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& BABY BASHING: IS THERE ANY
PLACE IN THE CHURCH FOR
IMPRECATORY PSALMS?

Broken Teeth, Bloody Baths, & Baby Bashing: Is there any place in the Church for the Imprecatory Psalms?

by Rev. Dr. Reed Lessing

“Break the teeth in their mouth, O God!” (Ps. 58:6). “The righteous will be glad when ... they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked” (Ps. 58:10). “Blessed is he ... who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks” (Ps. 137:8b-9). How did such barbaric words make their way into the prayer book of God’s people? Are these texts really part of same the same tradition that admonishes the faithful to “turn the other cheek” (Luke 6:29), “walk the extra mile” (Matt. 5:41), and “bless, and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14)?

The sentiments of broken teeth, bloody baths, and baby bashing are not confined to a few psalms, in fact thirty-two of them fall under the ominous title, “imprecatory.” They are often categorized into these three groups: imprecations against societal enemies (58, 94), imprecations national enemies (68, 74, 79, 83, 129, 137), and imprecations against personal enemies (5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 17, 28, 31, 35, 40, 52, 54, 55, 56, 59, 69, 70, 71, 104, 109, 139, 140, 141, 143).

But before we accuse the Old Testament of such atrocities we have to face the fact that in the first book about the Christian Church, and this in its first chapter, Luke records an event when Peter quotes from both Pss. 69 and 109 – two of the most notorious of the imprecatory psalms. The apostle goes on to quote from these two psalms with the words that these texts, “had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas ...” (cf. Acts 1:16, 20; Pss. 69:25; 109:8). Does this mean that the imprecatory psalms – all thirty two of them – were inspired by the Holy Spirit? How did this state of affairs come about?

The answer is in Gen. 12:3. Here the LORD promises Abra[ha]m, “the one cursing you I will curse.” God promises to curse Israel’s enemies. The LORD, and not Israel, is the one doing the cursing. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the LORD” (cf. Deut. 32:35 Rom. 12:19).

When psalmists call down curses it is because enemies have been disloyal to the LORD’s covenant. As a consequence, the covenant breaker deserves the LORD’s covenant curses. So when Israel’s God enacts vengeance, “his sword is all blood, it is gorged with fat” (Isa. 34:6), this is because he is “contending for Zion” (Isa. 34:8). Without vengeance upon Israel’s enemies there can be no salvation for Israel (cf. Isa. 35:4; Rev. 20:11-15).

The theology of imprecation appears in many places in the New Testament (cf. e.g., Acts 8:20, 13:10-11; 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:14; Rev. 6:9-11; 14:19-20; 18:4-8, 20; 19:1-3, 15). The classic example comes in Gal. 1:8-9 when the apostle invokes an anathema upon the enemies of the Gospel. The word anathema is lexically and theologically equivalent to the Hebrew word herem which appears in Israel’s holy war texts and means utter annihilation. Standing in the same tradition, Jesus also uttered prayers of imprecation upon his enemies (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24; 23:13-39; Mark 11:14).

To be sure, love and forgiveness are the Church’s major key. But what has happened to her minor key? Just look at any Christian hymnal that includes psalms and see how many of them are imprecatory.



Islam in America | A Special Edition from thESource for Youth Ministry

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Christians continue to be victims of violent and unthinkable acts of hatred. There are countless Christians – even in the West – who are suffering horrific atrocities. Those who face sustained injustice, hardened enmity, and gross oppression must learn to pray imprecatory psalms. They are God’s gift so that sufferers are able to hold fast to their human dignity while at the same time endure hardship nonviolently. Luther puts it this way: “We should pray that our enemies be converted and become our friends and, if not, that their doing and designing be bound to fail and have no success and that their persons perish rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ” (Luther’s Works, vol. 21, The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and A.T.W. Steinhilber [St. Louis: Concordia, 1956], 1000).

To summarize: A war is going on and it is a war of opposing powers with eternal consequences. In this war the baptized experience casualties, traitors, and triumphs. Our weapon is the “sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Eph. 6:17) and this weapon is not one of sweet passivity, but of life and death. It is a weapon that includes both “the kindness and the severity of God” (Rom. 11:22). In times of acute and ongoing distress we must invoke the severity of God as expressed in the imprecatory psalms. It is our way of coming before the Lord and throwing the sword to him, for “the battle belongs to the LORD” (1 Sam. 17:47).

For further study see John N. Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms teach us about Mercy and Vengeance in an age of Terrorism*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005.