

## **Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

---

Laura Elizabeth Jones

---

Date

Cursing Like Jesus: Theological and Pastoral Considerations for Cursing in Church

By

Laura Elizabeth Jones  
Master of Divinity

Candler School of Theology

---

Dr. Joel M. LeMon  
Committee Chair

---

Dr. Steven J. Kraftchick  
Director of General and Advanced Studies

---

Dr. Ellen Ott Marshall  
Committee Member

Cursing Like Jesus: Theological and Pastoral Considerations for Cursing in Church

By

Laura Elizabeth Jones

B.A., University of Pennsylvania, 2008

Thesis Committee Chair: Joel M. LeMon, Ph.D.

An abstract of  
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Candler School of Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Divinity  
2012

## Abstract

### Cursing Like Jesus: Theological and Pastoral Considerations for Cursing in Church By Laura Elizabeth Jones

There has been a recent and growing trend in biblical scholarship to call for the reclamation of the imprecatory and/or lament psalms in the life and worship of Christian churches. Often pastoral concern for the marginalized is particularly cited as the stimulus for reappropriation of these psalms in the life of the church. In addition, theological concerns about the nature of God are raised, inasmuch as neglect of images of God's violence represents a theological deficit. It is my aim in this paper to build on the foundation laid by biblical scholars to sketch the contours of a theological and pastoral model for reappropriating cursing psalms in Christian worship. I will employ an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing the insights of Christian ethicists and practical and systematic theologians to explore the insights offered by these biblical scholars and their implications for theological ethics and pastoral care. My goal is to complexify the conversation by considering the ways that the multiple spaces/layers of social power that function simultaneously in congregations affect how these psalms might serve to expose injustice and facilitate ethical responses. My particular focus is the movement towards surrender of vengeance to God, and how (or whether) this movement relates to constructive ethical action. I will explore some ethically problematic ways of constructing a theology of surrender, and draw on the theological categories of the *imago dei*, *imitatio dei*, the trinity and the incarnation to construct a nuanced theological ethic based on surrender, discernment and imitation of Christ. The purpose of such an ethic is two-fold; to aid congregations in employing cursing prayers in worship without thereby undertaking the fulfillment of curses as a Christian ethical responsibility, and to consider practices by which communities might receive rage, move toward surrender of violence, and also discern constructive, ethical responses to injustice. I will also utilize the work of Christian ethicists to consider the relationship between rage and ethical behavior in order to illuminate how a healthy discernment process might look. In conclusion I will offer some practical suggestions for embodying these theological ethical principles in meaningful ways in congregational life.

Cursing Like Jesus: Theological and Pastoral Considerations for Cursing in Church

By

Laura Elizabeth Jones

B.A., University of Pennsylvania, 2008

Thesis Committee Chair: Joel M. LeMon, Ph.D.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Candler School of Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Divinity  
2012

## Acknowledgements

I am pleased to acknowledge the many mentors, companions and co-learners in my life who walked with me as I journeyed through the material for this project. For those who provided the intellectual and spiritual inspiration and guidance for this work, I am grateful: Dr. Joel M LeMon, who asked the important questions and shared his wisdom and expertise along the way; Dr. Ellen Ott Marshall, who gave me tools to wade through the ethical queries; Dr. Elizabeth Corrie and the staff community of the Youth Theological Initiative, who taught me to engage in challenging pedagogical reflection. For those who provided support in the writing process, I am indebted: Krista Showalter-Ehst, who initiated our thesis accountability group and offered thoughtful edits; Jennifer Kidwell, who on more than one occasion offered last minute editing help; Christopher and Leah Lyman Waldron, the pastors of my local congregation, who listened to me talk about cursing in church with patience and open hearts. And of course, for the love and support of my partner, Amaryah Armstrong, I could never say enough. Thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION ..... 1

2. REVIEWING THE LITERATURE ..... 4

    The Problem of Cursing Psalms in the Canon

    Cursing Psalms as Giving Voice to the Marginalized

    The Psycho-spiritual Benefit of Catharsis and/or Surrender of Vengeance

    Theological Insights of Cursing Psalms

3. THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL RESPONSES ..... 25

    Understanding Vengeance as God’s and Not Ours

    Sketching a Christian Ethical Model: Imitatio Dei?

    Towards a Christocentric Theological Ethic of Surrender

4. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS ..... 47

    Receiving the Rawness of Rage

    Facilitating Surrender of Vengeance

    Rage and Discernment in the Christian Life

    Towards Practices of Voicing and Witnessing Anger through the Cursing Psalms

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The history of the use of the Psalms in Christian worship testifies to both appreciation of the Psalms as Christian prayer as well as revulsion and fear of the Psalms as expressions of pre-Christian (and thus inferior) faith. Particularly the imprecatory psalms have tended to provoke the latter.<sup>1</sup> In response, there has been a recent and growing trend in biblical scholarship to call for the reclamation of the imprecatory and/or lament psalms in the life and worship of Christian churches.<sup>2</sup> These calls have been articulated thoroughly by Walter Brueggemann and Erich Zenger, but have also been lifted up by others, including David Firth, Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf Jacobson, and Joel LeMon. The grounds given by various scholars for such a reclamation are many, but fall into four primary categories: 1) their significance as part of the canon, 2) their usefulness in giving voice to the experience of the marginalized (and thus exposing the violence of the privileged), 3) their psychological function of catharsis and/or release of violent feelings to God, and 4) their theological affirmation of righteous anger/judgment. Often pastoral concern for the marginalized is particularly cited as the stimulus for reappropriation of these psalms in the life of the church. In addition, theological concerns about the nature of God are raised, inasmuch as neglect of images of God's violence represents a theological deficit.

---

<sup>1</sup> Erich Zenger, *God of Vengeance: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 14-21.

<sup>2</sup> While the categories of imprecation and lament psalms are technically distinct, in the literature, arguments for inclusion of laments often apply to imprecatory psalms, and vice versa. Further, the categories overlap such that the imprecatory psalms often contain elements of lament, and are assumed to arise out of similar situations of frustration, anger and/or oppression. Therefore in this paper I will include arguments about the role of lament to illuminate my focus on cursing psalms.



It is my aim in this paper to build on the foundation laid by the aforementioned scholars by sketching the contours of a theological and pastoral model for reappropriating cursing psalms in Christian worship. I will thus employ an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing the insights of Christian ethicists as well as both practical and systematic theologians to explore the insights offered by these biblical scholars and their implications for theological ethics and pastoral care. My goal is to complexify the conversation by considering the ways that the multiple spaces and layers of social power that function simultaneously in congregations and individuals affect how these psalms might serve to expose injustice and facilitate ethical responses to it. I begin with the complexity of social power because often the justification for imprecation relies on a binary reading of oppression and marginalization that is not nuanced enough to sustain the conversation for many churches occupying the gray areas of social location. For such churches, it is not self-evident that the imprecatory psalms will naturally function to give voice to and heal experiences of marginalization while also effecting release of violent impulses and right ethical action. Rather, there is more work to be done in developing a theology of cursing and surrender that invites and moves congregants through this process.

My hope is that by considering why and how Christians are called to prayerfully surrender vengeance, what surrender means theologically, and what responses are then appropriate, I can deepen the conversation around imprecatory prayer to responsibly include a variety of social situations. I largely accept the notion that voicing anger leads to healing, and believe that it applies in a variety of social locations; I see the connection between voicing anger and surrendering vengeance as less clear. Thus, my particular

focus is that movement towards surrender, and how (or whether) this movement relates to constructive ethical action. I will explore some ethically problematic ways of constructing a theology of surrender, and draw on the theological categories of the *imago dei*, *imitatio dei*, the trinity and the incarnation to construct a nuanced theological ethic based on surrender, discernment and imitation of Christ. The purpose of such an ethic is two-fold; 1) to aid congregations in employing cursing prayers in worship without thereby undertaking the fulfillment of curses as a Christian ethical responsibility, and 2) to consider practices by which communities might receive rage, move toward surrender of violence, and also discern constructive, ethical responses to injustice. Thus, I will also utilize the work of Christian ethicists to consider ways of thinking about the relationship between emotions, particularly rage, and ethical behavior in order to illuminate how a healthy discernment process that considers power and social location and moves toward a nonviolent ethic might look. In conclusion I will offer some practical suggestions for embodying these theological ethical principles in meaningful ways in congregational life, particularly in worship.

In what follows, I consider issues of social location, power dynamics, and intersections of oppression. Therefore, I locate my reflection and recommendations within my own pastoral context, as a White, queer, American, woman serving a congregation in the United Church of Christ. My social world and that of the congregations I serve has been situated in the gray area of layered, intersecting forms of oppression and privilege. When I consider the use of cursing in church, I do so from the perspective of blended congregations that represent diverse social locations. I do so from the perspective of serving congregations that may experience painful marginalization in

one area of life, while at the same time experiencing enormous privilege in another. While I do try to consider strategies that could be employed in a wide variety of congregational contexts, I understand my perspective to speak especially to contexts of hybridity, diversity, and intersecting oppression and privilege. I thereby encourage the reader to read these reflections as such, and respond with sympathy and freedom.

## Chapter 2: Reviewing the Literature

### The Problem of Cursing Psalms in the Canon

A common starting place for scholarly views of the propriety of using cursing psalms in worship is their canonical status. Naturally, the canon's boundaries are of interest to biblical scholars; the inclusion of imprecatory psalms in the canon makes a good starting place because it is that which prompts their study. It is also that which renders them a problem for church people. Biblical scholars note the great care taken by Christian clergy and commentators to explain, ignore, or otherwise soothe the sting of vengeance present in violent psalms. As with many violent biblical texts, the Psalms are frequently edited for liturgies and sermons so as to exclude verses deemed inappropriate for Christian prayer - ones that depict human desires for violence, or worse, God's violent action.<sup>3</sup>

Erich Zenger notes many other ways in which exclusion of violent psalms from the life of

---

<sup>3</sup> LeMon reports that "most depictions of divine violence are not included in the responsorial readings and the Psalm settings" of the hymnals of the United Methodist Church or the Presbyterian (PC[USA]) Church. Further, "the psalms lections in the Revised Common Lectionary exclude most of the pleas for God to exact violence on enemies." Joel M. LeMon, "Saying Amen to Violent Psalms: Patterns of Prayer, Belief and Action in the Psalter," in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 99.

Christian prayer and preaching have occurred in the introduction to his book *A God of Vengeance: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*. For example, he points out the long history of anti-Jewish interpretation by Christian commentators who seek to dissociate the violence of the Psalms from Christian faith and prayer, particularly citing Bernhard Duhm and Arthur Weiser.<sup>4</sup> Zenger also names the “less dogmatic, but ultimately more serious” objections to the violent psalms that arise out of pastoral experiences.<sup>5</sup> By way of illumination he provides several useful anecdotes, including the story of the nuns of a convent outside the memorial ground of a Nazi concentration camp, who “felt [themselves] 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.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Christians committed to the integrity of the Scriptures in their entirety as the word of God find in the violent psalms a pastoral and theological snag. Larry Silva poses the question this way: “These [cursing] psalms are not used in the Roman Catholic liturgy, for example, ‘because of their unfavorable psychological impact.’ Yet they have been preserved in the Jewish and Christian canons of Sacred Scripture for centuries. Why?”<sup>7</sup> At the most basic level then, the motivation for reconsidering the use of the cursing psalms in church is simply that it is the common and constant task of each new generation of Christians to

---

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Weiser’s oft quoted commentary on Ps 51 describes the psalm as “undisguised gloating and cruel vindictiveness of an intolerant religious fanaticism,” which “clearly shows the limits of Old Testament religion.” Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Larry Silva, “The Cursing Psalms as a Source of Blessing,” in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 221.

reflect on the Scriptures – all of them – in the life of faith. This argument is articulated most clearly by Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford in her chapter, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms:”

First, those communities of faith that shaped the texts into the canons of Scripture known as the Hebrew Bible or as the Christian Old Testament incorporated the book of Psalms (which includes the imprecatory psalms) into their canons. In addition, the Septuagint Psalter includes the imprecatory psalms (all of them), as do the various Psalters discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. . . . they were transformed by their inclusion in the canon from words *of* the faithful *to* God to words *from* and *about* God to the faithful. They are no longer the utterances of a particular community of faith to its God; they have become words about God for all communities of faith, across all times and all spaces, to their God.

By the very act of accepting the imprecatory psalms as part of their canons of “Scripture,” the Jewish rabbis and the Christian church leaders acknowledged the importance and value of these psalms for their overall understanding of the character and nature of the relationship between the God of the biblical text and the people who choose to worship that God.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, deClaissé-Walford argues, Christians cannot rid themselves of cursing psalms – they come with the tradition – nor should they desire to do so. Rather, Christians should attend to these psalms in order to discover what important characteristics of God they convey to the faithful.

Zenger’s articulation of the significance of these psalms’ canonical status is more complex. Zenger too is concerned about these psalms because of their inclusion in the corpus traditionally handed down to us as “the word of God.” But for Zenger, these psalms’ status as “God’s word” does not so much prompt his critical reflection on them, but on the notion of “the word of God” itself. For Zenger, critical understanding of violent psalms provides complexity and perhaps a corrective voice to uncritical

---

<sup>8</sup> Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 80.

hermeneutics; “these psalms, rather, challenge us to examine and differentiate the heretofore unreflective manner of speaking about the Bible as ‘the word of God,’ which is therefore to be accepted in obedient faith.”<sup>9</sup> Following Zenger’s logic, the examination of difficult texts, even beyond imprecatory psalms, give fuller shape and meaning to the church’s understanding of God’s word.

Joel LeMon makes another distinct argument against forming a canon within a canon by ignoring the violent images of the Psalms. LeMon takes an historical-ethical approach, considering the problematic ways in which Christian attempts to reject these pieces of the canon have led ultimately to more violence. He notes that the trend of excluding violent psalms in church is not a naturally developed squeamishness, but a pattern established by Old Testament scholars and commentators. These academicians propagated a supersessionist and anti-Semitic understanding of the violence in the Old Testament as “pre-Christian and even anti-Christian Judaism, a religion at best out of tune with Christianity and at best [*sic*] utterly contrary to Jesus’s teaching of love for one’s enemies.”<sup>10</sup> These religious beliefs have in turn been used to justify violence against Jews at the hands of Christians. Thus, continuing in this historically developed pattern of rejecting violent psalms has negative ethical implications which “make this tactic an unacceptable option.”<sup>11</sup>

From a Jewish perspective, David Blumenthal, too, considers the ethical pitfalls of ignoring texts that depict violence or abuse. For Blumenthal, the main problems can be summed up as denial and arrogance. First, contemporary interpreters deny the existential

---

<sup>9</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> LeMon, “Saying Amen to Violent Psalms,” 100.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

struggle of engaging these difficult texts by classifying them as the product of a certain period of history with different societal conditions; thus, “they can be contextualized and then existentially dismissed as archaic.”<sup>12</sup> It is not hard to see that such a tendency produces modern arrogance, for the contemporary reader thus assumes that her contemporary period is more morally developed/evolved than the period of the text, thus enabling the dismissal. Blumenthal asserts, “both these assumptions are very naïve. Establishing historical situatedness does not absolve us from existential engagement, and the century of Auschwitz and Hiroshima cannot boast of its moral excellence.”<sup>13</sup> Thus Blumenthal’s approach is to “engage seriously the texts as we have received them,”<sup>14</sup> in order to explore honestly the dark side of the human psyche that is so prevalent in the book of Psalms.

The ethical facets of imprecatory and/or lament psalms’ exclusion from the canon are explored from yet another angle by Walter Brueggemann, although his critique is situated more in present day social reality than historical reflection. He argues that in excluding the lament psalms the church loses a powerful mode of social critique and even God-critique that are tools for healing and wholeness. He fervently defends the protesting spirit of these psalms, concluding that

It makes one wonder about the price of our civility, that this chance [to protest] in our faith has largely been lost because the lament psalms have dropped out of the functioning canon. In that loss, we may unwittingly endorse a “False Self” that can take no initiative toward an omnipotent God. We may also unwittingly endorse unjust systems about which no questions can properly be raised. In the absence of lament, we may be engaged in uncritical history-stifling praise. Both *psychological inauthenticity* and *social immobility* may be derived from the loss

---

<sup>12</sup> David Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox, 1993), 238.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

of these texts. If we care about authenticity and justice, the recovery of these texts is urgent.<sup>15</sup>

### Cursing Psalms as Giving Voice to the Marginalized

Brueggemann's lament at the loss of lament psalms from the functional canon moves beyond concern about their status toward concern for the health of the church. Indeed, many scholars begin their call for reclamation of the violent psalms with appeal to canonical status, but end by arguing the benefits of the lament and imprecatory psalms for the wholeness and/or integrity of the church. One of the most frequently cited benefits of violent and vengeful psalms is their usefulness in giving voice to the marginalized in today's society, which effects healing and potentially social change. Indeed, Walter Brueggemann elsewhere dedicates a whole article to the theme in a lecture delivered at Calvin Theological Seminary, "Voice as Counter to Violence."<sup>16</sup> Here Brueggemann argues, based on both biblical exegesis and interdisciplinary work on violence and speech, that the speech of the marginalized is critical both for effecting social change and healing their trauma. He cites others who work in psychiatry, psychology and literature, who each conclude that speech is essential in the recovery from torture, war, sexual abuse, and long-term systemic marginalization. From this interdisciplinary framework for understanding the usefulness of speech in recovery, Brueggemann concludes that "in these lament psalms we have a script for how the community has practiced that subversive activity of finding voice. ... in a society that is increasingly shut down in

---

<sup>15</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 111.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Voice as Counter to Violence," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (April 1, 2001): 22-33.



terms of public speech, the church in all of its pastoral practices may be the community where the silenced are authorized to voice.”<sup>17</sup>

Blumenthal makes a very similar argument in a chapter of published letters between himself and colleague who is a survivor of child abuse. In a discussion around her failed effort to reach resolution with her abusive father, Blumenthal reflects upon the meaning of voice:

One undertakes such a confrontation, I think, only because of the need to speak – independent of how the hearer will hear. Do we need to do that with God? to protest, steadfastly, independent of whether He hears or not? independent of whether HE reacts or not? My answer is yes. We, like the psalmist, must protest. He must answer and, if He does not, we continue to protest – in this world and in the next. If necessary, Judgment Day will be a confrontation, and maybe not the final one either.<sup>18</sup>

Here Blumenthal argues that the psalmists and other victims of abuse voice their protest for their own sake, regardless of their reception. This insight builds upon Brueggemann’s and carries interesting implications for the question of ethical responses of communities receiving such protests here on earth.

deClaissé-Walford also sees speech as healing, and issues urgent appeals for liturgical space dedicated to hearing the voices of the marginalized. Her text itself seems to embody that which she calls for; in poetic repetition, deClaissé-Walford continually brings to the forefront the experiences of the marginalized as her starting place for consideration of the imprecatory psalms. Three times she creates a sense of urgency by a series of questions or suggestions:

What *if* a church member has been gang-raped, fallen victim to a scam, been abused by a nursing home caregiver, been cheated out of their pension, lost a child to a drunk driver, been betrayed by a trusting friend? What *if* the people in

---

<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, “Voice as Counter to Violence,” 25.

<sup>18</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 201.

your church are victims of hate crimes or are targeted for profiling in your neighborhood? What about the abject poverty and starvation brought about by corrupt governments throughout the world? What should be the response of the church?<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the ever-present starvation, oppression, and exploitation of innocent people throughout the world has given us a new outlook. Perhaps the growing crime rates and poverty in our cities and suburbs has required a new view of things. Perhaps the increasing corruption of our political and corporate leaders, the growing unrest of the world, the downward spiral of morals and ethics, and the declining health of this planet have made us more aware of the declining “rightness” of this world in which we live. What should be the response of the faithful?<sup>20</sup>

But what if praise is not what we feel? What if we have been subjected to atrocities that simply do not allow praise and worship? What then? What did and do the victims of the Holocaust and their descendants feel? What did and do the victims of the race wars in America feel? What about parents and children in Darfur and Iraq and other areas of unrest in our world? How do the victims of violent crimes, hate crimes, and fraud feel? And what about children who are victims of sexual and other types of abuse?<sup>21</sup>

These series of intense questions or suggestions convey certain implications. The first is that praying imprecatory psalms is a useful spiritual practice for giving voice to victims of practically any type of marginalization or abuse. In this vein, deClaissé-Walford is merely expanding on Brueggemann’s claim that speech is the solution for trauma as varied as torture or long-term, low-grade marginalization. By naming such a lengthy list of modern day examples, deClaissé-Walford suggests a limitless number of situations in which the use of imprecatory psalms might be appropriate and in fact appreciated by the silent sufferers in our congregations. Indeed, this openness is quite contrary to the fear and exclusion that generally characterizes liturgical use of these texts. Another implication of deClaissé-Walford’s intense questioning is that the failure to utilize

---

<sup>19</sup> deClaissé-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 83.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

imprecatory psalms in worship is merely symptomatic of a much larger problem of the church's blindness to social sin. This blindness only serves to deepen the oppression felt by suffering individuals by forcing them to praise God while silencing their voices. In this sense, the call to pray imprecatory or violent psalms would be an initial suggestion toward developing a liturgy that is more attentive and empowering to the victims of social sin. One of the questions that I will consider later is whether the conflation of so many varieties of suffering is helpful, and what kind of nuanced understanding of marginalization and power might help church communities discern how to employ imprecatory psalms in worship.

Another author, although not a biblical scholar, who considers the use of violent psalms in church to give voice to the traumatized is Serene Jones. In her book *Trauma and Grace*, Jones considers the use of the Psalms in healing from trauma as one of the many liturgical and theological resources available to church communities in responding to trauma in their midst. Her understanding of the healing quality of the psalms of lament (even violent ones) comes from a fruitful reading of John Calvin's *Commentary on Psalms* in light of her own research on post-traumatic stress disorder. The dialogue between Calvin's use of the Psalms and the contemporary psychological research of trauma theorists yields several significant parallels. First, she notes remarkable similarity between trauma theorists' psychological descriptions of the effects of trauma on the human psyche and the comments Calvin makes on such lament psalms as Ps 88; the "undone selves" of trauma theorists seem to have much in common with the "free among

the dead” Calvin describes.<sup>22</sup> She then notes how the healing method that Calvin suggests – praying certain types of psalms in a particular order – coordinates with movements of healing suggested by trauma theorists.<sup>23</sup> Calvin claims that praying the Psalms gives space for an individual to speak unutterable groaning in the presence of a witnessing God, a claim which aligns with contemporary psychological research connecting testimony in a safe space to healing.<sup>24</sup> That is, speaking, and being heard, or witnessed, can be accomplished through prayer if the pray-er imagines God as one who hears and affirms the pray-er’s speech. Calvin’s categorization of the Psalms into three groups – psalms of delivery, psalms of lamentation, and psalms of thanksgiving – corresponds uncannily well with the three stages of healing identified by trauma theorists – the establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life.<sup>25</sup> The intersection of trauma theory and Calvin’s commentary leads Jones to reflect on her changing views of the use of violent language in healing from trauma:

When I first ventured into Calvin’s analysis of the psalms of lamentation, the degree to which he encourages his readers to identify with the often-violent rage of the psalmist and to viciously hate “the wicked ones,” meaning the dogs, the liars, the evildoers who have hurt them – this encouragement made me quite uncomfortable. . . . When I began to read these psalms in light of trauma literature, however, my assessment shifted; I was less troubled and more intrigued by the rhetorical force of Calvin’s interpretation. I began to understand that by allowing the full range of human emotions to surface in his reading of these psalms, Calvin creates a vivid imaginative space within which his readers can similarly experience, without negative judgment, the outrage and grief that emerge as they remember and name the traumatic harm they have suffered. Moreover, I appreciated how these sentiments may have provided his readers with a language they might not initially have possessed but which they could now actively inhabit as they struggled to speak. *I saw as well that demonizing their perpetrators was*

---

<sup>22</sup> Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 51, 53-54.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

*an essential part of their healing process, and that admitting the depth of their anger toward their persecutors was a necessary precursor to his community's return to the land of the living.*<sup>26</sup>

Thus Jones characterizes the violent emotion expressed in lamentation and cries for vengeance as necessary for the healing of those who have suffered trauma. Her remarks are not without reservation; she also recognizes that a characteristic of PTSD is the compulsion to “reenact the original scene of the trauma without interrupting its dramatic unfolding.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, she is wary of encouraging psalmic prayer without recognizing the risk “that these poems/songs might also be performed in a manner that forcefully reinscribes the violence articulated rather than healing it.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, her work makes powerful use of trauma theory to defend the violence to which many protest.

In a similar vein, both Zenger and Silva use psychological insights to argue that at the very least it is important for victims of violence to feel free to express their genuine emotions in the life of prayer. Silva, for example, argues that praying these psalms “have a favorable psychological impact,” because they express rather than suppress feelings of anger and rage. Further, these psalms may effect more than simply inner healing; “indeed these uncomfortable words have more than a cathartic effect and may very well serve as an impetus for change of the oppressive situation.”<sup>29</sup> Zenger’s argument follows a similar trajectory, but goes even further. For he, like deClaissé-Walford, argues that ignoring these psalms is the characteristically numb behavior of those who have lost “that

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 60, emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Silva, “The Cursing Psalms as a Source of Blessing,” 222.

sensitivity to suffering that is constitutive for biblical piety.”<sup>30</sup> Arguing against such a loss, Zenger defends the psychological value of such honest prayers:

These psalms do not arise from the well-tempered psychological state of people from whom every scrap of sensitivity and emotion has been driven out. On the contrary, they are serious about the fundamental biblical conviction that in prayer we may say everything, literally everything, if only we say it to GOD, who is our father and mother. We have, in the meantime, learned from psychology that suppressed fears and repressed aggression do not overcome violence, but multiply it. What is necessary is that we learn to live with fears and aggressions by bringing them to consciousness and acting against their destructiveness. The psalms do not repress all this; they express it before GOD and place it in GOD’s hands. Those who suffer injustice and sin as the opposites of love, and who therefore cry out to GOD, in order that GOD will put an end to violence and contempt for human beings, are not prevented by this from living solidarity and love in concrete interaction with other human beings.<sup>31</sup>

Zenger thus argues that total transparency in prayer is a biblical conviction, a necessity for the psycho-spiritual health of an individual, and most importantly a means for dealing with aggression in a way that ultimately minimizes violence. This appeal to the psycho-spiritual benefit of imprecatory psalms goes a step further than Brueggemann’s or Jones’, in that it suggests that praying violently is not only a means for healing from violence, but also a means of potentially interrupting the cycle of violence.

Zenger’s emphasis on the compatibility of praying vengeful psalms and living in love and solidarity is complicated by LeMon’s article. LeMon begins his argument with the Latin dictum of the Christian theological tradition *lex orandi lex credendi*, and its more recent expansion by liturgical theologians: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex agendi*.<sup>32</sup> He concludes that “the careful reader of the Psalms realizes that prayer is the sole foundation of ethical behavior. Prayer informs and shapes every action in the lives of the

---

<sup>30</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>32</sup> The dictum loosely translates “The pattern of prayer is the pattern of belief, which is the pattern of action.” LeMon, “Saying Amen to Violent Psalms,” 93.

faithful. And according to the Psalms, right actions rely on constant dialogue with God.”<sup>33</sup> The healing power of speech in cases of trauma aside, LeMon certainly makes a valid point that one’s prayer and beliefs are connected to one’s actions. LeMon’s article brings up the question of how the violent psalms might shape a church community in the course of routine liturgical use, particularly if that community does not self-identify as powerless, but rather socially empowered. There is a real danger that a person “may be motivated to act as God’s agent of vengeance if and when the supplicant has the power to do so.”<sup>34</sup> LeMon cites the instance in which a church pastor publicly celebrated the murder of an abortion doctor as an answer to imprecatory prayers.<sup>35</sup> LeMon’s challenge is significant because it introduces the factor of social location and relative power among those praying violent psalms in church into what could have become an oversimplified conversation about “the marginalized.” LeMon’s article brings up questions of intersecting privilege and oppression, as well as the complex nature of agency for those living in one margin or another. These issues certainly complicate the picture and challenge the assumed inevitability of right moral action following from release of violent desires. These complications certainly do not delegitimize the notion that lament and imprecation can be healing, nor imply that the church should remain silent in the face of suffering. Rather, the questions function as the catalysts for further investigation as to how these psalms can bring voice and healing to sufferers while interrupting cycles of violence.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 104.

### The Psycho-spiritual Benefit of Catharsis and/or Surrender of Vengeance

Many biblical scholars name additional beneficial effects of praying lament or imprecatory psalms, despite (or because of) their calls for violence: cathartic release of aggression (which presumably aids in the healing process), and surrender of violent impulses to God. The link between voice and healing has been made by Brueggemann, as mentioned above; but he also goes beyond individual healing in his estimate of the beneficial effects of lamentation.

I proposed [in *Praying the Psalms*] that what the lament psalms do is show Israel doing three things. First, you must voice the rage. Everybody knows that. Everybody in the therapeutic society knows that you must voice it, *but therapeutic society stops there*. Second, you must submit it to another, meaning God in this context. Third, you then must relinquish it and say, “I entrust my rage to you.”<sup>36</sup>

Thus Brueggemann intentionally moves beyond the claims of the “therapeutic society” in order to make a theological/pastoral claim about the proper response to rage. In his chapter “Vengeance – Human and Divine” in *Praying the Psalms*, Brueggemann elaborates, using Psalm 109 as his model, the vengeful speech of the Psalms as moving through two stages. The first involves owning and fully articulating one’s rage; in the second, “this full rage and bitterness is *yielded to God’s wisdom and providential care*. . . . The yielding cannot be full and free unless the articulation and owning is first full and free. The yielding, i.e., submission to God, is an act of faith and confidence.”<sup>37</sup>

Brueggemann importantly qualifies his claim, writing, “By the end of such a Psalm, the cry for vengeance is not resolved. The rage is not removed. But it has been dramatically

---

<sup>36</sup> Brueggemann, “Voice as Counter to Violence,” 24.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1982), 71.



transformed by the double step of *owning* and *yielding*.”<sup>38</sup> That he considers his schema to be a theological understanding laid upon a psychological foundation is evident when he writes, “the Psalm characteristically is structured to show that vengeance is not simply a psychological but a theological matter. It must be referred to God. And when vengeance is referred to God, the speaker is relatively free from its power.”<sup>39</sup>

Others share Brueggemann’s perspective regarding the psalmic move toward surrender. Indeed, David Firth’s entire book *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms*, argues that the theology of the Psalms is one of surrendering retributive violence before God. He concludes that “from the human perspective, violence may be received, pondered, and suffered, but it may not be initiated. That is a right that belongs solely to Yahweh, and *is a right that is handed over in worship*.”<sup>40</sup> Firth analyzes thirteen psalms in which the individual experiences violence in some way (including sickness) and prays in response to that violent situation. Firth sees the theology of surrender consistently present in all of the psalms he examines. He thus concludes that “the presence of such a pattern is suggestive of a policy with which the final editors of the Psalter worked.”<sup>41</sup> In his introduction, he suggests that a consistent editorial policy “would, in fact, represent a didactic element within the Psalms.”<sup>42</sup> Although Firth does not make any claims about the effects of contemporary devotees praying the individual laments, per se, his indication that the Psalms were composed/arranged in order to teach a theology of surrender implies

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>40</sup> David Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaints* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), 3, emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3.

that one who prays the Psalms should learn that the proper response to violence is surrender of vengeance.

Zenger also is clear that the theology of the vengeful psalms leaves vengeance to God in an act of human surrender; he does, however, view this understanding as one that has been lost in translation. For example, the word rendered in Christian bibles as “vengeance” in Psalm 94:1 (*n<sup>e</sup>qamot*) is inappropriately translated, according to Zenger. The modern connotations of vengeance/revue in English suggest violent action undertaken outside of the auspices of the legal system. Zenger asserts that the psalmist’s understanding of vengeance does not connote uncontrolled rage that leads to violent action outside the legal procedure, but rather righteous, legitimate judgment.

When those who pray call to their God as the righteous judge, they avert “vengeance” from themselves. It is not some irrational, wildly abusive God to whom they cry (one before whom they themselves would be in fear!). They appeal to a God who, as the God of justice, considers, decides, and punishes ... The analogue in the background here is precisely not uncontrolled or secret vengeance, but the public intervention of a legitimate, constituted authority.<sup>43</sup>

Thus Zenger also sees vengeful psalms as calling for surrender, although he is unsure of whether that interpretation has persisted in present day English-speaking Christianity. Therefore, he calls for a new translation that better conveys this meaning.<sup>44</sup>

deClaissé-Walford builds upon both Brueggemann’s and Zenger’s work around surrender, adding an additional claim: not only do imprecatory psalms enable surrender, they are also necessary for ethical, peace-making actions in the face of oppression. In her concluding paragraph, she considers the responsibility that the pray-er maintains, after surrendering violent desire to God. She concludes that after giving over anger and rage,

---

<sup>43</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 71.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

the one who prays remains responsible for acting to end further violence. She also implies that it is only through this surrender that such action becomes possible:

As long as people are angry and vengeful against the leaders of those countries who deprive their citizens of the basic human needs of food, water, and shelter, we will never have the energy to find ways to provide folk with those basic needs. As long as we are angry and feel vengeful against those who commit violent crimes, we will never have the energy to move out into our communities and work to eradicate the root causes of those violent crimes. As long as we harbor absolute and abhorrent hate for those who commit terrorist acts, we will never have the energy to attempt to build bridges across the great divide of our worldviews.<sup>45</sup>

Thus the healing, cathartic process of praying lament psalms of vengeance can be summarized as freedom; freedom from the venom of rage, freedom from participation in an endless cycle of violence, and freedom to take meaningful action in the world to end violence.

But what about those who do not self-identify as victims of violence? Are the imprecatory psalms ever appropriate for them to pray? Some would argue that the transformative power of the lament and/or cursing psalms is not limited to those who are experiencing oppression. Jacobson, for instance, acknowledges that many in his American congregation do not come to worship feeling anger and rage at the experience of marginalization. Using Brueggemann's term, he describes a significant portion of his congregation as "oriented." However, in his view, "the state of orientation is impermanent. . . . Because disorientation is coming, pastors and liturgists should try to equip parishioners against the day it arrives."<sup>46</sup> But the spiritual benefit is not only for the oriented; it is on behalf of the disoriented, the sufferer, that the pastor dares to trouble the

---

<sup>45</sup> deClaissé-Walford, "The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms," 92.

<sup>46</sup> Rolf Jacobson, "Burning Our Lamps with Borrowed Oil: The Liturgical Use of the Psalms and the Life of Faith" in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 95.

waters for the oriented. The hope, according to Jacobson, is that by experiencing the cognitive dissonance of disorientation (by praying lament psalms), those who are oriented will be prodded toward new cognitions and attitudes toward those who suffer. One example Jacobson gives is a repudiation of the belief that suffering is a form of punishment.<sup>47</sup> While Jacobson hopes that the lament psalms might create more compassion and unity between those who fall in the general categories of “oriented” and “disoriented,” Zenger zeros in on violence in particular, and views the violent psalms as tools of exposing violence and creating a space for its disruption. He writes, “because the psalms of enmity express sensitivity to suffering in light of the misfortune *of others* within *their own* address to God in prayer, those who pray them are inevitably faced with the question of *their own* complicity in the web of violence.”<sup>48</sup> Thus the violent psalms are healthy for even those in positions of power, in that they are the occasions for self-examination and repentance for complicity in violence.

#### Theological Insights of Cursing Psalms

In addition to the many arguments regarding the value of lament or imprecation psalms for marginalized Christians’ psycho-spiritual healing and health, there are a number of arguments for the use of these psalms simply for the sake of good theology. The concern here usually stems from a suspicion that our human inclination is to fashion our image of God to look like ourselves, while ignoring those pieces of the tradition that make us uncomfortable. Biblical scholars point out a number of theological insights that violent and imprecatory psalms provide to us. deClaissé-Walford, for example, argues that the

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 76.

very presence of imprecatory psalms in our sacred scriptures indicate that “God does not ask us to suppress those emotions but rather to speak about them in plain and heartfelt terms.”<sup>49</sup> Silva makes the same argument: “The imprecatory psalms are God’s wonderful way of recognizing that our human struggles are not always pretty and involve many negative feelings. God-with-us does not want us to ignore these feelings of anger, rage, or vengeance, nor to pretend that those who have faith in God are above such feelings.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, these violent psalms’ status as prayers of the faithful tell Christians that God appreciates honest prayer, even if the pray-er honestly desires violence. deClaissé-Walford further argues that these psalms’ theological implication is that God is able to alleviate those things in the world that are not good.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Zenger argues that these lament psalms require a profound trust in God, in that they assume a God who is not only *able* to right wrongs, but *desires* to right wrongs; “the appeal and the trust of those praying, in fact, depend essentially on the presupposition that God is *personally* touched by injustice, and is even called into question by it – and that God must bring about justice ‘for the sake of God’s own name.’”<sup>52</sup>

That God desires human honesty and cares about the injustices humans face is a fairly innocuous proposition. Many church pastors would whole-heartedly endorse such claims. There are other theological insights that these psalms bring about that are more complex. Some biblical scholars argue that the theology of the Psalms posits vengeance as properly belonging to God. That is, vengeance is righteous when enacted by Yahweh, while simultaneously unrighteous when enacted by humans. Because of this theological

---

<sup>49</sup> deClaissé-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 89.

<sup>50</sup> Silva, “The Cursing Psalms as a Source of Blessing,” 222.

<sup>51</sup> deClaissé-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 90.

<sup>52</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 71.

rule, “there is no need to seek retribution because the world view of the psalm again assumes that Yahweh acts on behalf of the righteous against the wicked.”<sup>53</sup> In the same vein, Brueggemann asserts that:

The Psalms (and the entire Bible) are clear that *vengeance belongs to God* (Deut. 32:25, Ps. 94:1, Isa. 63:4, Rom. 12:19, Heb. 10:30). Vengeance is not human business. Now it may trouble us that God is concerned with human vengeance. But we may begin with the awareness that the assignment of vengeance to God means an end to human vengeance. It is a liberating assertion that I do not need to trouble myself with retaliation, for that is left safely in God’s hands. The Psalmist seems to know that. The venomous words show that the reality of vengeance is present. But that these words are addressed to God shows a recognition that this is God’s business and not ours. That is the first and most important thing to say about God’s vengeance. To affirm that vengeance belongs to God is an act of profound faith. Conversely, to try to keep some vengeance for self and to withhold it from God is to mistrust God, as though we could do it better than God. Affirmation of God’s vengeance is in fact a yielding.

Brueggemann’s claim about the theology of the Psalms is echoed by others who write about God’s violence in the Hebrew Bible more generally. Harold Wayne Ballard, Jr. explores the motif of the Divine Warrior in the Psalms, and concludes that a primary role for the Divine Warrior in the Psalms is that of a judge. “Yahweh is called upon to judge the evil of men and to act accordingly. The Divine Warrior is also expected to mete out justice if some are found lacking in righteousness.”<sup>54</sup> Ballard’s identification of the Divine Warrior theme with the judge theme indicates that it is a part of Yahweh’s role as judge to utilize violence and war in punishment. In this way, violence is a category for God to exercise, not humans, who are subject to God’s judgment.

Quarantining violence into the realm of God’s action and not our own, however, does not sufficiently respond to the fear and terror around violence. That it is pushed to

---

<sup>53</sup> Firth, *Surrendering Retribution*, 141.

<sup>54</sup> Harold Wayne Ballard, Jr. *The Divine Warrior Motif in the Psalms* (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1999), 77.

the divine realm may provide some relief, but ultimately the practice of violence on the part of God still evokes images of what Zenger refers to as “sadistic and/or masochistic destructiveness” as a part of “pseudo-Christian threats and fantasies of hell found even today.”<sup>55</sup> Thus Zenger works to recover not only our theological understanding of vengeance as properly God’s, but also as properly *good*. He writes, “We have suppressed in our Christian consciousness the idea that judgment is for the sake of justice, especially for those who are the victims of injustice, and that the purpose of this judgment is to restore everything ‘as it should be’ – and even to confront the wicked with their injustice in such a way that they honor justice through their repentance.”<sup>56</sup> Zenger’s image of justice as good in some ways minimizes the violence typically associated with God’s judgment or the “day of the Lord.” When judgment is cast in terms of adjudication between good and evil, and rejection of the latter, its theological and spiritual benefit is clear.

Zenger’s inclination to defend God’s *goodness* amidst violent imagery is countered by the opposite contention of David Blumenthal. Rather than making recourse to that commonly ascribed attribute of God, Blumenthal instead opts to add an attribute to God’s character, based on his reading of the Psalms and other texts: abusiveness. Thus he follows Brueggemann’s argument insofar as he faces head-on the issue of rage-filled violence and its use by God; however, he asserts that Brueggemann does not go far enough. Brueggemann, he claims, withholds final approval of humanity’s rage on ethical grounds, but Blumenthal cannot do this, because humanity’s rage is wholly justified in

---

<sup>55</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

the face of an abusing God.<sup>57</sup> Blumenthal concludes that “*God is abusive, but not always,*” and further that “What is true of abusive behavior by humans is true of abusive behavior by God. When God acts abusively, we are the victims, we are innocent. . . . Furthermore, the reasons for God’s actions are irrelevant, God’s motives are not the issue. Abuse is unjustified, in God as well as human beings.”<sup>58</sup> Blumenthal thus constructs his theology of protest around this central claim.

### Chapter 3: Theological and Ethical Responses

#### Understanding Vengeance as God’s and Not Ours

The arguments included in these scholars’ calls for reclamation of violent/imprecatory/lament psalms have certain theological and ethical implications. Indeed, Zenger is aware that the re-examination he offers of psalms of vengeance, if accepted, will affect and alter our understanding of the nature of God, the word of God, and the shape of our own faith and practice in light of these.<sup>59</sup> In this section, I will explore what I see as the most significant theological claim of the above arguments and its potential effects on Christian practice.<sup>60</sup> First, I will explore the suggestion that violent retribution as a category belongs properly to God, especially as it relates to theological

---

<sup>57</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 244-5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>59</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 63.

<sup>60</sup> While Blumenthal’s argument certainly has theological and ethical implications, they are clearly discussed in his book, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*. I will not discuss Blumenthal’s argument in this section for three reasons. First, I have no new insights to add to his thorough argument. Second, in my view, his argument does not bring up the same ethical and theological complications that many of the others do. Third, I will be arguing here from a Christian perspective, using Christian theological categories that would not be helpful for illuminating Blumenthal’s argument from a Jewish perspective.



anthropology and the concept of the *imago dei*. My goal is to explore what kind of theological sense it makes to assign violent retribution to God while limiting it in humans. Second, I will explore the ethical implications that flow from the preceding discussion, using the concept of *imitatio dei* as my guide. Specifically, I will consider how the rule of *imitatio dei* is transformed by the existence of a category which belongs to God, and attempt to develop a Christological ethical model in light of this reality.

One conversation that is helpful to bring into this dialogue is that around God's violence in creation. The insights that Paul Ricoeur, Walter Wink, and J. Richard Middleton bring to that topic apply to this conversation because they explore the consequences of God's violence for theological ethics. While it is true that the biblical scholars above have named particularly *vengeance* as belonging to God, it is unclear why a *justified* violent action like retribution should be excluded from the realm of ethical human behavior unless there is something about violence more generally that is inappropriate for humans but appropriate for God. Thus the conversation about God's violence in creation may shed light on this topic insofar as it explores theological anthropology and/or the meaning of the *imago dei* in light of God's violence. Most of these arguments see a top-down effect in terms of legitimating violence, so that God's violence is used to legitimate, or even ensure, human violence. These arguments provide a foil for any overly simple image of violence as belonging to God while remaining naturally removed from human ethical behavior. We can thus use this conversation as a starting place in nuancing our thought around vengeance belonging to God and its implications for ethical human response to violence.

Ethical exploration of the violence present in some biblical creation accounts was sparked by Herman Gunkel's 1895 work, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton*, which identified in several psalms and other biblical texts evidence of a creation-by-combat myth, or *Chaoskampf*, which was shared by other Ancient Near Eastern cultures.<sup>61</sup> Several authors have since taken up the question, what might be the ethical implications of God's creating the world through violence? Tikva Frymer-Kensy, for example, identifies the *Chaoskampf* as an extremely detrimental myth for encouraging ethical human behavior because it "manifests faith that power is a constructive force."<sup>62</sup> By establishing the creation of the world as a violent conquering of chaotic, destructive forces by a dominating male figure, she argues, the *Chaoskampf* encourages messianic thinking that waits for a strong male to continue solving problems through violence. Further, the myth's use in legitimating earthly kingship demonstrates the persuasive power of the paradigm in justifying political violence. Such a myth is dangerous for our culture, she argues, because of "our culture's fervent desire to believe, not that might makes right, but that right-minded might can make everything right."<sup>63</sup> While this myth promises order, she argues that it only contributes to an endless, cosmic cycle of violence; "violence used to defeat enemies always leads to new violence as it creates resentment and revenge fantasies in those it defeats. Threatened violence leads us to seek a redeemer; the power we invest in our redeemers turns against us once they become

---

<sup>61</sup> Hermann Gunkel and Heinrich Zimmern, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>62</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensy, "Creation Myths Breed Violence: The Chaokampf Myth of Creation Sets Up a Cosmic Cycle of Violence. Can it Ever Bring Peace?" *BR* (*Washington, D.C.*) 14, no. 3 (June 1, 1998): 17-22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

kings of the universe. The combat myth is a violent myth, and after all our history, ancient and recent, it is hard to believe that violence can ever bring peace.”<sup>64</sup>

While Frymer-Kensy’s argument is based mostly on political and cultural observations, others dig deeper into the potential problem of creation-by-combat for ethics and theological anthropology. Paul Ricoeur laid the foundations of the argument, taken up and expanded upon by others, that the Babylonian creation myth (a manifestation of the *Chaoskampf*) essentially justifies human violence. He arrives at this claim by examining the philosophical implications of order/creation arriving through the violent conquering of chaos. According to Ricoeur, the myth situates evil as ontologically prior to good. Further, in order to eradicate the evil of disorder, more disorder is required, “for it is still by disorder that disorder is overcome; it is by violence that the youngest of the gods establishes order.”<sup>65</sup> Thus “the creative act, which distinguishes, separates, measures, and puts in order, is inseparable from the criminal act.”<sup>66</sup> Ricoeur then steps back to consider the ramifications of this creation myth in the Babylonian social and religious consciousness.

It will be seen what human violence is thus justified by the primordial violence. Creation is a victory over an Enemy older than the creator; that Enemy, immanent in the divine, will be represented in history by all the enemies whom the king in his turn, as servant of the god, will have as his mission to destroy. Thus Violence is inscribed in the origin of things, in the principle that establishes while it destroys.<sup>67</sup>

Ricoeur goes on to name the connection between the king’s enactment of violence through war and Marduk’s conquering of chaos in creation. “If the King represents the

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 179.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 182-183.

god who overcomes chaos, the Enemy should represent the forces of evil in our history and his insolence should represent a resurgence of ancient chaos.”<sup>68</sup> Thus the creation myth provides a foundation for holy war theology and political violence in general.

So I see the ultimate outcome of this type of myth in a theology of war founded on the identification of the Enemy with the powers that god has vanquished and continues to vanquish in the drama of creation. Through the mediation of the king, the drama of creation becomes significant for the whole history of mankind, and particularly for all of that aspect of human life which is characterized by combat. In other words, the mythological type of the drama is marked by the *King-Enemy* relation, which becomes the political relation *par excellence*.<sup>69</sup>

Although Ricoeur here discusses the Babylonian version of the *Chaoskampf*, which is more prominent and defined than the traces present in the Hebrew Bible, some of the principles are helpful for our conversation. Particularly his emphasis on the role of the king as the mediator between the cosmic and the historical is useful. Even those who wish to argue that vengeance is unacceptable in humans while acceptable for God must admit that the role of the king, in the Psalms and the Hebrew Bible as a whole, provides a problematic exception.<sup>70</sup> Further, designating violence as a natural or appropriate way for God to respond to enemies seems to validate this response as a natural or appropriate way for humans to respond to enemies, as the trajectory of Ricoeur’s argument demonstrates. It therefore requires more exploration, theologically, to understand why the opposite might be the case in the theology of the Psalms. Finally, if the King’s role does prove to be a leak, so to speak, in the barrier between God’s permissible action and humanity’s,

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 197-8.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Firth states that “Within the “I” psalms only the violence that may be enacted by Yahweh is acceptable. The only apparent exception to this occurs ... in the actions attributed to the king in the royal psalms. Here, however, the perspective changes so that the king is understood as the one who acts of behalf of Yahweh.” Firth, *Surrendering Retribution*, 3. See also LeMon, “Saying Amen to Violent Psalms,” 97.

then the clarity regarding ethical human behavior in relationship to vengeful desires is lost.

Walter Wink certainly believes this “leak” exists, to the detriment of many. While Ricoeur’s argument focuses on the social/political role of the King and his influence on society, Wink takes up his argument in relationship to social consciousness as a whole, arguing that peace is impossible from this worldview. After summarizing Ricoeur’s argument, Wink concludes:

The implications are clear: humanity is created from the blood of a murdered god. Our very origin is violence. Killing is in our blood. Humanity is not the originator of evil, but merely finds evil already present and perpetuates it. Our origins are divine, to be sure, since we are made from a god, but from the blood of an assassinated god. We are the consequence of deicide. Human beings are thus naturally incapable of peaceful coexistence.”<sup>71</sup>

Wink’s theological anthropology is not at all limited to the “king,” or in modern terms, the representative of the state. Wink uses this foundation to discuss the premise of redemptive violence in popular culture today, concluding that “it is the dominant myth in contemporary America (more influential by far than Judaism or Christianity), that it enshrines a cult of violence at the heart of public life, and that even those who seek to oppose its oppressive violence often do so using the very same means.”<sup>72</sup>

J. Richard Middleton also utilizes Ricoeur’s argument about the King to consider wider ethical implications for humanity in general. His starting place is the concept of the *imago dei*, and the popular interpretation of the concept to mean “the status or office of humanity as God’s authorized stewards, charged with representing God’s rule on

---

<sup>71</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 15.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

earth.”<sup>73</sup> This representative power in the *imago dei* is effective for all humans, not only God’s representative in the king. Thus the ethical implications are of broader concern. Middleton argues that “it is not enough to claim an analogy or likeness between human power and God’s own power. What is urgently needed is an investigation into the content or substance of the power humans in the divine image are expected to exercise.”<sup>74</sup> At first glance, it may seem that Middleton’s argument operates, or at least investigates, with similar assumptions to Firth’s, Brueggemann’s, and others’ who distinguish between God’s appropriate action and our own. But a close reading of the structure of Middleton’s ethical query reveals that his concern is not to demarcate the scope of responsible exercise of power for humans from an infinite scope available to God, thereby limiting in humans what is acceptable in God. Rather, Middleton seeks to illuminate more about the way in which God exercises power, in order to understand how humans made in God’s image might then exercise power on God’s behalf. It is important to note that Middleton names as his primary concern the coupling of power and violence that often leads to abuse and/or oppression.<sup>75</sup> Thus the starting point of his query hearkens back to the primary concern of LeMon’s article; that power affects the ways that violence is understood and used ethically. There is a discernable ethical difference (even for those who eschew all forms of violence) between the violent rage of a powerless individual experiencing some kind of dehumanizing oppression and an individual wielding social power and a bad temper. Middleton’s concern is that the *imago dei* might become a

---

<sup>73</sup> J. Richard Middleton, “Created in the Image of a Violent God? The Ethical Problem of the Conquest of Chaos in Biblical Creation Texts” *Interpretation* 58, no. 4 (Oct 1, 2004): 341-355, 341.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 341-2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

concept employed by those in power to justify abusive behavior. Because the combination of power and violence is so ethically troubling for Middleton, it is problematic if God's exercise of power appears to be *intrinsically* violent; thus, Middleton begins in the story that has the most significant ontological ramifications – the creation story.

The *Chaoskampf*, as others have argued above, seems to “enshrine violence as the quintessential divine action.”<sup>76</sup> Because the concept of the *imago dei* implies that humans should take their ethical cues about the exercise power from God, the problem must be resolved first in the divine realm. The thrust of Middleton's argument, therefore, is an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which the distinct use of the *Chaoskampf* in the Hebrew Bible transforms some of the ontological implications named by Ricoeur and others. By employing the *Chaoskampf* infrequently, and to describe historical struggles, the authors of the Hebrew Bible effectively mute the cosmic meaning of the myth in favor of discrete historical conflicts. While Middleton recognizes that this myth tends to justify and/or reinforce ethnocentric/nationalistic military endeavors by valorizing the king and the order he creates through violent subjugation of the chaotic enemy, he maintains that the myth's use in a primarily *historical* sense provides important limitations to its power. In describing Pss 2 and 110, he writes

Such texts raise the question of whether it makes any significant difference if the combat myth is used in connection with creation or with history. Do not both suggest that violence is God's characteristic action, thus legitimating human violence in the world? Indeed, Levenson suggests that “too much can be made of the distinction between the myth *with* creation and the myth *without* creation.”

On the contrary, I think it is a crucial distinction. The use of a “historicized” combat myth to describe a particular historical event (like the exodus) makes no particular assumptions about the primordial or normative

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

character of violence or evil. Rather, evil is treated as an intra-historical reality, without assigning it ontological status.<sup>77</sup>

While the Hebrew Bible's use of the myth may not assign evil an ontological status, it still seems to justify the use of violence, particularly for the state, as a way to create order. Middleton sees this aspect as even more problematic in the modern world than the ancient Near East, because "the combat myth does not strictly require a monarchy. In the contemporary world, where human agency is more widely diffused, a democratized *imago dei* combined with the us/them framework of the chaos/cosmos scheme may harbor significant potential for the legitimation of human violence at many levels."<sup>78</sup> Here Middleton is drawing on the work of liberation theologian Pedro Trigo, who identifies the chaos/cosmos binary in the *Chaoskampf* as essentially polarizing and violent. Significant for our conversation is Trigo's analysis of the ways that the *Chaoskampf* becomes alluring to marginalized groups as well as the oppressive, militaristic state structures it naturally endorses. His argument follows a similar trajectory to Franz Fanon's analysis of the use of violence in the consciousness of a colonized people,<sup>79</sup> although Trigo has a decidedly more negative perspective; as a result of being subject to the violence of "these enslaving, highly ritualized polarizations," he argues, "we may be seriously tempted, however, unconsciously, to 'buy' the chaos-versus-cosmos schema, and simply throw in our lot with the excluded, chaotic member."<sup>80</sup> This temptation is a result of the psychological pressure of life "experienced as profoundly

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>79</sup> Frantz Fanon, "Concerning Violence," in *On Violence: A Reader*, ed. Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 79-100.

<sup>80</sup> Pedro Trigo, *Creation and History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 79.



irrational and ruthless. It is not easy to discover meaning under such conditions. Hence the propensity to adopt an oversimplified view, characterized by stark contrasts.”<sup>81</sup>

Identifying danger in the *Chaoskampf* for both the powerful and the relatively powerless, Middleton is careful to argue for the primary place of the Gen 1-2 creation narratives in the Hebrew Bible. While acknowledging that the *Chaoskampf*, and indeed all violence in the Hebrew Bible, must be dealt with in Christian ethics, he sees Gen 1-2 as the normative understanding of God’s creative use of power and intentions for humanity, by which the violence of the rest of the Hebrew Bible must be judged. Ultimately, the peaceful creation story of Gen 1 provides not only a normative interpretive framework, but also “a paradigm or model for exercising of human power in the midst of a world filled with violence.”<sup>82</sup>

Ultimately, then, Middleton finds his paradigm for human behavior by solving the problem on the divine level; his emphasizing Gen 1, a peaceful portrait of God, as the normative text solves humanity’s problem with violence because it solves God’s “problem” with violence. In that sense, Middleton’s argument is not helpful in considering our quest to understand how vengeance as a category belongs to God and not humans, because Middleton’s argument focuses on the ontological *likeness* between humans and God. Where his argument is helpful, however, is in his turn from ontological concerns of God’s violent creation to historical-ethical concerns of God’s violence in history. When the ontological question is muted, the intra-historical question can be attended to. By solving the cosmic dilemma that Wink and others presented, Middleton “saves” humanity in the ontological sense from the *necessity* of re-enacting cosmic

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>82</sup> Middleton, “Created in the Image of a Violent God,” 355.

violence perpetually in the historical realm, bringing us one step closer to establishing a theology in which God might be violent while creating humans to be peaceful. This move makes the question of discerning how humans should respond to violence in the historical realm significantly less fraught. Thus we can move on to consider certain historical examples of divine violence that, while not necessarily carrying cosmic weight, are certainly paradigmatic in nature.

In his book *Yahweh is a Warrior*, Millard Lind approaches the issue of human participation in divine violence using a few paradigmatic historical episodes that he sees as foundational in shaping Israel's theology of war, and he traces that theology's shifts and changes throughout Israel's history. His argument relies on his understanding of Yahweh's paradigmatic violent victories as *non-synergistic* with human agency; that is, Yahweh wins battles by himself, and the role of the people is not violence but faithfulness. Thus for Lind, two normative texts are the story of the exodus, especially as expressed in the Song of the Sea, and Israel's other ancient war poem, the Song of Deborah. From these texts, particularly the first, Lind makes bold claims: "the unilateral role of Yahweh as warrior in freeing the Hebrews from Egypt is the emphasis of all of Israel's relevant literature, the earliest as well as the latest."<sup>83</sup> The exodus text is so foundational because it establishes Israel's deliverance in the midst of warfare not through Israel's military action, but through a prophetic figure. This experience created a distinct theo-political order that enshrined Yahweh as king, rather than an earthly figure, and thus avoided functioning as an endorsement of state violence through human kingship. This form of theo-political order seems to answer Ricoeur's and others' point

---

<sup>83</sup> Millard Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 170.

about the role of the king as a translator of the cosmic violence of God into the historical violence of God-through-the-king. Lind acknowledges that this theo-political ideal, while normative, did not last. Already in the Song of Deborah, an early text, he notes the celebration of Israel's participation in warfare, and the placement of the figure of the war leader alongside the prophetic personality, although the latter remains dominant.<sup>84</sup> By the time of the monarchy, this distinctive theology of warfare is overpowered by the reliance upon traditional methods of warfare, although he sees a resurgence of the more ancient belief with the rise of David. The continued competition between the prophetic/critical voice alongside traditional military power represents for Lind the persistence of the more ancient view, and its ultimate victory after the fall of the monarchy. This treatment of the issue is of course incomplete; as Marvin Tate remarks, "Lind leaves a good many loose ends and does not solve the fundamental problem of Yahweh's violence. After all, the Egyptians 'dead upon the seashore' (Ex. 14:30) were just as dead whether killed by Yahweh's storm or Yahweh's war."<sup>85</sup> Although Tate only hints at it here, understanding Yahweh's violence as primarily through natural phenomena may solve one ethical problem, but it introduces many more in an age of increasing natural devastations. While Lind's argument has significant limitations, it does suggest a means of considering the limits of kingship that might then apply more broadly to human action through the "democratized *imago dei*," described by Middleton. With this foundation, the task at hand is to name more precisely what those limits are, or how to discern them; in Lind's

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Marvin Tate, "War and Peacemaking in the Old Testament," *Review & Expositor* 79, no. 4, (Sept 1, 1982): 587-596, 592.

review of the literature there lingers the troubling suspicion that waiting for Yahweh may not exclude human engagement in military action.

Both Lind's and Middleton's articles, and indeed the larger conversation around the *Chaoskampf*, provide important insights for our consideration of the claim that vengeance belongs to God. A basic insight of these authors is that God's violence at the very least problematizes the ideal of peaceful world without human violence, and has troubling implications for theological ethics. Central among them is the question of how the role of the king as God's ambassador or the human person as made in God's image can be understood if violence is proper to God but improper to humans. Middleton's move to relativize the question of God's violence for theological anthropology by appealing to the norm of Gen 1-2 and the intra-historical nature of biblical descriptions of God's violence shifted our discussion to the historical realm. We then assessed the troubling role of the king as a cosmic-historical link as God's representative, and the ways in which the *imago dei* has become "democratized" in the contemporary world to include humans generally, and not just political representatives who embody some sort of quasi-divine power. Lind offers one potential solution, by considering the limitations imposed on Israelite kingship (which could be generalized to humanity in Middleton's democratic schema) by its unique theology of warfare. The biblical and indeed our historical record demonstrate that this response is incomplete. It is therefore crucial to look for constructive models of ethical human action to accompany the limitation placed on humans by the theological claim that vengeance belongs to God.

### Sketching a Christian Ethical Model: Imitatio Dei?

Here another theological concept may be more helpful to explore than the *imago dei*, which is primarily concerned with ontology. Walter Houston's investigation of the concept of *imitatio dei* might provide a more useful framework for considering the historical side of divine and human violence without recourse to underlying metaphysical considerations. Houston begins his discussion with the question of whether God's character in the Old Testament "provides an appropriate basis for the *imitatio dei* that a number of writers have argued is prominent in Old Testament ethics."<sup>86</sup> He reviews several authors who argue that *imitatio dei* is a key principle of Old Testament ethics, an idea Houston believes was perhaps "suggested by the Christian principle of *imitatio Christi*, which is already well established in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John."<sup>87</sup> The conversation around *imitatio dei* in Old Testament ethics centers on the question of whether or not God is limited by the ethical considerations of humans. This is not merely an issue of power – as to whether or not humans are able to question God – but a larger issue of "whether the biblical character known as YHWH or Elohim inhabits the same moral universe as the people he governs, and if so whether he is really bound by the same moral principles." Houston cites several authors who conclude at the very least that "YHWH's conduct is inconsistent with what he asks of his people,"<sup>88</sup> such that "it is sufficient to say that [these judgments] are made to show that it is very far from self-

---

<sup>86</sup> Walter Houston, "The Character of YHWH and the Ethics of the Old Testament: Is *Imitatio Dei* Appropriate?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (April 2007): 1-25, 1.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

evident that imitation of the God of the Old Testament makes sense as an ethical principle.”<sup>89</sup>

Houston’s suggestion that God’s behavior is sometimes, but not always, appropriate to imitate could certainly help illuminate the notion that vengeance belongs to God. That God operates on a different, perhaps higher or more expansive, and certainly more inscrutable ethical plane makes the surrender of vengeance to God an act of wisdom and not resignation, passivity, or ethical irresponsibility. It is true that to take this approach is to depart slightly from Zenger’s attempt to restore faith in God’s goodness/fairness, and the legitimacy of vengeance; for appealing to the transcendence of God’s moral universe means losing certainty in our judgment of God’s ethical behavior. We cannot completely circumscribe a realm of fairness in which to situate God’s vengeance or judgment if we emphasize our moral distance and difference from God. This is not to say we can make no moral judgments of God’s action, but that we admit them to be always incomplete. The ethical questions posed by cursing psalms, then, are not about God’s goodness or legitimacy as much as they are our own actions and responses to injustice. How might we facilitate surrender and how should we respond to injustice, if not by enacting vengeance? It is one thing to recognize that the behavior of the inscrutable God Christians worship does not always provide a direct correspondence for a Christian ethical model; it is another to determine appropriate human behavior in light of that reality. Tate’s essay on war in the Hebrew Bible provides one reading that may be helpful, although it is certainly partial. Here, Tate affirms Yahweh’s participation/direction in acts of war in the Hebrew Bible, but asserts that “in terms of our

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 7.

own behavior we surely must take our guidance from Yahweh's *basic intention* for Israel."<sup>90</sup> Tate identifies this basic intention as a desire for Israel to be "worshippers not warriors."<sup>91</sup> He emphasizes that Yahweh's purpose for Israel is not to make war, but shalom among people and nature, citing Isa 11:6. He is careful, however, not to exclude war from the realm of faithful people's action:

If the Jew or the Christian does participate in war, it ought always to be with a heavy heart and *a sense of deep failure*, knowing full well that the mission of the people of Yahweh should be that of peacemakers and not warriors. On the other hand, we ought not to try to banish the Divine Warrior from our theological heritage. God has used war to accomplish his purposes in history – at times against his own people – and he may do so again. We dare not make absolutes of either violence or non-violence, war or peace. Our mission is clear. We are to move toward the vision of justice and peace which the Divine Warrior has given to his people, for the Divine Warrior is also our loving heavenly Father, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>92</sup>

What is helpful about Tate's argument is not his practical suggestions (which are quite vague) but his method of including and accepting God's violence in his theological horizon, while still claiming an ultimate goal of peace for God and a mandate of peacemaking for humans. While he acknowledges the occasion for war in human history, he withholds approval for it, still naming it as a failure, *even while he claims that God may use it to accomplish God's ends*; thus he maintains the tension between God's ethical responsibility and ours. Tate's argument seems to operate similarly to Middleton's, inasmuch as he relativizes a violent image for God in light of other texts; at the same time, his argument resonates with Houston's claim that God's behavior cannot be encompassed by our ethical mandates.

---

<sup>90</sup> Tate, "War and Peacemaking in the Old Testament," 594, emphasis mine.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 593.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 595.

Still, seeking peace and justice is too vague a mission in light of the ever-changing, newly formed conflicts and moral dilemmas presenting themselves to contemporary societies. The need for a guide remains even as we recognize that God may not provide that model. In some sense, the argument presented by Brueggemann, Firth, Zenger, et al. contains a partial model within itself – that is, prayer and surrender of all violent impulses to a God, for whom vengeance is proper. This model could be useful to the church insofar as surrender of violent impulses is actually accomplished through praying the Psalms. The problem, as LeMon and others have pointed out, is that the incredible diversity of human contexts brought to bear on these psalmic prayers complicates the idea that their result is always surrender; differences in power, in real or imagined enemies, in differing political contexts (democratization of the *imago dei*, for example), and in theologies of prayer all affect the act of prayer for contemporary Christians, and make the idea of surrender far murkier than it may seem.

#### Towards a Christocentric Theological Ethic of Surrender

While it is important to remember in interpreting the Psalms as prayer that their original context and meaning ought to maintain a primary place, it is equally important for Christians not to ignore the extremely significant implications of Christ's life with respect to themes like surrender to God and right response to violence. Thus I propose that the incarnation of Christ might provide important clarification of what Christian surrender of vengeance ought to look like with respect to psalmic prayer; this is not an argument for Christological interpretation of all or even most of the Psalms, nor is it an argument that a Christological interpretation should hold a primary place in our readings of these texts. Rather, I am making an argument for a Christocentric theological ethic which might



illuminate Christians' understanding of what happens when one surrenders violence to God.

It may seem problematic to argue for a Christocentric theological ethic when I have just argued for the non-imitation of the first person of the trinity. Here I find Kathryn Tanner's chapter "Politics" in her recent work *Christ the Key* helpful in distinguishing Christ's incarnate life and his cosmic life in the trinity. Tanner's argument regards Trinitarian theology as an inappropriate model for human imitation, and thus it serves our purposes here in affirming our inability to imitate God's life in its mystery, while clarifying how it is that humans are called to participate in God's work. Tanner begins by reviewing what she regards as unsuccessful attempts to imagine a model for ethical human community based on the life of the trinity; these previous efforts have failed, she argues, because "no matter how close the similarities between human and divine persons ... differences always remain – God is not us – and this sets up the major problem for theologies that want to base conclusions about human relationships on the trinity."<sup>93</sup> She goes on to clarify that much of what is attributed to the trinity seems to be inapplicable to humans because of their finitude.<sup>94</sup> While the analogy with our context may be incomplete, insofar as humans are *able* to do violence and take vengeance, the idea stands that what may be appropriate to God in God's infinity may somehow be inappropriate to humans in their creatureliness. How then, ought we think about our ethical imitation of God? Tanner argues, unsurprisingly, that Christ is the key. In the incarnation, Christ *changes* the divine economy and accomplishes something for humanity – namely our salvation – and it is perhaps in this difference that humanity can

---

<sup>93</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 221.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

takes its cue. Thus Tanner writes, “my own strategy for closing this gap also looks to what the trinity is doing for us – what is happening in the life of Christ, in short – to answer the question of how the trinity applies to human life.”<sup>95</sup> The question of how to lessen the gap between God’s life and our own is transformed by Christ’s incarnation, since “the second person of the trinity takes the humanity united to it into its own relations with Father and Spirit ... In Christ we are therefore shown what the trinity looks like when it includes the human, and what humanity looks like when it is taken up within the trinity’s own relationships.”<sup>96</sup> This is not to say that through the incarnation Christ enables humanity to reflect the Trinitarian life of God in its community. Christ’s relationship to humans did not reflect Christ’s relationship to God, and neither should ours. Rather, through Christ humans are drawn into the life of the trinity and find a way to relate to God that shapes their relationships with others into the image of Christ’s relationships with others. Jesus’s human relationship to the first person of the trinity certainly has implications for our conversation; Jesus as a human person harmonizes his will to the Father in worship and surrender, which in turn shapes his responses to humans and particularly to human violence. His example therefore resonates with the arguments about surrendering vengeance through psalmic prayer; thus Christ can provide our embodied model *and* our empowerment to accomplish this kind of prayer, through union with him. A Christocentric theological ethic thus provides clarity and perhaps can illuminate for Christians the theme of surrender on which the psalms of lament and imprecation seem to dwell.

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 235.

I do not mean to imply that by surrender I only refer to the (in)famous prayer of Gethsemane and Jesus's surrender of his will to the Father's. Rather than risk reinscribing a potentially harmful urge for the marginalized to surrender to violence by looking to this prayer in isolation, I would appeal more broadly to the pattern of Christ's prayers as a whole. A broader scope enables us to consider Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane in the context of his other prayers, which effect empowerment, challenge to social norms, and healing. Broadening the scope also enables us to avoid the unhelpful move of centering our theological reflection only on Jesus's crucifixion, a sort of theological proof-texting that typically short-changes the marginalized.<sup>97</sup>

A survey of Jesus's prayerful behavior reveals two patterns significant to our reading of surrender. The first is a tendency to pray in a way that challenges injustice. For example, Jesus's prayer for children in Mt 19:13-15 provides the occasion for him to challenge and in fact invert the disciples' assumption that children are to be excluded from Jesus's new kingdom. Similarly, Jesus challenges the disciples in Mk 9:29, in the wake of their failure to free a child from an extremely destructive demonic possession, to view prayer as the only effective means of liberation. In a more cryptic case, Jesus's curse against the fig tree frames his cleansing of the temple in Mk 11, which ultimately serves to endorse cursing prayers against unjust structures. When the disciples remark on his curse's efficacy, he responds with an exhortation to faith in God and gives the disciples an example of another curse (11:20-23). Following this, his exhortation for the disciples to have faith in their own prayers (11:24) takes on a very particular meaning. That is, Jesus's "example curse" – that the mountain might be thrown into the sea (11:23)

---

<sup>97</sup> See Kathryn Tanner, "Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal," *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 1 (Dec 1, 2004): 35-56.

– gives shape to the more general exhortation. Because this example follows immediately the cleansing of the temple, it follows that “one of the most appropriate applications of the proverbial ‘this mountain’ would be to the temple mount.”<sup>98</sup> Thus the example and exhortation work together to imply that the disciples should have faith in a certain *kind* of prayer, namely cursing prayers against structural injustice, such as that practiced in the temple situated at the mountain top. From this discernable pattern in Jesus’s prayer life one can conclude that for Jesus, prayer functions to include the marginalized, liberate the oppressed, and challenge unjust practices.

Jesus prayers are not only aimed outwardly, towards others’ liberation. There is also a discernable pattern in his prayers of an inward focus that shapes his identity and mission and empowers him to carry it out. Throughout the gospel of Luke especially, Jesus’s prayers accompany and even effect his development of a relationship with God that empowers and transforms him to do God’s will. I say effect because it appears that Jesus’s prayer is often the occasion for God’s revelation of Jesus’s identity and mission. When Jesus is baptized, for example, he is praying when the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends amidst God’s verbal message: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3:22). Later, Jesus has a conversation with his disciples about his identity, in which Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ and Jesus confirms this and elaborates on his mission (Lk 9:18-22). It is noteworthy that Luke informs the reader that this conversation arose from Jesus’s solitary prayer. Then, only a few verses later, Jesus takes Peter and John to a mountain to pray, and as he is praying is there transfigured and

---

<sup>98</sup> John Paul Heil, “The Narrative Strategy and Pragmatics of the Temple Theme in Mark,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (Jan 1, 1997): 76-100, 79.

again affirmed by the presence of Moses and Elijah and a verbal message from God: “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” (Lk 9:28-36). In both these instances, the transfiguration and the conversation with the disciples beforehand, Jesus is praying alone, but in the disciples’ presence. Thus the disciples are not praying with Jesus but serving as witnesses to Jesus’s life of prayer and the effect that it has on his identity and mission.

These other patterns of prayer set the stage for Jesus’s prayer of surrender in Gethsemane. They suggest that Jesus’s harmonizing his will to the Father’s is not a surrender to passivity or acceptance of violence; rather, it is built upon the foundation of prayers and actions that challenge injustice and empower and affirm Jesus in his divine mission. Jesus’s prayer of surrender must therefore be interpreted in that light. It should also be recognized as a particular form of surrender that does not entirely overlap with the general concept of surrendering vengeance to God. Jesus’s encouragement of cursing prayers in Mk 11, for example, could exemplify the psalmic surrender Brueggemann and others encourage, while Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemane might represent a particular kind of surrender distinct from release of vengeance. For Jesus here surrenders not vengeful desires, necessarily, but primarily his own life. The prayer itself reveals the great difficulty and the real internal struggle it evokes. He is described in the gospel of Luke as praying in agony, in sweat and blood (Lk 22:44). Further, in the Synoptics, he warns his disciples to pray that they would not enter into the time of trial, or temptation, and sometimes adds that “the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41, Mk 13:48, Lk 22:46). These elements convey the difficulty surrounding this form of surrender, and indicate that not all might be called to it. Thus the life of Christ can

provide a liberative model for discerning ethical action even as we surrender our own vengeful desires to God.

#### Chapter 4: Practical Applications

##### Receiving the Rawness of Rage

By considering how the embodied act of surrendering vengeance might look, and what ethical actions might accompany such surrender, I do not mean to shift the focus away from the act of prayer in itself. I agree with the well-argued proposition that speech in itself is a healing act. The questions I bring to the table are what kinds of speech heal, and what kind of *correlation* between our speech and our action is necessary for healing. In other words, how can a Christian community prayerfully voice and give witness to its anguish in a way that moves that community toward Christ-like surrender and response? The model I outline here is meant to help us understand better how to navigate the relationship between our prayers, desires, and actions in light of the life of Christ. An important first step is acknowledging that healing, self-remaking speech might necessarily be much more vitriolic and violent than healing action. Authors like Serene Jones distinguish between the healing act of demonizing the perpetrator of violence in speech and the harmful act of reinscribing violence in action. It is thus not necessarily true that to affirm violent speech is to affirm violent action. The pattern of surrendering vengeance and discerning ethical action based on the life of Christ may provide a model by which a Christian community could affirm violent speech without also affirming its fulfillment. Thus it may be appropriate to say that there is no violent speech which a church could not affirm, so long as the pray-er(s) and the community alike acknowledged

the double-step of surrender and discernment positioned between prayer and action. The buffer zone between prayer and action established by that double movement might in fact be the only way to create a safe space for healing speech to take place.

In the first place, it is necessary for church communities to recognize that often what arises first out of great suffering is not clear, thoughtful, ethical reflection, but rather “incomprehensible wailing that, when witnessed, is transposed into an articulate voice.”<sup>99</sup> William Blaine-Wallace here echoes the point that Jones also emphasizes, that witnessing lamentation is an important step in its transformation. Like many of the authors mentioned here, Blaine-Wallace also posits that public grief through lamentation is essential for a nonviolent ethic. He emphasizes, however, the need for reiteration of grief:

The grieving and aggrieved need a predictable and consistent audience for telling and retelling their stories, over and over again ... At the time of loss and trauma, the words shared don't necessarily convey the meaning desired. The narrative that will conquer the pain, stave off the abyss of nothingness, transform the memory, enable us to move ahead is a cacophony of words slowly but surely co-constructed into a liberative language in and from which a preferred future is cocreated. A liberative story is built by sharing old and new word arrangements over and over again. There is no telling how often stories of sorrow and tragedy need repeating in order for a new perspective, a glimpse of meaning, an unforeseen path, a previously unimaginable forgiveness, a once-closed future to open.<sup>100</sup>

Serene Jones also reflects on the raw nature of words spoken out of trauma. I have already mentioned her defense of the violent language and demonization of perpetrators as necessary steps in the healing process of trauma. She discusses her shifting views of John Calvin's pastoral role in the healing of his community, traumatized by violent

---

<sup>99</sup> William Blaine-Wallace, “Lamentation as Justice-Making,” in *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, ed. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 186.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

oppression; at first, she viewed his encouragement toward violent language in a negative theological light.

In these psalms, Calvin fully shares the writer's sense that the world can be sharply divided into two groups of people, the good and the evil, and that the good people who have suffered the oppression of the evil ones have every right to want their oppressors to suffer, to be punished by God, to be annihilated by divine wrath. As he reads through these psalms, he refuses to remove the sharp edges of these feelings; actually, he often goes farther than the psalmist in expressing his anger, outrage, despair, urge for revenge, and desire for unspeakable harm to befall the wicked. In this respect, his account of these psalms is uncomfortably rough, assaultive, emotional, and rage-filled.<sup>101</sup>

While Jones' theological discomfort with such a binary, potentially self-serving view of the world remains, and is a part of the reservations she names at the end of her chapter, she concludes that there is a space in which these well-formed theological views must be set aside momentarily in the name of healing. Thus she writes, "given this, Calvin's skills at vitriolic oration impressed me as a theological strength rather than as a discomfiting theological weakness. I saw that perhaps the more caustic his language became, the more expansive the possibilities of healing."<sup>102</sup> Thus she suggests that it is a part of the pastoral role to help people feel the depths of their own rage at injustice.

This idea relies on the assumption that the Psalms as prayer and the Christian community as witnesses to that prayer might together bring about emotion or depth of emotion that was previously unknown, or unspeakable. Jones understands the unspeakability of rage in light of trauma theory, which posits memories and feelings that are fragmented and cut off from consciousness, so that victims literally struggle to speak their experience in a coherent way. Brueggemann understands the Psalms to function similarly, although without specific reference to PTSD. Borrowing Ricoeur's category of

---

<sup>101</sup> Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 60.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*



limit expressions, Brueggemann makes the startling claim that “unless we have rhetoric for it, we cannot fully experience our experience.”<sup>103</sup> He elaborates:

But, says Ricoeur, we have no effective access to limit *experiences* unless we have available limit *expressions*. Without utterances of dangerous probe, we are denied access to our deep humanness. We are consequently fated to live in the safe middle ground that is cut off from the extremities of our life where God-given image is most on exhibit.<sup>104</sup>

Thus both conclude that it may in some way be a part of the pastoral *responsibility* to help parishioners feel their own feelings. Particularly, they suggest, feelings that are often unhealthily suppressed in larger society, such as rage. In the communal act of witnessing rage, it is important to remember that feeling a feeling is only a beginning. While there have been many conversations about whether emotions can be considered morally wrong, I am not sure that this is the correct question with respect to a Christian community’s response to rage.<sup>105</sup> It seems to fall into the same error that Jones describes above; however correct or nuanced theological or ethical reflection on rage might be, it appears inappropriate as an *initial* response with respect to healing. Thus a form of judgment that supposes to decide the morality of an emotion is not entirely helpful. That is why I suggest a move to communal *discernment* as a better response;

---

<sup>103</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Psalms as Limit Expressions,” in *Performing the Psalms* ed. Dave Bland and David Fleer (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 34.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> See William Werpehowski, “Do You Do Well to Be Angry?” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (Jan 1, 1996): 59-77; William C. Mattison III, “Virtuous Anger? From Questions of Vindictio to the Habituation of Emotion,” *Journal Of The Society Of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 159-179; Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36, (January 1, 1981): 41-57; Jacobson, “Burning Our Lamps with Borrowed Oil,” 93.

LeMon suggests a similar process through communal giving or withholding of Amens.<sup>106</sup> By beginning with the *acceptance* of rage as a valid part of a person's or group's experience with God, a community can reflect together on how surrender of vengeance might look and what kinds of ethical response might be appropriate to this rage in light of its theological beliefs. I suggest that this theological and ethical discernment might be a part of the creative co-construction of a liberative story that Blaine-Wallace describes above. Because it includes acceptance and mirroring of emotion rather than judgment and rejection, and discernment in community with the rage-filled, it seems to be a response that honors the rage while not necessarily endorsing or encouraging violent retribution.

#### Facilitating Surrender of Vengeance

The theological and ethical reflection would of course vary by community (and a variety of other factors) and produce drastically different understandings of the how to surrender and respond to rage. In the Reformed tradition of Serene Jones, for example, a turn to establish safety in the comfort of God's omnipotence constitutes the first step toward hearing rage and healing. Thus the solid foundation of God's sovereignty provides the theological environment in which surrender, discernment and response make sense. Again commenting on Calvin's commentary, Jones remarks, "it is crucial that Calvin invoke, at the beginning of his training in the art of prayer, the reality of God's sovereignty because this dimension of divine identity provides the traumatized with a profound sense of safety, which they so strongly lack."<sup>107</sup> Later she expands on this:

By assuring readers that God is in control and that they are protected and heard by God, Calvin creates an imaginative space where those who have felt helplessness

---

<sup>106</sup> LeMon, "Saying Amen to Violent Psalms," 104-109.

<sup>107</sup> Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 56.

in the face of violence can once again imagine themselves as agents whose actions in the world matter. On the surface, it might seem counterintuitive that *giving control of one's life over to God* can have the inverse effect of increasing one's sense of personal agency and control, but the literature on trauma suggests otherwise. It proposes that trauma survivors desperately need to believe that the world is fundamentally ordered and trustworthy if they, in turn, are to have the capacity to imagine themselves as meaningful actors within it again.<sup>108</sup>

Thus for Jones' UCC community facing a trauma in the life of one of its teens, the Reformed doctrine of God's sovereignty proves useful in imagining a space within which their rage takes shape and makes meaning. In other communities, this idea might prove detrimental rather than safe. Or, it might give rise to another understanding of the religious expression of rage; Blumenthal, for example, in developing his theology of protest, cites the example of a Christian woman recovering from rape who offers her own rewrite of Psalm 27. For Beth, God's omnipotence is something to rage against and ultimately to reject in light of her experience. Her reflection on vv. 4-5 demonstrates a portion of her anger: "I have asked but one thing of the Lord' – that he keep his promises! If you say you are my protector, then protect me. If you cannot protect me, at least tell me so. Don't pretend you can conceal me, protect me, or shield me. Don't pretend to be a rock or a shepherd. Don't pretend to have a sukka."<sup>109</sup> Later her anger shifts as she rejects the notion of God's omnipotence:

It is *my* choice now, whether or not to seek your face.

NOW I CAN SEE YOUR FACE. IT IS BRUISED AND SCARRED.

YOU ARE NOT SMILING.

Your face is battered!

Maybe the help you can give is limited. That is not your fault.

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 57, emphasis mine.

<sup>109</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 228.

But it is the nun's fault for teaching me wrong.<sup>110</sup>

For Beth, her anger is still religiously expressed and reflected upon in her interpretation of the psalm. Her anger, however, does not meet healing balm or solace in God's sovereignty. Rather, she protests against God and then against her community that teaches God's omnipotence. Rage in this context might still be made sense of theologically (as protest) and might still effect some kind of surrender (as a vulnerable solidarity with God rather than trust in God's strength). Thus theologies and communities shape rage and risk being reshaped by rage. This is one of the risks that must be faced by Christian communities that desire to bring anger and despair at violence and injustice into their midst.

#### Rage and Discernment in the Christian Life

The risky potency of rage suggests that in order to venture forward in hearing it, Christian communities should keep in view both the theological/ethical pitfalls of rage *and* the uses for rage in moving toward the Kingdom of God. Only with a view of both can the work of communal discernment be done wisely. Of course Zenger's accusations of spiritual insensitivity to suffering come to mind, but if sensitivity were the only redeeming quality of anger, then a less explosive form of compassion might be encouraged in its stead. Here, Beverly Wildung Harrison's important text, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," serves as a warning that the basic Christian goal of love may not be realizable without acceptance and embrace of anger. Harrison asserts: "It is my thesis that we Christians have come very close *to killing love* precisely because anger has been understood as a deadly sin. Anger is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 230.

feeling-signal that *all is not well* in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us.”<sup>111</sup> In this view, anger is not something to quickly be rid of, or a painful part of an otherwise happy story about life with Christ. Rather, anger is a completely necessary path in the community’s journey toward reconciliation and wholeness. It is thus a part of the Christian vocation to be angry.

That is not to say that anger equals innocence. The relational trouble that anger signals may be in another’s behavior or in one’s own self. In the first case, another’s provocation of our anger might be the occasion for us “to see or recall or discover ourselves as the person we are in the social world we inhabit,” as William Werpehowski argues.<sup>112</sup> This self-discovery is a reconstructive process, “a mode of self-reinvention,” that occurs “*apart* from the damning gaze that defined you and, often, *in connection* with others who have shared with you the pain of humiliation.”<sup>113</sup> In these instances, anger (and its voicing) functions as a useful process of remaking the self, which Brueggemann mentions in “Voice as Counter to Violence.” It can therefore be seen as a faithful act of reclaiming internal worth and dignity, therefore empowering people to live boldly in Christ.

In other instances, however, anger does not seem to serve this important function, and in fact may expose a person’s sense of injured pride than a reality of injustice. Werpehowski warns of the distorting effect of pride on the emotion of anger. Drawing on Reinhold Niebuhr’s seminal work on pride, Werpehowski traces the inappropriate development of anger as an attempt to protect oneself against vulnerability in a pretense

---

<sup>111</sup> Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” 49.

<sup>112</sup> Werpehowski, “Do You Do Well to Be Angry?” 65.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

of personal sovereignty. This kind of anger, Werpehowski asserts, is often an abusive lashing out against legitimate anger and can result in the belittling of others' attempts at self-assertion. It can also take on the form of a propensity toward cruelty and obsession with punishment of the other. He argues that "the method in these cases is to inflict enough suffering, and/or to generate enough fear, and/or to instill enough self-contempt to render oneself invulnerable to complaint."<sup>114</sup> These moves are quite the opposite of Brueggemann's reading of psalmic lament, in which vulnerability lies just beneath rage, and the expression of rage moves the pray-er to her own experience of fragility.<sup>115</sup>

A survey of anger and its function in the gospels illustrates the analysis of these ethicists that anger can be motivated by both love and pride. That anger is used destructively in relationships is evident in the parable of the prodigal son, for example, when the older brother is too angry to go in to the celebration of his younger brother's return (Lk 15:28). More pointedly, Jesus exposes the ways that anger is used to protect power at the expense of the marginalized in his discourse at the Feast of Booths: "If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well?" (Jn 7:23). There are also instances, however, of righteous anger. Jesus, for example, is described as angry in his confrontation with the Pharisees in Mk 3:1-6 over his healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. In comparable parables in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, called the Parable of the Wedding Feast and the Parable of the Great Banquet, respectively, the God-character of the king is described as angry, which motivates his

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>115</sup> Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 69-70.

burning down the town in Mt and his inviting the marginalized in Lk (Mt 22:1-14; Lk 14:15-24).

Because of the multiple causes of anger and vindictiveness, discernment becomes all the more important, so as to move the community *through* anger, *toward* surrender and loving response. Discerning the motivations and/or usefulness of anger for achieving justice and restoration may sound quite similar to the form of judgment I rejected above. Here I appeal to William Mattison's careful discussion of emotions for clarity. He bases his argument on the work of Paul Lauritzen, who identifies emotions as cognitive in character, inasmuch as they are "not blind surges of affect, but intelligible embodied responses to particular sorts of stimuli."<sup>116</sup> Because they are cognitive, Mattison argues, it is right to speak of them as moral or immoral, inasmuch as a person or group ought to be able to discern justifiable causes for anger, as well as proportions/durations of anger. Further, our beliefs about the world affect what provokes our anger, and thus anger can be praiseworthy or blameworthy inasmuch as it reflects and sustains beliefs. *At the same time*, it would be inappropriate to treat emotions as solely caused by beliefs about the world, for this would deny the ability for anger to arise independently of "one's deliberate, considered judgments."<sup>117</sup> Mattison appropriately notes that "emotions may at times defy our beliefs."<sup>118</sup> Following from Mattison's argument, it holds that a Christian community might avoid the fairly pointless and generally unfair judgment that "you shouldn't feel that feeling," by recognizing that feelings do not directly correspond to conscious beliefs. It can, however, maintain that exploration of an expressed emotion's

---

<sup>116</sup> Mattison, "Virtuous Anger?" 166.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

cause on the basis of shared theological beliefs can serve as a useful practice in uncovering a moral response to that emotion and its cause. Anger, for instance, may be real but deemed excessive or unhealthy, as in the case of great anger at a small offense, or misdirected anger, or obsession with cruel punishment that does not lessen over time. Drawing on Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, Mattison outlines three stages of managing inappropriate anger, with the ultimate goal of habituating oneself so that inappropriate anger does not arise (although this is a stage to be striven for, rather than realized). These stages are continence, suppression of inordinate passion, and temperance, or right seeing. This right seeing can be shaped and molded (slowly) by our beliefs; thus the act of expressing anger and theologically reflecting on anger in a community shapes each successive experience of anger, so that anger moves more and more into accord with one's beliefs about the world.

If it is important to discern the motivations of anger (in oneself and one's community) carefully, it is also important to discern its goal. Similarly, Harrison emphasizes the telos of anger as right relationship, another Christian value that might serve as a criterion for discernment. Assuming that an abusive pattern is not at play, the question of whether an expression of anger has as its goal the correction of some imbalance and a restoration of the relationship can help distinguish between a desire for justice and a desire simply for harm of the other, and thus give rise to a wiser response. Here I am not arguing necessarily that wiser *always* means nonviolent; however, the Christian vision of right relationship limits the ways in which violence might be considered useful. A prime example of the pragmatic nature of this broader theological consideration can be found in Martin Luther King's argument for nonviolence:



If one is in search of a better job, it does not help to burn down the factory. If one needs more adequate education, shooting the principal will not help, or if housing is the goal, only building and construction will produce that end. To destroy anything, person or property, can't bring us closer to the goal that we seek.<sup>119</sup>

While the Christian vision of reconciliation and restored relationship holds a prominent place, I am not arguing (nor is Harrison) that a *desire* for cruelty or a cursing of the enemy is therefore excluded from the range of Christian experience with God. The discernment is about action, not embodied emotion. As Harrison puts it, “The moral question is not ‘what do I feel’ but rather ‘what do I do with what I feel?’” This clarifies her point that

Where anger rises, there the energy to act is present. In anger, one's body-self is engaged, and the signal comes that something is amiss in relation. To be sure, anger—no more than any other set of feelings—does not lead automatically to wise or humane action. (It is part of the deeper work of ethics to help us move *through all our feelings*, to adequate strategies of moral action.)<sup>120</sup>

Powerful anger that expresses itself in curses feels dangerous to us because, as Harrison points out, in anger is also energy for action, perhaps moreso than in other emotions. Thus it is all the more important to feel anger and then discern our responses in community, according to our theological and ethical precepts.

It is also urgent for Christian communities to create a context in which legitimate anger can be expressed *in relation* to other beliefs. The power of anger could certainly eclipse other important Christian beliefs if not put into intentional conversation with them. Emotions that are deemed irreligious and thus suppressed become all the more threatening to Christian practices, whereas emotions that are not stigmatized, but brought

---

<sup>119</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 58.

<sup>120</sup> Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” 49.

into helpful conversation, can find a space for expression *within* Christian practice.

Brueggemann begins this work by making theological space for rage while also

considering what the Psalms tell us about vengeance and to whom it belongs.

Werpehowski works from another angle and considers the danger of anger becoming the

foundation of self-respect, such that “ongoing rage [is] required to *sustain* self-

respect.”<sup>121</sup> Against such a state, Werpehowski appeals to the Christian understanding of

justification by faith and reliance on God.

Trusting that he or she is justified by God alone, the Christian may sit looser to the need for self-justification. The self's narrowly specific focus on its own injury is challenged and taken up into the broader perspective of "zeal for the honor of God." On the one hand, claims to a narrow self-vindication through retribution are passed over; on the other hand, the self and its loyalties are *de-centered*, not extinguished, as the self's final loyalty is directed to God and the neighbor.<sup>122</sup>

The de-centering that takes place in the Christian identity when justified by Christ creates

a state in which anger cannot be the *only* force in constructing dignity and self-worth.

This question of what forces are at play in reconstructing identity is an important one for

Christian communities to consider, in order to relativize anger among other constructive

forces and thus lessen its power. This notion is the practical expression of Trigo's

admonishment regarding the chaos/cosmos binary established in the *Chaoskampf*.

Against the temptation to build one's identity solely in relationship to one's oppression

(or offense), thus self-identifying as chaotic and inevitably responding with violence,

there is the need for a new story to give expression to one's identity. For Christians, that

story is the gospel, and our identity comes as much from our life in Christ as from our

rage and grief.

---

<sup>121</sup> Werpehowski, “Do You Do Well to Be Angry?” 72.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

### Toward Practices of Voicing and Witnessing Anger through the Cursing Psalms

In my discussion of anger and communal theological reflection, I painted with broad strokes and thus created a bold, but somewhat vague picture. I have claimed that communities can pray or preach or sing outrageously violent poems while still surrendering vengeance to God, if only there is a stable communal witness. I have claimed that church can be a place to bring anger and rage, if only the community hears the anger and then processes what it has heard theologically and ethically, with a goal of surrendering vengeance. To these enormously broad claims the only logical response is a barrage of practical questions. What on earth could any of this look like? My first response will of course be unsatisfactory; there are as many visions of this kind of work as there are church communities to do it. Anything beyond general sketches risks irrelevancy in light of the far-flung diversity of Christian congregations and contexts of injustice. But in an effort not to be so general as to be useless, I will name some considerations and practices that might be serve as points of orientation in undertaking the risky task of involving anger in Christian worship.

No matter how much theological reflection a pastor or pastoral staff has done on the theology and pastoral nature of the Psalms, they will not function in a congregation in the ways we have discussed without some direction. As John D. Witvliet writes, “the Church has not always been a good steward of the Psalms as liturgical prayer. For one, we are often guilty of speaking the strange words of a lament or enthronement Psalm without serious attempts to help worshipers understand what they are saying.”<sup>123</sup> Part of

---

<sup>123</sup> John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 14.

this education can come in the liturgical treatment of the Psalms, but spiritual formation must also address cultural issues that come into play.

As Mattison argues, right seeing is crucial to right anger: “The ideally temperate person sees situations truthfully, and the resulting passions arise in accordance with such apprehension.”<sup>124</sup> Therefore a critical piece of engaging communal rage in response to injustice is taking an honest look at power. It is at this point that I find deClaissé-Walford’s cries for imprecation unhelpful; her collapsing of endless varieties of oppression in her call for Christian cursing serves to blur the already indistinct lines of intersecting spaces of power and oppression. Rather than glossing over distinct forms of suffering or denying the overlap of power and oppression in one community or individual, pastors ought to guide congregations toward seeing these intricacies more clearly, so that rage might be more balanced and well-aimed. If right seeing does not occur, then as a result, self-righteous rage might combine with real social power and give rise to violence. The point has been made that the vengeful psalms are for the helpless, who have no other option than to cry out for God’s intervention;<sup>125</sup> LeMon rightly points out, however, the danger in people with some kind of power (and therefore options) praying psalms such as these. Of course, there are those who recommend the benefits of imprecatory psalms for the spiritual lives of those in the center. As mentioned in the first section, both Zenger and Jacobson view the imprecatory psalms, or more generally the psalms of disorientation, as prompting the privileged/oriented toward new attitudes. For Zenger, the new attitude is self-examination and repentance for complicity in violent

---

<sup>124</sup> Mattison, “Virtuous Anger?” 170.

<sup>125</sup> deClaissé-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 86; LeMon, “Saying Amen to Violent Psalms,” 108; Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 76.

structures. For Jacobson, the result is better attitudes and more compassion towards those who suffer injustice. In both cases, however, these positive moves on the part of the oriented/powerful require a certain way of self-identifying combined with a certain way of reading/praying the Psalms. In Zenger's argument, the result depends on a distinct disassociation with the psalmist; the otherness of the psalm is recognized and prompts the pray-er to consider whether she might be involved in the kind of injustice befalling the psalmist. In Jacobson's model, quite the opposite is true; the worshiper is expected to identify intimately with the psalm, so that it becomes "her own cognition."<sup>126</sup> Once this identification takes place, the cognitive dissonance it produces yields new cognitions and changed attitudes. Neither of these models is sufficient without attention to power and right seeing. In the first, a pray-er must have sufficient acknowledgement of her own social position in the center for the disassociation to take place, unless the community explicitly names the psalm as intercessory prayer, which could facilitate the required mental distance. In the latter, there is insufficient attention to the power dynamics that cause, contribute to, or perpetuate states of orientation and disorientation. Further, it fails to account for intersecting experiences of power and powerlessness, as in the case of a rural, White, Christian congregation that might feel marginalized by the pluralistic, cosmopolitan atmosphere of American politics while at the same time it holds significant social power, or the working class man who feels powerless at work but wields great power in his home. The multiple spaces within which a person might enact agency complicate the ways in which these imprecatory prayers can function. It cannot be assumed that only the utterly helpless will identify with the psalmist, or that those in the

---

<sup>126</sup> Jacobson, "Burning Our Lamps with Borrowed Oil," 195.

center will always recognize the strangeness of the psalmist's perspective. It is possible that folks who occupy the many spaces inbetween will identify with the words of the suffering psalmist and allow those curses to influence their behavior in the spheres in which their expression is possible. Therefore, right seeing is essential, and prayers of confession ought to be prayed alongside prayers of imprecation. Church ought to be a space in which a person can navigate the many arenas in her life with both the anger of righteousness and the humility of repentance.

The complexity of social location, especially in the United States context, with so many insidious forms of oppression existing in and alongside those experiencing enormous social power in a global context, requires a multi-faceted approach to praying these cursing laments in church. It is important to name both the power and the oppression experienced in the sanctuary, sometimes in the same person's social existence, and very often in the mixed social backgrounds that make up a congregation. Thus it is not only important for pastoral leadership to help a congregation see these complexities, but also to engage in prayer patterns that respond sensitively to them. This might require some meditative guidance in praying the Psalms; what if, before a psalm is read, sung, or performed, the congregation was cued somehow as to what kind of prayer this psalm is functioning as in the particular worship service of the day? The same psalm could be prayed as confession, intercession, and/or lament on different Sundays. Rather than leaving it to each individual heart to identify with or dissociate from the psalmist's point of view, the congregation could be guided liturgically to understand its prayer a certain way. The function that the psalm plays in the worship service could then be used to determine the liturgical setting in which is it prayed. For example, if a psalm is prayed

as intercessory prayer, then a prayer or responsive reading that guides the congregation towards surrendering the imprecatory desires to God could accompany the psalm. Or, as an introduction, “a worship leader might suggest what kinds of people (both within and beyond the congregation) might quite naturally pray a Psalm like this, and invite the congregation to offer the text in solidarity with them.”<sup>127</sup> Further, the intercessory prayer could be prayed in conjunction with an announcement or ritual action surrounding a mission project or social engagement that the church is or has been undertaking, so that the anger that has been stirred on behalf of the marginalized might be directed towards the church’s works of mercy. Thus, a church might begin to heal from the emotional and spiritual insensitivity to suffering that Zenger warns about while yet refraining from reinscribing violent patterns as the inevitable responses to injustice. Rather, pastoral leadership could offer a form of action it has discerned as appropriate to its community in order to guide the congregation towards discerning right action out of anger. This connection should not be made explicitly, however, as a form of judgment against the cursing desires expressed in the psalm. As Howard Neil Wallace argues, “such theological reflection is necessary ... but it is not the aim of intercessory prayer. This is much more concerned with acknowledging how others experience life and bringing them into our conversation with God.”<sup>128</sup> The church’s social response should not be offered as a one-up on the psalmist’s cursing, a more Christian solution to a common problem. Rather, the expression of rage and invitation to social engagement should each stand on their own, two pieces of a larger faith portrait. Moreover, I suggest the combination of the

---

<sup>127</sup> Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship*, 74.

<sup>128</sup> Howard Neil Wallace, *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005), 118.

two with some reservation, and do not recommend that this pairing always be made; channeling anger towards social engagement is one way of helping Christians cope with the sorrow of facing injustice with open hearts. It is not, however, (nor should it be) a cure for the helplessness that we must indeed face when pondering the terrors of this life. Social action is never enough, never an adequate response to the horrors that have already been committed, and we should not view our social engagement in this way. Thus, it is significant also that these cursing psalms be left to stand completely on their own sometimes, or paired with familiar musical lamentation that might further evoke the spirit of the psalm. As Blumenthal writes

One of the paths of our life is walking with the victim – beyond endurance, into suffering that cannot be told – as best we can. One tack in our lives is to confront what we would rather avoid, with as much courage as we can muster. Not so that we, too, will suffer, but as an act of solidarity; not in guilt, but as an act of remembrance. We must do this in our texts, in our deeds, in our commitments. We must do this in every universe of discourse we use. As we tack, we need to bring the ghosts with us.<sup>129</sup>

At other times, the congregation members should be led to identify personally with the psalmist, to discover the surprising pain within themselves, to recover lament. In those cases, it would be more appropriate to frame these cursing psalms with prayers of confession and discernment on either side, to establish a pattern of preparing and responding to cursing desires. This form of praying seems an honest way to follow the prayer pattern Christ offers us, inasmuch as Mark's Jesus encourages his disciples to pray cursing prayers against unjust structures, then goes on to say "whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mk 11:25). The prayers of discernment can lay

---

<sup>129</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 54.



the ritual groundwork for more communal follow-up in cases that require the church's response and witness, such as national or local disasters, difficult circumstances or instances of violence in the lives of community members, communal conflict, etc.

Another possible approach to praying the cursing psalms is a Christologically interpreted prayer. I distinguish this kind of Christological interpretation from, on the one hand, a supersessionist reading of the Psalms, and on the other, a dissociative Christological approach, which focuses on the *difference* between the individual Christian and Christ. Elaine J. Ramshaw elaborates: "For centuries, Western Christian liturgical practice included praying the 'lament psalms,' but they were interpreted christologically, which often meant that since only Jesus was truly innocent in his suffering, only Jesus had the grounds on which to lament."<sup>130</sup> Such a Christological interpretation is problematic for two reasons; first, it is at best unhelpful and at worst dangerous to discuss the guilt or innocence of a sufferer in response to oppression or abuse, which is based not on the victim's moral fault but on the perpetrator's sinful protection of power. Second, it is not the difference between Christians and Christ that should be highlighted in this kind of prayer, but their similarity; it is from a standpoint of inclusion in the body of Christ, and therefore solidarity with the sufferers in it, that a Christian should pray Christologically. This distinction is illuminated by the Christological reading of the Psalms offered by Mary Anne SchimmelPenninck, who wrote a long essay on the interpretation of the Psalms in 1821. She reads the Psalms as portraits of Christ's life, but with an eye toward the risen Christ and his life in the church,

---

<sup>130</sup> Elaine J. Ramshaw, "Making (Ritual) Sense of Our Own Lives," in *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, ed. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 297.

his inseparably united bride.<sup>131</sup> Because of Christ's identification with the church, his body, the Psalms serve as not only a portrait of Christ, but also of the church. With this understanding, a Christological praying of the psalm would create a prayer that is both personal and intercessory, both individual and communal; the pray-er would pray on behalf of herself as well as Christ and the others in Christ's body. Her portrait of the suffering over which she laments and rages would be clarified by both Christ's suffering and the suffering of his earthly body. Further, her image of personal and communal response would be colored by Christ's life and prayers, and the model of both empowerment and surrender that he represents. One suggestion Witvliet offers for encouraging a Christological interpretation of a psalm is to follow a psalm with a Christian hymn based on the same text.<sup>132</sup>

A final suggestion for approaching the cursing psalms as prayer is the oft-rejected spiritualization of the enemies and/or curses. This approach is suspicious for many reasons. It can be used as a way to neutralize the otherwise powerful language of vitriolic cursing. It seems to provide "the easy way out" of problematic texts by referring the issues to an imaginary world rather than dealing with them in the real one. To that end, it also seems to delegitimize the real suffering that gives rise to these psalms by refusing to speak of embodied enemies and violence done to bodies. These unfortunate and usually disempowering results are all possibilities when one turns too quickly to spiritualization. But to assume that a spiritual reading of the Psalms will *always* effect these results does

---

<sup>131</sup> Marion Ann Taylor, "The Psalms outside the Pulpit: Applications of the Psalms by Women of the Nineteenth Century," in *Interpreting the Psalms for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV and D. Brent Sandy (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), 228-9.

<sup>132</sup> Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship*, 76.

not give credit to the reality of spiritual enemies. Especially when it comes to oppressive structures, the powers and principalities of Ephesians may prove a very useful way of understanding the larger-than-life entities that seem to both be shaped by and also control human beings and their relationships. To attribute insidious and constantly morphing systems of oppression to both spiritual forces and human agency is not necessarily to deny the real, embodied suffering caused by these forces. Rather, sometimes the move toward spiritualization is a way of naming the enormous power of these sins, such as racism, sexism, or materialism, that moves beyond even what human individuals are able to control. In that case, a spiritualization of enemies might be an appropriate way to feel rage while refraining from perpetuating cycles of violence. Further, as Tate argues, “there is some biblical basis for spiritualization,”<sup>133</sup> even outside of Ephesians. Some passages in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in Joshua 1-12, indicate that a kind of spiritualization of the conquest narrative had already occurred, and was used in worship to encourage faith in Yahweh. Tate also refers to Gerhard von Rad’s reading of the “spiritual sublimation,” of some texts.<sup>134</sup> Thus, spiritualization of violent passages may not be an unfaithful move, if undertaken with care and attention to the real suffering spiritual forces can cause.

Such a multi-faceted approach obviously requires time to establish, as approaches and patterns of prayer are learned in the long-term, rather than in individual services. But this is true of any faith practice. Equipping communities with ritual practices that make sense in response to the complexity of life may mean inviting individuals or communities into prayer that does not match their current feelings about God, themselves, or the world. The benefits of these mismatches, however, have been noted by many, not only

---

<sup>133</sup> Tate, “War and Peacemaking in the Old Testament,” 589.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 590.

those who defend the liturgical use of psalms, such as Jacobson, but also those who find value in liturgical and ritual seasons. The hope is that liturgical seasons are instructive for Christians; that they are preparatory in their regularity, and that they train Christians to enter into their own seasons of joy and sorrow with spiritual tools. Ramshaw, for example, views ritual empowerment as an important function of congregational life, particularly for the marginalized who constantly seek renewal and strength to face injustice. She views it as one of the major goals of congregations to include in weekly worship “certain elements that are particularly well suited for use in times of crisis or celebration outside the community setting.”<sup>135</sup> While it is often noted by pastors that the Psalms are helpful lamentations in pastoral visits with sick or struggling individuals, this individual use is not reflected in communal use. As deClaissé-Walford notes, “for some reason, private lamenting seems acceptable in our faith communities; we feel free in the solitude of our individual prayer lives. . . . But we are reluctant to voice in community words such as we find in Psalm 94.”<sup>136</sup> Those who study ritual practice suggest, however, that communal settings are the place where ritual practices are learned, and then can be incorporated in the home or individually. Rather than confining ritual responses to complex grief and anger to individual pastoral visits, it is wiser to explore the complexities communally in ritual practice, so that individuals in their own lives can practice these prayer patterns when the need arises.

While much can be communicated through ritual, it is also important to revive the Psalms as Scripture that can be preached. Not only (but especially) the communal laments have been considered for many years to be inappropriate for preaching. J.

---

<sup>135</sup> Ramshaw, “Making (Ritual) Sense of Our Own Lives,” 302.

<sup>136</sup> deClaissé-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 88.

Clinton McCann, Jr. cites many common arguments against preaching the Psalms, including form-critical ones – the Psalms should be sung, rather than preached – and practical ones – poetry is very difficult to preach in the increasingly narrative style of Western Protestant churches.<sup>137</sup> Despite this historical treatment, preaching may be one of the best places to use the imprecatory psalms in worship because of its reflective and instructive nature. deClaissé-Walford, following the argument of Patrick Miller, argues that “a congregation who regularly hears sermons and lessons on psalms will find the imprecatory psalms easier to appropriate into their life of faith.”<sup>138</sup> Not only is the regular reflection on a variety psalms needed to help incorporate the abrasive qualities of the imprecations into their larger context, regular reflection can also serve an important part in the lament itself. Brueggemann and others have often noted the turn that psalms of lament often make in their final verses towards hope and confidence in God; while this turn is not elaborated in the Psalms themselves, the gap that is found there can be filled in by the larger proclamation of the faith community. As John Mark Hicks remarks in his chapter “Preaching Community Laments,” the act of preaching these painful psalms

will not only give voice to the cry of the disoriented but will also become a word of God to the disoriented. Through communal lament the church expresses its lament, hurt, and pain; but also through hearing the communal lament of Israel’s past it hears a word of God that gives hope in the present. The Word bears witness to God’s faithfulness and rehearses Israel’s own memory of God’s mighty acts.<sup>139</sup>

Not only are sermons good places to flesh out the unspoken move from lamentation and cursing to confidence in and surrender to God, they are also locations for some of the

---

<sup>137</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “Thus Says the Lord: ‘Thou Shalt Preach on the Psalms!’” in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>139</sup> John Mark Hicks, “Preaching Community Laments,” in *Performing the Psalms* ed. Dave Bland and David Fleer (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 81.

communal discernment named above to be initiated, especially in response to disasters that are communal. For example, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 evoked the uncommon experience of communal lamentation for many Americans. In what has become an infamous sermon ever since its use against Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign, Jeremiah Wright addresses the lamentation and desire for revenge that pervaded America after the attacks, using Psalm 137 as his text. Beginning by inviting the congregation to repeat the imprecatory verses of the psalm, thereby placing the words in their mouths, he goes on to consider these immortal words of an exiled people. He demonstrates the pastoral role of helping his congregation feel its own feelings when he connects the rage of the imprecations with the experience of African Americans:

African Americans have a surge of emotion as they see the color of poverty in a world of wealth, and begin to understand that it is no accident that the world's poorest are one color and the world's richest are another color. When they tie together the pieces of 500 years of colonialism, racism, and slavery with what it is they see in 2001, a surge of emotions hits them, and the last three verses of Psalm 137 help them to understand what it is they are feeling.<sup>140</sup>

He goes on to discuss, however, the dangers in the move from lamentation over the injustice to desire for revenge; he refers to these dangers as movements from reverence to revenge and worship to war. He especially highlights v. 9, which he sees as a shift from hatred of armed soldiers embodying oppression to hatred of unarmed innocents. He

---

<sup>140</sup> *Jeremiah Wright Full Sermon Part 1 of 4*, YouTube video, 9:30, posted by bgs123a, March 27, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycWgFCEnprs>; *Jeremiah Wright Full Sermon Part 2 of 4*, YouTube video, 9:30, posted by bgs123a, March 27, 2008, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d86EKmGo\\_1M&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d86EKmGo_1M&feature=related); *Jeremiah Wright Full Sermon Part 3 of 4*, YouTube video, 9:37, posted by bgs123a, March 27, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ruj15g1XphI&feature=related>; *Jeremiah Wright Full Sermon Part 4 of 4*, YouTube video, 8:55, posted by bgs123a, March 27, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Lb3PFVnUiY&feature=related>.

concludes this section of the sermon with the admonishment “And that, my beloved, is a dangerous place to be.”<sup>141</sup> He then explicitly moves into a discerning meditation on what the appropriate response might be. He concludes that the proper response to *this* injustice is self-examination, social transformation, and spiritual adoration, and expounds on each. In his piece on social transformation especially, he demonstrates a strategy of spiritualizing the enemy in order to interrupt the cycle of violence. He proclaims, “Rather than figure out who we gonna’ declare war on, maybe we need to declare war on racism. Maybe we need to declare war on injustice. Maybe we need to declare war on greed.”<sup>142</sup> While pastors may respectfully disagree with his conclusions, I believe his move toward discernment is a crucial response to the rage of sufferers. While his suggestions are general, they could serve as the beginning of a larger conversation about responsible social action in response to injustice.

As Wright’s sermon demonstrates, preaching is not only a helpful medium for engaging the Psalms in church because of its instructive/reflective nature, but also because of its evocative nature. If, as I argued above, it is a pastoral function to help congregations feel rage at injustice, and even the depths of that rage, then preaching on these poetic scriptures can be a pastor’s sharpest tool. Drawing on the reflection of Caroline Fry, a nineteenth century commentator, D. Brent Sandy and Kenneth Bickel view the poetry of the Psalms as a unique tool for plunging the depths of our emotional world.

The psalms speak a special language that coaxes us to come forward with our own feelings. They engage us with precisely what we’re experiencing and with how we’re responding, and they affirm the validity of both ... *We may begin with a*

---

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

*vague understanding of our own feelings, of our theology, of our needs.* But when we listen to the psalms, before we know it, we are singing the same tune.<sup>143</sup>

While the poetic nature of the Psalms gives them a special revelatory function, it also complicates preaching. What are methods of preaching on such a rich genre that will bring it to life for the hearers? For Sandy and Bickel, the key to conveying the richness of the poetry to listeners is experiential; “teachers and preachers should take intentional steps to help listeners *experience* a psalm to the greatest extent possible.”<sup>144</sup> The authors suggest several methods of inviting listeners into the experience of the psalm so that they might be directed by its emotion. These tools include vivid word pictures (metaphors, similes and other figures of speech), actual pictures via slideshow or other means, displaying the psalm’s emotions or describing them vividly, using personal testimony, and structuring the sermon according to the movements of the psalm. Further ideas include involving multiple participants in the reading or dramatization of the psalm, as well as coordinating pieces of the service to highlight or be in dialogue with the message of the psalm. These suggestions are important reminders that sermons can be poetic as well as reflective, and can serve to translate some of the foreignness of the poetry in the Psalms while maintaining the movements, metaphors, and emotions.

Just as a preacher creating a poetic meditation on the Psalms can engage a congregation’s emotions, a lay individual or group can do the same by writing a new psalm specific to the community, based on a psalm text. This practice and its healing effects are evident in the story of Beth, the author of the rewritten Psalm 27 quoted

---

<sup>143</sup> D. Brent Sandy and Kenneth Bickel, “The Psalms in the Hand of Preachers and Teachers,” in *Interpreting the Psalms for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV and D. Brent Sandy (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), 242, emphasis mine.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 246, emphasis mine.



above. Although Beth's practice is a little different, in that she chose a psalm expressing faith and used it as a foil to write her psalm of misery and protest, it still functions to give personal voice to her rage. The tentative steps toward healing are evident even in the last line of her rewritten psalm; in response to verse 13, she writes:

I have seen your battered and bruised face.

I know what the world is like.

But will this prevent me from seeing the goodness in the land of life? That is the constant struggle.

That is, I think, what healing is about.<sup>145</sup>

This practice can be liberatory and healing on a communal level as well as an individual level. Zephania Kameeta, a pastor in Namibia, rewrote a number of psalms in an attempt to respond to the oppressive illegal occupation of Namibia by South Africa. While not all of the Psalms were imprecations or even laments, they still represented honest wrestling with his community's daily suffering before God. At the same time, the chance to rephrase certain verses may result in theological reflection on them and an ultimate softening of some language; in his rewrite of Psalm 137, for example, Kameeta rephrases v. 9 as: "Happy is the man who pays you back/for what you have done to us -/who takes your rotten system of apartheid/and smashes it against a rock."<sup>146</sup> Because of the strong tendency to soften the vitriolic language that already seems evident in Christian communities, rephrasing psalms should be done in conjunction with praying the Psalms themselves. Wallace illuminates the benefits of each strategy more clearly. What I have

---

<sup>145</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 230.

<sup>146</sup> Zephania Kameeta, *Why, O Lord? Psalms and Sermons from Namibia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 48.

described above he categorizes as one way to pray *from* the Psalms, which is distinguished from praying *with* the Psalms.<sup>147</sup> Praying from the Psalms involves more spontaneous, personalized energy using a psalm as inspiration; it could thus include rewriting a psalm, meditating on a certain word, phrase or verse, or memorizing portions to use in longer, extemporaneous prayers.<sup>148</sup> Praying with the Psalms, on the other hand, involves a level of identification with the words of the psalm that resembles contemplative prayer practices, in which the self is emptied or de-centered to make space for something new.<sup>149</sup> Thus the practice as Wallace describes it is meant to de-emphasize the intellectual processes of prayer and invite a more emotional and spiritual engagement that is suited to the poetic form of the Psalms.

At this point, my recommendations have tip-toed out of the sanctuary and spilled over into daily individual and communal practices outside of worship. To that end, it is important to remember that while I have focused on worship as a primary site of psalmic engagement, that should not be the only place these risky prayers are explored and practiced. The communal discernment necessary in responding to rage cannot only happen in worship; there is simply not enough space there. It must also spill over into Sunday School, small groups, Bible studies, committee meetings, fellowship dinners, coffee hours, and more. Rage needs room to breathe and be heard, and the liberative language of lament and response will not be co-constructed only in liturgy. As Ramshaw points out, ritual agency must be cultivated in every part of church life in order to equip

---

<sup>147</sup> Wallace, *Words to God, Word from God*, 103.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

congregation members to spiritually process all of their lives.<sup>150</sup> Further, a community that really enters into the feelings of rage and lamentation in its worship and prayer life will need a place to reflect and discern at other times. A story Serene Jones weaves through her book is instructive; although she is speaking about the worship resources available to Christians in response to post-traumatic stress disorder, she does not see these theological tools as only finding expression in ritual and liturgy. She also describes the impromptu but well-organized support group style Bible study created by women in the church who came together to support a teenager traumatized by witnessing a drive-by shooting that resulted in a young man's death.<sup>151</sup> This group journeyed together through Calvin's commentary on the Psalms as a way to theologically reflect on the work they were doing in supporting this young woman. This kind of group, formed in response to violence and trauma in the life of a member, is a possible location for the communal discernment I speak of above. Of course, a more permanent group could serve this function also, if a pastoral care team or similar entity existed. Either way, diverse avenues of reflecting together on rage will be important for any community seeking to face it honestly. For the rage itself will be as diverse as humanity and the experiences of injustice therein. The church can only hope to provide a safe and meaningful place to process, respond to, and heal from the myriad forms of suffering within its body.

---

<sup>150</sup> Ramshaw, "Making (Ritual) Sense of Our Own Lives," 303.

<sup>151</sup> Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 44.

## Bibliography and Works Cited

- Ballard, Harold Wayne. *The Divine Warrior Motif in the Psalms*. North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1999.
- Blaine-Wallace, William. "The Politics of Tears: Lamentation as Justice Making." In *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, edited by Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen Brown Montagno, 183-197. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.
- Blumenthal, David. *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Praying the Psalms*. Winona, Minn: Saint Mary's Press, 1982.
- . *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- . "The Psalms as Limit Expressions." In *Performing the Psalms: With Essays and Sermons by Walter Brueggemann, J. Clinton McCann Jr., Paul Scott Wilson, and Others*, edited by Dave Bland and David Fleer, 31-50. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005.
- . "Voice as Counter to Violence." *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (April 1, 2001): 22-33.
- deClaissé-Walford, Nancy L. "The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms." In *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, edited by Rolf A. Jacobson, 77-92. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.
- Fanon, Frantz. "Concerning Violence." In *On Violence: A Reader*, edited by Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim, 79-100. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Firth, David G. *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in Individual Complaints*. Milton Keynes (U.K.): Paternoster, 2005.
- Frymer-Kensy, Tivka. "Creation Myths Breed Violence: The Chaoskampf Myth of Creation Sets Up a Cosmic Cycle of Violence. Can it Ever Bring Peace?" *BR (Washington, D.C.)* 14, no. 3 (June 1, 1998): 17-22.
- Gunkel, Hermann, and Heinrich Zimmern. *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2006.
- Hanson, Paul D. "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible." *Interpretation* 38, no. 4 (October

1, 1984): 341-362.

Harrison, Beverly Wildung. "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics For Women and Other Strangers." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36, (January 1, 1981): 41-57.

Hicks, John Mark. "Preaching Community Laments." In *Performing the Psalms: With Essays and Sermons by Walter Brueggemann, J. Clinton McCann Jr., Paul Scott Wilson, and Others*, edited by Dave Bland and David Fleer, 67-81. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005.

Houston, Walter. "The Character of YHWH and the Ethics of the Old Testament: Is *Imitatio Dei* Appropriate?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (April 2007): 1-25.

Jacobson, Rolf. "Burning Our Lamps with Borrowed Oil: The Liturgical Use of the Psalms and the Life of Faith." In *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, edited by Stephen Breck Reid, 90-98. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001.

*Jeremiah Wright Full Sermon Part 1 of 4*, YouTube video, 9:30, posted by bgs123a, March 27, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycWgFCEnprs>.

*Jeremiah Wright Full Sermon Part 2 of 4*, YouTube video, 9:30, posted by bgs123a, March 27, 2008, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d86EKmGo\\_1M&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d86EKmGo_1M&feature=related).

*Jeremiah Wright Full Sermon Part 3 of 4*, YouTube video, 9:37, posted by bgs123a, March 27, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUjI5g1XphI&feature=related>.

*Jeremiah Wright Full Sermon Part 4 of 4*, YouTube video, 8:55, posted by bgs123a, March 27, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Lb3PFVnUiY&feature=related>.

Jones, Serene. *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Kameeta, Kameeta. *Why, O Lord? Psalms and Sermons from Namibia*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Keizer, Garret. "The Other Side of Rage: Forgiveness Doesn't Come Naturally." *Christian Century* 119, no. 16 (July 31, 2002): 22-27.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom." In *A Testament of*

*Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 54-61. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.

LeMon, Joel M. "Saying Amen to Violent Psalms: Patterns of Prayer, Belief and Action in the Psalter." In *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, edited by Rolf A. Jacobson, 93-109. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.

Lind, Millard. *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980.

Mattison, William C, III. "Virtuous Anger? From Questions of Vindictio to the Habituation of Emotion." *Journal Of The Society Of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 159-179.

McCann, J. Clinton, and James C. Howell. *Preaching the Psalms*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001.

McCann, J. Clinton Jr., "Thus Says the Lord: 'Thou Shalt Preach on the Psalms!'" In *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, edited by Stephen Breck Reid, 111-122. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001.

Middleton, J Richard. "Created In the Image of a Violent God? The Ethical Problem of the Conquest of Chaos in Biblical Creation Texts." *Interpretation* 58, no. 4 (October 1, 2004): 341-355.

Ramshaw, Elaine J. "Making (Ritual) Sense of Our Own Lives." In *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, edited by Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen Brown Montagno, 291-304. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Symbolism of Evil*. Translated by Emerson Buchanan. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

Sandy, Brent D. and Kenneth Bickel. "The Psalms in the Hand of Preachers and Teachers." In *Interpreting the Psalms for Teaching and Preaching*, edited by Herbert W. Bateman IV and D. Brent Sandy, 241-253. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010.

Silva, Larry. "The Cursing Psalms as a Source of Blessing." In *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, edited by Stephen Breck Reid, 220-230. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001.

Tate, Marvin E. "War and Peacemaking in the Old Testament." *Review & Expositor* 79, no. 4 (September 1, 1982): 587-596.

- Taylor, Marion Ann. "The Psalms outside the Pulpit: Applications of the Psalms by Women of the Nineteenth Century." In *Interpreting the Psalms for Teaching and Preaching*, edited by Herbert W. Bateman IV and D. Brent Sandy, 219-232. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010.
- Trigo, Pedro. *Creation and History*. Translated by Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Vervenne, Marc. "Violent Imagery in the Hebrew Bible: Satanic verses or Anti metaphors?." In *Textarbeit*, 523-543. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003.
- Wallace, Howard N. *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004.
- Waltke, Bruce K., J. M. Houston, and Erika Moore. *The Psalms As Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010.
- Werpehowski, William. "Do You Do Well to Be Angry?" *Annual Of The Society Of Christian Ethics* (January 1, 1996): 59-77.
- Wink, Walter. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Witvliet, John D. *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007.
- Zenger, Erich. *A God of Vengeance?: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.