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From its beginnings under founding editor Michael R. Weed, *Christian Studies* has sought to offer "Scholarship for the Church," as stated in the journal's motto since 2008. We are pleased with this volume to introduce to our readers two new Austin Graduate School of Theology faculty members, Keith Stanglin and Daniel Napier, and we look forward to their years of service to the church with us.

Christians in America face new challenges today. We are living in what David Bentley Hart has called a post-Christian world. Churches must consider how to adjust to new realities and a cultural environment that appears in some respects less hospitable to the open proclamation and practice of historic Christian faith, while in other respects offering unprecedented opportunities for authentic and powerful Christian witness. How do we communicate the gospel by word and deed to a culture that believes it has already heard and rejected it, but which may never have seen faith working through love? How do we foster authentic transformation into the image of Christ, both in ourselves and in others?

One vital function of scholarship for the church is to raise questions and promote discussion that allows churches to evaluate options for ministry and service. This aim ties together the essays on various topics contributed to this issue by AGST faculty and emeriti. Building on the analysis of Max Scheler, Michael Weed explores the phenomena of *ressentiment*, the toxic engagement of apostates with the traditions in which they were formed. Keith Stanglin asks what use followers of Thomas Campbell have for church history, and how those impressed by Campbell's vision might need to refine the terms in which it was originally expressed. Jeffrey Peterson explores how the liturgical calendar of the ancient church might help Christians and churches live through the year in the power of the resurrected Christ. Daniel Napier considers how revivalist approaches to conversion may actually thwart true conformity to the image of Christ and reflects on what contemporary churches might learn from ancient catechetical practices. Mark Shipp discusses the challenges of appropriating especially difficult Psalms for use in the church of Jesus Christ. Allan McNicol offers a substantive review of a recent book

on the difficult question of eschatological violence and its implications for our understanding of God's nature.

While each author speaks for himself, the reader of this issue is invited to join the ongoing discussion—and the occasional charitable argument—pursued at the faculty lunch table. We offer this collection to our readers in hopes of spurring productive discussion toward the growth of faith, understanding, and discipleship.

Finally, some changes are coming soon to *Christian Studies*, and we want our readers to be a part. Please go, right now, to your computer, type **austingrad.edu/survey** in the browser window and take our *Reader Survey*! Make your wishes for the journal known!

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“Smash Them Against the Rocks”? The Christian Appropriation of Difficult Psalms

R. Mark Shipp

Introduction

Psalms is the hymnbook of the Bible, and is thus the particular domain of the synagogue and the church. It has comforted the lamenter and given expression to the praises and thanksgivings of worshippers for thousands of years. It is friendly to the life of faith, for it was produced out of the depth of experience of faithful ones of old who passed on their praise, thanksgiving and lament to us.

This, at least, is the book of Psalms as it is offered for public consumption—a view, so to speak, from outer space. When we actually read the Psalms on the ground, we are often confronted with a strange world of cultural practices, beliefs, and cosmology different from our own. Often the theology is foreign to our experience and sometimes can be offensive to our modern sensibilities. Take, for example, the so-called imprecatory Psalms, or Psalms of vengeance:

> Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
> And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
> I hate them with perfect hatred;
> I count them my enemies (Psalm 139:21–22).

These sentiments seem to fly in the face of the injunction in Romans 12 not to seek vengeance, but to repay evil with good. Such passages as this in the Old Testament, and particularly the book of Psalms, are off-putting to

many Christians, leading them to adopt a dispensational or even semi-Marcionite attitude toward them.

How *should* we approach such Psalms and their difficult sentiments? In many churches, the Psalms have been relegated to the pre-Christian, Judaic past, and are primarily of historical interest. Many Christian groups heavily redact the Psalms, picking and choosing those parts more friendly to Christian worship, and effectively deleting others not deemed appropriate for inclusion. Others "baptize" the Psalms, making them "crypto-Christian," that is, reading them primarily as allegory or prophecy. My approach is to present a few categories of Psalms that Christians often find difficult, and to give some considerations for how they may still be important for Christians today.

"I Am Weary with My Crying": Psalms of Lament

I have talked to Christians who feel that the reading or personal use of lament Psalms by the Church is inappropriate, since we live on the other side of the cross. Lament is not a worthy sentiment for Christians, we are told, because Christians are supposed to be people of praise. This strikes me as odd. It is not unlike a parent telling his or her child, "Stop crying! You should be happy, because you are my child." I have recently been told about a young man who was responsible for putting another person in the hospital. He went to church the next day, hoping for some word in the service to articulate or legitimate his pain, but the only songs and readings were happy and oriented to praise.

People in both testaments cry out to the Lord in pain and petition. The fact that God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes … and mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev 21:4) in the eschatological age implies that in these in-between times there *will* be crying, and pain, and mourning. It is not only appropriate, but essential, to voice our lament to the Lord. It is not that Christians lament; everyone laments. It is that Christians voice their laments to the Lord, and it is the covenant commitment of the Lord to hear and draw near to all those who cry out to him.[1] With whatever

[1] See Deut. 26:7: "We cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression." Also see Psalm 34:7: "When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from all their troubles."

else we do with lament Psalms, these observations are intended to orient us to their appropriation.

1) The lament is the honest cry to the Lord. But lament Psalms do much more than just give utterance to our honest complaints.[2] They give us the vocabulary and movement of complaint so we may lament faithfully. "We do not know how to pray as we ought," and we might say the same thing about lament: "We do not know how to lament as we ought." The biblical laments provide us with a template for faithful lament and protest directed to God.

2) Lament is also "structured grief," possibly the most highly structured and ritualized expression of human grief. Lament provides structure to what is otherwise unredeemable chaos.[3] It is from a deep longing for order that cries of lament to God arise.

3) Lament is much more than just complaint. It is the invocation of God into lament with the sufferer and is therefore the ultimate act of trust.[4] It is to give to God everything we are and have. It is to cry out to God, suspended by our fingernails over the abyss.

4) Finally, lament is an important dimension of Christian worship.[5] I have told my students for 20 years that on any given Sunday, half or more of our church members come to worship with profound burdens. When we build lament into our services, we give them permission to cry out to God and provide them with the structure and vocabulary to do so faithfully.

The most dreadful (i.e., "full of dread") example of the lament genre is Psalm 88. Psalm 88 is one of very few lament Psalms with no shift to praise or thanksgiving in it. It is unrelieved lament. We might conclude from lament Psalms that they may be appropriated by the church in worship *because* most of them end with praise and thanksgiving. However, if it is God's cov-

[2] See Sally Brown and Patrick Miller, eds., *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville: W/JKP, 2005), xiv–xvi and Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Augsburg Old Testament Studies; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 52–53.

[3] Ibid., p. 54.

[4] Ibid., p. 52.

[5] Brown and Miller, *Lament*, p. xvii.

enant commitment to be near to all who cry out to him, then it is the cry itself which demonstrates faith, not just the movement from lament to praise. I am reminded of the Canaanite woman who cries out persistently to Jesus in the words of the faithful lamenter in the Psalms: *Haneni YHWH*, "Have mercy on me, O Lord." She, a Gentile woman, was commended for her faith when she persisted in crying out to Jesus, not because her lament ended in praise (Matt 15:21–28).

"I Hate Them with a Perfect Hatred": Psalms with Imprecations

Something has been said already about Psalms which include imprecations or cursing, Psalms which call the wrath of God down upon the enemy. One of the best known of such imprecations is the closing part of Psalm 137, a communal lament often set to music in its opening lines, but which turns into one of the most resistant passages in the Old Testament to Christian appropriation. The verses in question are vv. 7–9, especially vv. 8–9, dealing with Babylon:

> 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!

It is not difficult to imagine why many metrical Psalms based upon Psalm 137 have skipped these verses. Indeed, it is difficult for us to imagine anyone commending bashing babies against the rocks in solemn Christian worship. In those psalters which do give a metrical paraphrase of vv. 7–9, strange things can happen. Note the *Bay Psalm Book*'s version of v. 9:

> O happie hee shall surely bee
> that taketh up, that eke
> thy little ones against the stones
> doth into pieces breake.

Note the slightly more poetic Ravenscroft Psalter:

> Yea, blessed shall that man be called
> That takes thy children young,
> To dash their bones against hard stones,
> Which lie the streets among.

Perhaps the prize for most clever, but ill-advised, appropriation of vv. 8–9 is a verse attributed to Robert Burns, Scottish poet laureate:

> O blessed may that trooper be,
> Who riding on his naggie,
> Shall tak' thy wee bairns by the taes
> And ding them on the craggie.[6]

What shall we do with such passages as these? As one who edits metrical psalters, I am keenly aware of the exegetical, theological, and poetic decisions which must be made in the process of rendering ancient Semitic poetry into modern verse. Walter Brueggemann has suggested it is a mature and visceral faith which gives rise to these sentiments, although it is not a "noble vision" in scripture.[7] James Mays says "There is no evading the passionate pain and anger that animates these prayers. They call for the accounts in the books of history to be balanced."[8] Craig Broyles says "These expressions referring to the slaughter of children are a way of depicting the end of an oppressive dynasty … Psalm 137 is in the mouth of powerless victims, not powerful executioners."[9] Perhaps the most interesting and cogent discussion of prayers of imprecation is that of Patrick Miller, who states that prayer to God for vengeance has been superseded by the prayer of Christ from the cross for forgiveness and the command to actively seek the good of the enemy. He also, however, recognizes that such imprecations are cries to the Lord for justice, surely a contemporary concern.[10]

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[6] Some recent psalters skip these verses altogether—due to the difficulty most churches would have in singing these lines in communal worship—or condense them to lessen the offense (the ELCA worship supplement *With One Voice* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995], no. 656 only sets vv. 1–4; the CRC *Psalter Hymnal* [Grand Rapids: CRC, 1987], condenses the verses; Michael Morgan, in *Psalter for Christian Worship* [rev. ed.; Louisville: Witherspoon, 2010], p. 166 condenses the last three verses into two lines; in *Psalms for All Seasons* [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012], pp. 897–900, all 9 verses are condensed in versions A, D, and E; in the Missouri Synod *Lutheran Service Book* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2006] and Christopher Webber's *A New Metrical Psalter* [New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1986], Psalm 137 is skipped altogether).

[7] Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, p. 77.

[8] James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation Commentary; Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 423.

[9] Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 480.

[10] Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 299–303.

While the theological issues posed by this text are difficult, there are some ways we can approach imprecatory Psalms and orient ourselves toward their potential use in worship. 1) The Psalms of lament, including imprecations, are honest cries to the Lord. One of the gifts of the Psalter is that of legitimating our anger and protest and articulating it to God, individually and corporately. 2) Israel in particular, and Semitic cultures of the ancient Near East in general, were societies characterized by "corporate personality." What I mean by this is that while the individual was understood in these ancient cultures, individuals only had meaning as part of the group to which they belonged. To "smash the little ones against the rocks" is a way of saying "Lord, do not let the injustice of the Babylonians continue; end their culture of violence and do not let a new generation of Babylonians continue their legacy of terror and evil." 3) These imprecations are cries for justice, for God to rise and act against the wholesale slaughter of innocents and extreme injustice of the Babylonians. They are never cries for personal vengeance. It is God's job to exact vengeance, for he knows how to perfectly execute justice. Perhaps two movements related to injustice and the enemy are critical: first, the biblical curse is directed against evil and its destructive force, and is an appeal to God for justice; second, our job is not to curse, but to war against injustice by actively pursuing the good of the enemy.

With imprecatory Psalms one must recognize the full brunt of the evil inflicted upon the sufferer. Equally, however, one must recognize the lamenter is not seeking personal revenge. It is the justice of God to which the Psalmist appeals. Vengeance is God's appropriate domain, and his alone.

The Royal Psalms

In my teaching experience, I have found that students are eventually able to understand the value of lament and even imprecation, but often the most foreign of the Psalms are the Royal Psalms. These reflect an ideology of government and society far removed from our own. Royal Psalms also reflect kingship by divine choice and right, a cosmology of kingship reflecting the microcosm of Israelite kingship over the nations as the counterpart to the macrocosm of God's heavenly reign. The Royal Psalms sit uneasily in our worship psalters, since democracy, governmental accountability by the people, and a material view of the cosmos are the norm in Western society. Even

though my own congregation has a Psalm reading/singing many Sundays, I cannot remember the last time a Royal Psalm was utilized in worship.

Some Royal Psalms are more resistant to appropriation than others. A few we are somewhat familiar with, as they have been filtered through the New Testament, and so a New Testament application of these texts almost always trumps the surface, literal reading in Christian appropriation. I think in this regard of Psalm 2, with its language of divine adoption of the son of David, and Psalm 110, which says the king is a priest like Melchizedek. Other Royal Psalms, or portions of the ones just mentioned, do not fare so well in terms of Christian adoption. Psalm 45 clearly concerns a royal wedding. Psalm 89 is something of a double whammy: not only is it a Royal Psalm, it is also a lament. Psalm 110 uses language similar to royal inscriptions dealing with empire building.

Although the imagery and theology of the Royal Psalms is among the most foreign to our experience in America, appropriation in worship can be quite simple. Regardless of whether we think human kingship in the Old Testament is an aberration or a blessing, God has elected to bring blessing and reconciliation through the medium of the kingship of David's line. Also, regardless of our political persuasion, in the Church we submit to a most benevolent monarch. In my judgment, it is appropriate when singing the Royal Psalms to think of David's greatest son and heir, Jesus the son of David, the son of Abraham.[11] In this manner, baptizing the Psalm for Christian use is not really necessary; they are already, in a sense, "baptized." Jesus the Christ is a great king who still holds sway over the nations and calls them to account.

Psalms of Zion

Psalms of Zion are related to Royal Psalms. The "twin pillars" of God's covenant with David are David's dynastic succession and the eternal choice of Jerusalem as the city of the temple and its priesthood. The Songs of Zion reflect that second of God's eternal choices, his special relationship to the city of Jerusalem.

[11] James. L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: W/JKP, 1994), 19, 100–102.

There are obvious problems with this theology of eternal covenant concerning a city and a temple. First, Jerusalem was destroyed, producing a theological crisis articulated several times in the Old Testament, especially in Psalm 89, Jeremiah 25–29, and Ezekiel 37. Second, the spatial connection of the covenant with David to a Near Eastern city seems at odds with the insistence in the New Testament that the kingdom of God is "not of this world." Finally, the cosmology of these songs is an important corollary to God's choice of mount Zion and the city of Jerusalem, but is foreign to our material understanding of the cosmos. It is this cosmology that I want to highlight.

If God chose Zion above all other locations on earth, there are implications to this which are reflected many places in the Old Testament. First, Zion is the tallest of all mountains, reflecting the greatness and glory of the Lord (Ps 48, Isaiah 2). Second, it is the center, or navel, of the earth, reflecting its importance in the cosmos (Ezek 38:12). Third, Zion, with the temple in its midst, is the holy mountain, the "Olympus" of Israel, with the temple as the earthly representation of the heavenly court and throne (Isa 6, Ps 48). Fourth, Zion exerts a profound and inexorable draw on all the nations around, causing them to either do battle against it, or in their inevitable defeat, to be drawn to it in honor, worship, instruction, and submission (Isa 2, Pss. 46 and 48).

All of this seems at odds with the theology of the "new Jerusalem," the abode of God and of his throne, and the notion of the church as the "living stones" of a spiritual temple. On the other hand, the need to democratize and spiritualize the cosmology of Zion and the temple is a process we see at work in the pages of scripture: from Ezekiel's vision of an eschatological Zion, temple, and land, to the holy city coming down from heaven at the end of Revelation. It seems to me that scripture itself contains the hermeneutical keys for appropriating the cosmology and imagery of the Zion Psalms.[12]

In appropriating Zion theology for the Church we should let the imagery and cosmology of the Zion Psalms stand, as it is not a major jump from the all-encompassing reach and importance of physical Zion to the comfort and peace of spiritual Zion. It is important, however, for us to recognize that

[12] J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 150–152.

there is both continuity and discontinuity between the ancient, and the modern understanding of Zion. There is indeed thematic continuity: "Zion" is the place where God exercises righteous rule, the location in space and time where God's holy people gather for worship. Just as importantly, there is discontinuity between the ancient and modern understandings of Zion, temple, and the cosmology surrounding them. Their view of the cosmos (comprised of heavens, earth, and underworld) is not our own. Jerusalem was not literally the "center" of the universe. We do not usually think of the physical temple as the copy of the divine temple in heaven and the conduit of God's blessing and presence. We have no king who sits on a throne in a physical city and holds sway over the nations. But even these physical understandings of God's rule and the spatial understanding of God's presence in worship may be understood theologically and metaphorically: where God is the true center of the universe. Jesus the Christ fulfills what it means to be the true, faithful, anointed son of David, who extends his kingdom over the nations even today. The Church is the true temple of God, where God's presence dwells within his people, and in the end, the new Jerusalem of God will be the dwelling-place of God's people forever.

Conclusion

In this study I have attempted to offer suggestions for how we may recover "difficult" Psalms for Christian worship and the life of faith today. I have suggested that laments are the honest cries to the Lord of those who hurt, the essence and not the absence of faith. Incorporating lament Psalms into worship will give the many who come to worship in pain or distress permission to lament, and also give them the appropriate words and theology so they may do so faithfully. I have suggested that Psalms of imprecations are cries for the Lord to execute justice in a world sadly lacking in it. I have suggested that Christians appropriate Royal Psalms and Songs of Zion as Psalms that pay homage to the son of David who still rules, and that help us envision Zion as the place of God's throne. "Difficult" Psalms are invitations to reflect on aspects of Christian life and worship which resist simple or comfortable appropriation, but which repay those who are disciplined and taught by them with more profound insight into the holiness and presence of God.

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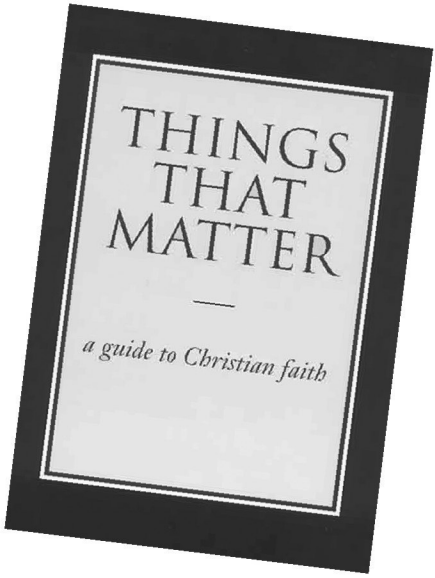

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