone bad –contemporary connotations to retributive justice*

As noted above, the term 'vengeance' has acquired a pejorative connotation in contemporary language use through its affiliation with self-centred, illegitimate and even (by most standards) immoral actions. For many readers, as noted by Peels; "['vengeance'] indicates 'the most furious and unsparing revenge'. The synonym 'revenge' emphasizes more the personal injury in return for which it is inflicted. Accordingly, 'revenge' often has the implication of personal retaliation, bitter and sometimes excessive conduct."[14] This contemporary and negative understanding of 'vengeance' is understandable from a historical perspective given the developments that has occurred within criminal law and its impact on the general (public) understandings of 'vengeance' and 'retribution' as means of establishing justice. When the state provides an established system for bringing about (retributive) justice for its citizens (with arbitration and enforcement of laws) vengeance as the private enactment of justice will necessarily be less and less tolerated. Consequently, from a juridical perspective, 'vengeance' is today viewed as a phenomenon that in principle belongs to the undeveloped stage of the legal system.[15]

A watershed moment came with the Enlightenment and its altered views on the rights of the state to implement punishments on its citizens. Up until the mid-18th century (especially during the Middle Ages), criminal law had become increasingly cruel in Europe and there had been no other form of jurisdiction than different forms of retribution, i.e. "tooth for tooth" and the like.[16] In this growing philosophical discussion of justification of

[13] Peels 1995, 291-292.
[14] Quotation from Peels 1995, 1. Cf. Hultberg 2012, 15; 413-414.
[15] Peels 1995, 2.
[16] Hultberg 2012, 45-47.

punishments, critical voices emerged inspired by the Enlightenment. One such criticism started from the observation that criminal law at that time could be summarized as vengeance acted out by the state. The critique consisted in that it could not be right that an act committed by a citizen was to be regarded as illegal when the same act executed by the state was to be seen not only as legal but also justifiable.[17] This argumentation took hold and much of our contemporary legal system and criminal law (in Sweden and elsewhere) rests upon this principle. Since the 20th century utilitarian theories have become predominant in the discourse on punishments and have developed into something that could be labeled a treatment ideology. As Molander points out, this ideology reached its peak between 1940 and 1970 when many defended the idea that criminality ought to be considered a mental illness and thus treatable. In the 1970's this 'treatment ideology' was replaced by a 'rehabilitation ideology' that is still maintained in many countries around the world.[18]

As a result, 'retribution' and 'vengeance' in the sense of "eye for an eye" has become something generally not sought for within the criminal law-discourse (except for those who advocate capital punishment for murder.) This idea that emotions of anger and rage need to be separated from the legal system (and especially from criminal law) is very much present in contemporary criminal law-discourse where there is a clear distinction between what the law prescribes and what the general public might consider to be just and/or a just punishment.[19]

In light of the observations above, it is not surprising that references to God's vengeance in the HB causes misunderstanding and offence amongst contemporary readers. The gap between the positive view on 'vengeance' in the biblical texts and the negative connotations that the word carries with it in a modern context constitutes a hermeneutical challenge that calls for interpretative strategies applicable to imprecatory psalms and contemporary worshipping communities. It is here that commentaries on the Book of Psalms constitute an important resource (among others) into the exegetical discourse on the topic of vengeance and violence in the psalms.

With this hermeneutical challenge in mind, it is time to take our next step into our second part of this inquiry into the exegetical discourse on vengeance and violence, using Ps 58:10 as our stepping-stone.

## *Step 2: Interpretative strategies applied to Ps 58:10*

Psalm 58 is indeed a 'difficult text' with its exceedingly turbulent and passionate imprecatory language.[20] As aptly put by Gillingham, the psalm's heading "Do not Destroy" is "somewhat ironic in the face of the psalm itself."[21] The combination of calls for both

[17] Hultberg 2012, 72-76.

[18] Molander 2009, 178-179.

[19] Cf. Molander 2003. In this article, Molander analyses the notion of retribution in connection to moral. Cf. also Tasioulas 1998, 147-148.

[20] The text is also 'difficult' from a textual point of view, which has resulted in great many ancient variants and a plethora of modern conjectures. The scope of the present paper does not allow for a discussion of these variations, nor a representative outline of interpretative strategies applied to Ps 58. Instead, the focus is directed towards the ways that Ps 58:10 and its mentions of vengeance (as a result of violent action) is currently addressed.

[21] Gillingham 2018, 335. Jewish tradition relates the phrase to David's refusal to "destroy" Saul on the grounds that he was the Lord's anointed (1 Sam 26:9). Feuer 1985, 723-725 and Clifford 2002, 273.

vengeance and acts of violence is doubtless what makes Ps 58 into "one of the most fearful passages in the Old Testament."[22]

The following section consists of an (abbreviated[23]) outline of interpretative strategies aimed at this 'difficult' psalm, and v. 10 in particular. The underlying assumption here is that Ps 58 constitutes a challenge for most readers since it is normally considered morally questionable to wish and/or pray for the death or harm of another human being. This assumption also forms the incentive behind the development of interpretative strategies that can help mitigate the ethical difficulties associated with imprecatory prayers.[24] Naturally, not all scholars share this understanding of psalms being 'difficult' and not all commentaries have as their outspoken purpose to guide readers in matters of theology and/or liturgy (although most do). Regardless, the possible lack of such outspoken interests does not stop readers from approaching commentaries in search for mitigating interpretative strategies. Thus, the mode of procedure here is to adopt the role of such an imagined interested reader in search for scholarly-based advice on how to approach (and possibly appropriate) imprecatory psalms.

For reasons of space as well as clarity, the present paper is limited to two popular and generic interpretative strategies applicable to Ps 58:10. The first is the reoccurring strategy of circumventing the call for 'vengeance' by focusing on the "end result", i.e. the establishment of (retributive) justice – without much mention of the violence that forms an inescapable part of this 'justice'. The other is the commonly supported 'cathartic approach' where it is emphasized that God – and not the petitioner – stands as subject for the vindication.[25] Not surprisingly, both strategies reflect the observations made in Step 1 regarding the positive notion and semantic value of 'vengeance' within the context of the Hebrew Bible. Additionally, most commentaries also reflect the general perception that 'vengeance' poses a challenge for contemporary readers. This is particularly noticeable in the priority given to 'justice' (as opposed to vengeance and violence) when the psalm's main focus is outlined, and the mention of 'vengeance' in v. 10 is commented on. Knowing that Ps 58 is generally omitted from liturgy for being a 'difficult' text (presumably due to its mention of vengeance and violence) it is somewhat surprising that what sparks reader's attention is not given more attention and consideration. Put differently; if 'vengeance' is the problem, can 'justice' be the answer? Are the terms really that interchangeable, and does this exegetical maneuver relieve the psalm of its hermeneutical and ethical challenge?

With this question in mind it is time to investigate how a selection of contemporary scholars have approached Ps 58:10, starting with the generic interpretative strategy of differentiating between 'vengeance' and 'justice' whilst prioritizing the latter.

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[22] Cf. e.g. Day 2005, 52 (where he qoutes Peels 1995, 218).
[23] The present paper is partially based on the analysis of Ps 58 in my dissertation.
[24] For a very short outline of commonly advocated 'interpretative strategies' applied to imprecatory psalms see Strawn 2008, 317-319 or Silber 2013, 116-132.
[25] Examples of other generic (i.e. applicable to more than one psalm and supported by more than one scholar) interpretative strategies are e.g. what I have labelled the 'Circumstantial reading' that mitigates the imprecatory language by stressing the psalm's *Sitz im Leben* and/or the petitioner's situation of acute distress. Another popular and pertinent interpretative strategy is to stress the nature of metaphorical language and/or the observation to the call for violence in Ps 58 could be said to be aimed at disarming the enemy, not total destruction.

## *1) The psalm is not about 'vengeance' but 'justice'*

As will be made evident by the examples cited below, there is a general tendency among scholars to address the topic of vengeance by either interchanging 'vengeance' with 'justice' or differentiate between the two as if the terms were not closely related to one another. Harman constitutes a refreshing exception in this regard as he aptly states that "without vengeance there can be no justice."[26] Other commentators on the other hand, appear to seek more or less creative ways to circumvent the negative connotations that 'vengeance' carries with it by speaking of Ps 58 – and especially v. 10 - as a psalm *not* concerned with vengeance but with justice. A reading of v. 10 that is quite the contrary of what first comes to mind.

This notion of Ps 58 as a psalm concerned more with justice than vengeance (and violence) becomes particularly evident in the commentary by vanGemeren where he introduces the psalm with the following general overview:

> The psalmist includes a rhetorical question, a response (vv. 1-2), a description of the wicked (vv. 3-5), and a prayer for justice (vv. 6-8). He finds solace in prayer and comfort in the Lord's promise of justice (v. 9). Instead of having to tolerate mistreatment, the righteous will experience a new freedom illustrated by their joy (v. 10) and will know that the Lord rewards the righteous. The structure of the psalm is as follows:
>
> A Concern for Justice (vv. 1-2)
> B The Lies of the Wicked (vv. 3-5)
> C Prayer for Justice (vv. 6-8)
> C' Expectation of Justice (v.9)
> B' The Joy of the Righteous (v.10)
> A' Affirmation of Justice (v. 11).[27]

In a similar manner, Mays reads the entire psalm as framed by the notion of God being the sovereign judge and just ruler. Consequently, according to Mays, 'vengeance' does *not* mean vindictive revenge but "an action to do justice":

> The psalm as a whole is an expression of the faith common to the psalms and prophets that the God who is sovereign of the world inevitably and inexorably acts as judge in the world. […] To believe in the reign of God is to reckon with and hope for judgement of God. The notion of "vengeance" (v. 10) is a feature of the vision of God as ruler. The term does not mean vindictive revenge; it refers to an action to do justice and restore order where the regular and responsible institutions of justice have failed.[28]

In a similar fashion, Hossfeld comments shortly on the meaning of נקם where he argues that it should be considered as a *liberating retribution* that reflects God's loving care for the world:

> In the fifth strophe (vv. 11-12), in v. 11 [v. 10 in NRSV] the joy of the righteous over YHWH's action is expressed as an emotional reaction to the experience of the complete restoration of justice. YHWH's נקם, "vengeance," is to be understood in Psalm 58 as an overlapping of

[26] Harman 2011, 440.
[27] vanGemeren 2008, 465.
[28] Mays 1994, 212, quoted also in McCann 1996, 909.

> juridical and liberating retribution that, however analogously, reflects faith in God's loving care for the world.[29]

There are also examples of commentators (such as Bullock and vanGemeren) who explicitly challenges the use of the word "vengeance" when referring to Ps 58 in general and/or v. 10 in particular. Bullock, for instance, argues that:

> While some religious traditions will not even permit Psalm 58 to be read in public because of the offensive imagery of 58:10, the idea of the righteous washing their feet in the blood of the wicked makes the picture of divine justice very real, albeit too real for some readers. Nevertheless, the graphic nature of this picture – call it vengeance if you like – draws out the gravity of evil and the urgency of justice. The blood of the righteous can never be silenced until God weighs out justice on his own scale, measured by the standard weights of his character.[30]

vanGemeren also exemplifies the tendency amongst contemporary commentators to circumvent the notion of 'vengeance' as the primary concern on Ps 58 by focusing on justice instead. vanGemeren translates נקם as "avenged" but argues that it is better understood as "being victorious":

> *10. The righteous will be glad when they are avenged,*
> *when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.*
> The joy of the righteous comes to full expression when they see evidences of God's justice. It is not so much the case that they are bloodthirsty but rather that they delight in justice. The reign of terror must come to an end! Isaiah portrays the Lord as the Divine Warrior coming with red garments, stained by the blood of his enemies (Isa 63:1-6). Here the godly join in the victory march, as they too have been granted victory. The imagery of feet in blood portrays the victory (cf. Isa 63:1-6; Rev 14:19-20; 19:13-14), rather than the gruesome picture of people relishing the death of the wicked. The godly share together with the Lord in his triumph over evil. Hence it is better to understand the word "avenged" as "victorious": "The just will rejoice when they behold [*ḥāzâ*] his victory."[31]

Ross has a similar approach where he also stresses the importance of 'justice' over 'vengeance', although from a slightly different perspective where he turns the reader's attention towards the final goal of violent actions and not the violence or vengeance in itself. The focus is and should be, according to Ross, on the notion of 'justice' over 'vengeance':

> The "righteous" is singular in form, but collective in meaning. And here they will rejoice when they see the vengeance (נָקָם; s. v. Ps 18:47). This expression is figurative in that it refers to the divine judgement on the wicked that will bring deliverance to the righteous (and so it is a metonymy of cause put for the effect). The substitution of the word "vengeance" indicates that the righteous will rejoice more because God's justice will be preserved than because the wicked will be destroyed.[32]

In sum, having reviewed a few representative examples of ways that Ps 58:10 is currently commented on by scholars writing for the 21st century, one can conclude that for the most

[29] Hossfeld 2005, 82.
[30] Bullock 2015, 444-445.
[31] vanGemeren 2008, 469.
[32] Ross 2013, 306.

part 'justice' is juxtaposed or interchanged with 'vengeance' when the overall meaning and intention behind Ps 58 is discussed. This leaves us with the impression that Ps 58 is not so much a psalm concerned with a thirst for violent revenge as one could imagine. Despite the psalm's turbulent language and use of violent imagery, it is to be associated with liberation and (retributive) justice rather than vengeance and violence. Thus, this 'psalm of vengeance' is mitigated through exegetical and sound observations concerning the meaning behind the root *nqm* so that is reappears as a legitimate cry for justice on behalf of the oppressed. It is no wonder that the custom of omitting imprecatory prayer from liturgy has been questioned repeatedly.[33] Why omit a psalm that is so passionately engaged in the longing for (God's) justice?

The argument against omitting imprecatory psalms from contemporary liturgy and theological reflection becomes even more pressing seeing that the other currently and widely supported mitigating strategy is to argue that psalms such as Ps 58 does not engage the petitioner to a path of action. Rather, it teaches the importance of submitting violent actions and vindication to God. This generic interpretative strategy that I have labelled the *cathartic approach to imprecatory prayer* is also reflected in commentaries of Ps 58:10.

## *2) The psalm submits vengeance and violent actions to God*

Bullock, Goldingay and McCann (to give but a few examples), make use of the exceedingly popular and generic interpretative strategy of arguing that imprecatory psalms serves the (liturgical) function of submitting (all) violent actions to God. Leaning on the NIV translation (note the translation "dip" instead of the more loud and self-involving "wash" or, as in NRSV; "bathe") Bullock argues:

> Ps 58:10 *when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked.* Along with Psalm 137:9, this statement is at the top of the charts for the spirit of vengeance that sometimes infiltrates the Psalms. It may be worth noting, however, that the righteous are passive here (lit., "when he sees the vengeance"). Generally speaking, the imprecatory psalms leave vengeance to God. Dahood's rendering of the preposition *beth* (NIV: "in") as "of" ("He will wash his feet *of* the blood of the wicked") is not convincing. The Greek text (LXX) has "hands" rather than "feet."[34]

In a similar manner, Goldingay also stresses the cathartic approach adopted in this psalm as he discusses the meaning behind the utterance in v. 10, adding to his outline also a remark that "vengeance" might give a misleading impression. "Redress" is more fitting, according to Goldingay:

> The metaphor suggests total and irreversible deliverance from danger as God or the gods at least take action against those who are currently spilling the blood of faithful people. The latter *see* the redress, but they do not take it, for that is God's business (see Ps 94:1; Deut 32:35).[35] For *nāqām* EVV have words such as "vengeance" but this gives a misleading impression. The word indeed implies acting with conviction, even passion, yet it does not

[33] Cf. e.g. Zenger 1996 and Brueggemann 1995 (esp. pp 1-32; 98-111). Mihăliă also notices the shift in appreciation of imprecatory psalms that have resulted in the positive outlook being the most representative amongst mainline protestants such as Anglicans, Presbytarians and Reformed. Mihăliă 2012, 233-234.
[34] Bullock 2015, 443. Cf. also the similar approach outlined in McCann 1996, 909. Regarding LXX cf. Hossfeld 2005, 83.
[35] Reference made here (Goldingay 2007, footnote 29) to Day, *Crying for Justice* (2005), 55.

> refer to the taking of personal revenge but to God's putting things right by seeing that people in the wrong are punished. The faithless were overturning the proper God-given order of the world, and the faithful look forward to seeing that order vindicated.[36]

There are also commentaries that frame the entire psalm (not just v. 10) within this interpretative strategy. One such clear example is provided by Brueggemann & Bellinger who end their commentary on Ps 58 with a 'Bridging of the Horizons' where imprecatory psalms and their relevance for contemporary circumstances and theology is discussed and summarized in four intertwined points, using Ps 58 as a reference point. Below I have quoted only point one and three since they fall neatly within the definition of the present and generic interpretative strategy:

> First, the central part of the psalm is in the form of prayer. It is not in the form of a curse [sic!] or a call for human violence. It is rather addressed to God in the hope that God will bring justice. One way to think of the prayer is in terms of the model prayer: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The prayer assumes that God is the one who reigns over all life and prays for divine justice in the face of strong injustice, violence and falsehood. The psalm is not so much about personal vengeance as it is about the hope for God's justice.[37]
>
> [---]
>
> Third, and based on the first two comments, Psalm 58 is a brutally honest prayer that God will powerfully bring justice for the oppressed in this world. Read in such a theological context and with such oppression in mind, the psalm is a bold act of faith, taking the pain and anger of injustice to the one who can act powerfully. In the Hebrew tradition, the execution of justice is the divine prerogative. God is the one who knows and embraces pain, and the plea is that God will act on the side of the faithful. This comment suggests that the lively and intense dialogue of faith modelled in the Hebrew Psalter includes the arresting presence of evil in the world as part of the wrestling with faith and with God. Theodical issues are pressing. Faith in the Psalter is not idealistic bus disturbingly realistic.[38]

This conclusion, as well as the overall cathartic approach to the longing for vengeance expressed in Ps 58:10 brings to mind the observations from Step 1 above where the biblical connotations to the notion of 'vengeance' and 'justice' where outlined, together with the observation that in the Hebrew Bible the establishment of (retributive) justice is reserved for God. Therefore, texts concerned with vengeance could very well be said to support a non-violent approach to injustice, making them relevant for contemporary theology and liturgy.

## *Concluding summary and reflections*

Those who seek scholarly support for the argument against omitting imprecatory psalms from liturgy can find plenty of support in contemporary commentaries on Psalms. Two such arguments (also the most prominent) where mentioned above and in relation to Ps 58:10. First the generic interpretative strategy of arguing that imprecatory psalms are

[36] Goldingay 2007, 208.
[37] Reference made here (Bruggemann & Bellinger 2014, footnote 134) to Bonhoeffer, *Psalms* (1970), 57: "Bonhoeffer's reflection on 'The Enemies' (pp. 56-60) is one attempt to avoid the abusive misuse of the imprecatory psalms." McCann also relates the request for (God's) violent intervention to the Lord's prayer, cf. McCann 1996, 909.
[38] Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014, 262.

concerned with 'justice' rather than vindictive sentiments and/or vengeance. Secondly, the generic interpretative strategy of arguing for a cathartic understanding of imprecatory psalms, where violence and longing for vengeance is entrusted fully to God.

Both of these generic and mitigating interpretative strategies correlate to how 'vengeance' can be assessed within the context of the Hebrew Bible, i.e. as liberating vindication *by God* in the establishment of (retributive) justice. This (admittedly exegetically correct) interchange of 'vengeance' and 'justice' can be questioned from a pedagogical point of view seeing that developments within criminal law discourse has given 'vengeance' a bad reputation and negative connotations compared to 'justice'. The words and concepts are indeed connected, but not entirely and easily interchangeable. Moreover, the hermeneutical strategy of circumventing 'vengeance' by referring to the (retributive) justice that comes after the vindication of the oppressed risks to undermine the close intertwinement of retributive justice and the use of violence – either enacted by God or humans. Without vengeance, there can be no (retributive) justice – and there can be no (retributive) justice without (some form of ) violence.

Knowing the reception history of imprecatory psalms and the implications that enemy-psalms has had on Jewish-Christian relations (to give but one example) there are reasons to proceed with caution when mitigating biblical prayers that venerates vengeance/retributive justice and the use of violence as means of establishing justice. Especially taking into consideration the self-involving aspect of reciting a psalm as prayer. For most of us, the shaping of our ethical principles is a largely unconscious process that gradually develops over time. In this process, as argued by Wenham, liturgy can have a tremendous impact. Whatever is included in public and joint prayer is simultaneously and subliminally accepted as important by the community, even if this is not explicitly stated. This makes the act of praying "the most potent form of ethical indoctrination." Thus, the Latin dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi* (that captures the close relation between *how* one prays and *what* one believes) would benefit from the addition of a *lex agendi* that brings to the fore that patterns of prayer and belief have the power to shape the petitioner's behavior.[39]

Commenting on the reception history of another 'difficult' imprecatory psalm (Ps 109) Crenshaw brings to the fore one important aspect and implication of the self-involving language of psalms read as prayers that is in line with the observations made above:

> This self-identification with God's purpose as understood by the pious worshipper shields that person from identifying the signs of spiritual decline. The use of Psalm 109 by Martin Luther and John Calvin to justify pogroms against Jews and others reveals the extent to which this deadly decease can strike religious leaders with its poison. C. S. Lewis has remarked that individuals with enormous potential for good are precisely the most dangerous because they believe so passionately in the justice of their cause. Consequently, they identify their own views with God's intention; in this way, extremism in God's name enjoys the highest sanction of all.[40]

[39] As argued by LeMon 2011, 93, here referring to Sailers 1994, 187. Cf. Sailers 1979, esp. pp. 173-174.

[40] Crenshaw 2001, 68. Unfortunately, Crenshaw fails to mention where C. S. Lewis has made this reflection but it appears to be taken from C. S. Lewis' *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958) where he comes to the conclusion that "[t]hose who are readiest to die for a cause may easily become those who are readiest to kill for it. [---] The higher the stakes, the greater the temptation to lose your temper over the game. " Lewis 1958, 33.

In other words: The more imprecatory psalms are said to be "not psalms of 'vengeance' but of 'justice'" and presented as cathartic prayers that teaches the reader the correct way to approach feelings of aggression and enmity – the greater the possibility that they continue to form readers' outlook on life and their conduct – perhaps even on a subconscious level. One possible outcome of such liturgical usage might be therapeutic, a non-violent way of venting emotions of anger and longing for revenge – as suggested by those arguing in favour or a cathartic approach to imprecatory psalms. However, given the reception history of imprecatory psalms, combined with the potential power of these self-involving prayers, there are good reasons as to why one could question the saying that "sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you."

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