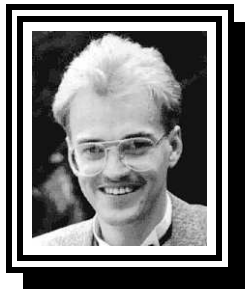


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Psalm 137

# The Problem of the Cursing Psalms



Christoph Lameter

FTS Box #466

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## 1. Introduction

It has often been noted that the Old Testament contains a lot of passages that call for revenge or curse others. Cursing and revenge-wishing are often seen as not compatible with our modern Christianity and our view of ethics. How are these passages to be treated? Does this cruelty belong into the Bible or should be cut it out?

The following paper discusses these issues using Psalm 137 as the basis for discussion. Psalm 137 is very much fitting for this purpose. The first half is often very much appreciated for its beauty while the second half is often seen as gross brutality.

## 2. Exegesis

### 2.1. Language

#### 2.1.1. Text

The following is a very literal translation. There is a one-to-one correspondence of the Hebrew word on the one side (beginning in the middle and progressing towards the sides) with the words on the right that are connected with underscores (\_). Additions to make the sense of sentences more clear are in parentheses (). Explanations -- such as to where the pronouns relate to - are in brackets [].

1.	לְ נהרות בבל צַ יַעֲבֹנוּ גִבְעֵינוּ בּוֹכְנוּ חַיִּים	At (the_)rivers_of Babylon, there we_sat, moreover_we_wept when_we_remembered Zion
2.	לְרֵבִי בְתוֹכָהּ תְּלִינוּ כַנְרוֹתֵינוּ	At (the_)poplars in_the-midst_of_her [fs=>Babylon] we_hungup our_lyres
3.	כִּי צַ צְלוֹנוּ צוֹבֵינוּ דְּבַר־צִיר וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ צִמָּה צִירוּ נוֹ מַצִּיר חַיִּים	Because there (they_)asked_of_us our_captors words_of_a_song and our_mockers (asked of us) joyfulness. "Sing to_us from_the_song_of Zion".
4.	יֵם נָצִיר תִּצִיר־יְהוָה לְ דָמַת נָכַר	How (can) we_sing (the_)song_of_Yahweh in (a_)land that_is_foreign.
5.	אֶחֱזֹק יִרְוַע תִּצְבַּח יְמִינִי	If I_will_forget_you Jerusalem (let) be_forgotten my_right_hand.
6.	תִּדְבַק־לְצוֹנִי לִבִּי לְ נֹכְרֵי לְ לָהּ תִּדְרֹעַ לְ רֵץ צִמָּתִי	May_cling my_tongue to_the_roof_of_my_mouth if_not I_remember_you [fs=>Zion], if_not I_lift_up Jerusalem to_the_highest_of my_joy
7.	זָכַר יְהוָה לְבָנֵי דָוִד יִרְוַע הַמְרִי רָוִד הַיְסוּד בָּהּ	Remember Yahweh of_(the_)sons_of Edom (on_the_)day_of Jerusalem they_were_speaking "Lay_bare, lay_bare unto the_foundation in_her [fs=> Zion]".
8.	בְּתִבְבַּל הַצְדוּדָה צָרִי צִי־לְלֵם תִּדְגְּמוּלֵם וּגְמַלַת לָנוּ	Daughter_Babylon the_one_(to_be)devastated blessed who_repays to_you with your_dealings what_you_have_done to_us.
9.	צָרִי צִיִּן וּנְפֵ תִדְלֵם לְהַסֵּל	Blessed who_grasps and_shatters your_children against_the_rock

### 2.1.2. Notes / Language

The LXX contains a heading  $\tau\omega$   $\delta\acute{\alpha}\sigma\iota\delta$ . This is neither confirmed by the Masoretic text nor by the texts found at Qumran (11QPs<sup>a</sup>)<sup>1</sup>. The riddle is still not solved what might have been meant by this phrase. It is impossible to attribute this addition to David due to the historical context.

#### 2.1.2.1. Verse 1

ל נהרות בבל	A reference to the two rivers of Mesopotamia where Babylon was located <sup>2</sup> . A.A. Anderson sees this as referring to the irrigation channels of the land of Babylon <sup>3</sup> . This would mean a concrete location and not a figurative one. A text found at Qumran (11QPs <sup>a</sup> ) reads בבלל instead of בבל. This would mean that instead of "By the rivers of Babylon" we should read "By the rivers in Babylon" <sup>4</sup> . This would also enhance the parallelism with the second verse and would support the understanding as a reference to the irrigation channels since there could not be a construct chain "rivers of Babylon" but a reference to a concrete locality "(the-)rivers in Babylon".
יִצְבְּנוּ	The verb used here has a whole range of meanings. "Sat" could be used if this refers to a concrete situation in Babylon. Yet יִצְבְּ also means "to settle down" <sup>5</sup> . Therefore it might refer to the forced resettlement to Babylon. There is some speculation what this "sitting down" was all about. A.A.Anderson mentions the speculation that this could mean that the exiles gathered for prayer and lamentation <sup>6</sup> foreshadowing the later development of the synagogue.
וְגַם	Often translated as a pure "and" (Luther, Elberfelder, NIV,NASB,NRSV even the Vulgate). But this word emphasizes the following, the weeping <sup>7</sup> , which is not brought over into German, English or Latin. Only the KJV tries to bring this effect over by translating "yeah, we wept".

The connection of sitting and weeping often appears in ancient settings of funeral services<sup>8</sup>.

#### 2.1.2.2. Verse 2

רְבִי	Often translated as "poplars", but according to Allen the real tree looks more like a willow <sup>9</sup> .
בְּתוֹכָהּ	Literally "in the midst of her" <sup>10</sup> , a reference to the land of Babylon(fem.). Its meaning is therefore "in the land".

There was no joyful song in Babylon. The lyres were hung up to show that there was no joyful song. Lyres were not used for the lamentation that is taking place here.

<sup>1</sup>Kellermann, p. 44, BHS p.1216, Allen p.235

<sup>2</sup>Bibelllexikon p. 170

<sup>3</sup>A.A. Anderson p. 898, Allen p.235

<sup>4</sup>Kellermann p. 44-45

<sup>5</sup>BDB, See also A.A.Anderson p.898

<sup>6</sup>A.A.Andeson p.898

<sup>7</sup>BDB p. 168. Allen p.236 has also some hints to this effect. Kellermann's translation also reflects this emphasis p. 44.

<sup>8</sup>Kellermann p. 56

<sup>9</sup>Allen p.236

<sup>10</sup>BDB p.1063

## 2.1.2.3. Verse 3

צוּבֵינוּ	An allusion to צוּב to turn back or away (from God?). צוּבָהּ also an apostate. Is this already a hidden curse?
תוֹלְלֵינוּ	This word is listed as dubious in BDB. It seems to be derived from תלל = to mock which is occurring with in this meaning otherwise only in the H-Stems. I assume that here a kind of G-Stem participle (G55) is present. The root seems to otherwise suggest a loftiness or exaltedness and might be a word play to show on the one hand the exaltation of the captors over the Israelites in their victory and on the other hand an indication of a mockery. A different way of deriving the meaning is suggested by Allen. He takes it as coming from ללל with the meaning of "howl" (Kellermann also takes this route supposing it means "the ones that make us lament") <sup>11</sup> .
צִיר חַיִּי	The song of Zion here might refer to the whole body of the Israelite song. A.A. Anderson suggests that this might concretely refer to the book of Psalms (an earlier edition of course) which are also called the Hymns of Zion <sup>12</sup> .

## 2.1.2.4. Verse 4

אֵי	This word has more associations than just the question "How?" and word is also associated with lament <sup>13</sup> . It is very near to אֵי = Calamity, national disaster.
יִרְיָהוּהָ צִי	A synonym for the Song of Zion <sup>14</sup> .
דָּמַת נֹכַר	A foreign land means an unclean Land (Amos 7:17b). In uncleanness it is not possible to sing the Song of Zion <sup>15</sup> .

<sup>11</sup>Allen p.236, A.A.Andersen p.898, Kellermann p.45

<sup>12</sup>A.A.Anderson p. 898,Allen 236

<sup>13</sup>BDB p. 32

<sup>14</sup>A.A.Anderson p. 898

<sup>15</sup>A.A.Anderson p.899, Allen p.236

2.1.2.5. Verse 5

הצב	<p>The word here has given rise to a lot of dispute since it seems to be not fitting here. The form given in the Masoretic Text is G26/27 (Qal-Stem Imperfect, singular, third person feminine or second person masculine). The second person does not make much sense.</p> <p>When using the third person the subject of this clause is 'מִיָּנִי' (my right hand). What does it mean: My right hand forget? The KJV,NIV and NASV express the thought that this means the losing of the skills and power associated with the term "right hand".</p> <p>The LXX translates ἐπιλησθειη<sup>16</sup> possibly taking the Hebrew as an N-stem. The meaning would then be "Let my right hand be forgotten" (Also Elberfelder). The LXX (around 200 BC) is a witness to an earlier version of the Hebrew text than the Masoretic text (around 800 AD) from a time when there was no vocalization in the written tradition. Therefore the LXX is the earliest witness to the understanding of the Hebrew and its understanding is to be preferred.</p> <p>Emendations to this are abundant in translations and literature<sup>17</sup>. The most popular is taking this verb as "wither" so it would mean "May my right hand wither" (Luther, NRSV). This involves a change in the radicals. It is difficult to hold this view in the light of early attestations by LXX, Targum and Masora of at least the stem's meaning<sup>18</sup>.</p>
יָמִינִי	Literally "My right hand". The right hand was a symbol for strength, skill and ability. It is that what earns a living and makes living possible.

2.1.2.6. Verse 6

תִּדְבַק לְצוֹנִי	A tongue clings to the mouth as a result of thirst or the clinging is used as a signal for dumbness <sup>19</sup> .
רֵאשִׁית	Literally: Head. The first and most important is Jerusalem.

2.1.2.7. Verse 7

זָכַר יְהוָה לִי	A call for revenge. Yahweh shall remember what has been done to his people and judge the enemies for their atrocities <sup>20</sup> .
יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם	The "Day of Jerusalem" is the day that Jerusalem was destroyed. The Edomites looted Jerusalem and killed the fugitives <sup>21</sup> .
רָוַע	Lay bare. It has the meaning of exposing and nakedness. It is shameful to do so. The repetition emphasizes the vengeance of the Edomites pushing to tear down the foundations of Jerusalem <sup>22</sup> .

<sup>16</sup>BHS p.1217, BDB p.1018

<sup>17</sup>See note 15,14

<sup>18</sup>Also held by Kellermann p.45

<sup>19</sup>BDB p.546, A.A.Anderson p.899

<sup>20</sup>Allen p. 236

<sup>21</sup>A.A.Anderson p. 900

<sup>22</sup>A.A.Anderson p. 900

2.1.2.8. Verse 8

הַצְדוּדָה	<p>Definite article + Gp51 (Participle, Passive G-Stem,3p.f.s.). The meaning of the root here is ruin, devastate. The one who (will be) devastated.</p> <p>Many translate the participle as an active ("The one who devastates") (Luther, NRSV) since the context seems to fit more the active than a passive translation. Some ancient translation also indicate this but the LXX has also a passive<sup>23</sup>. Anderson arguments that Babylon was not destroyed when it fell to the Persians therefore an passive meaning would be difficult<sup>24</sup>. I do not think that the destruction of Babylon is necessary for the psalmist. The writer could have expected the sure destruction of Babylon as a retribution of Yahweh for the destruction of Jerusalem. That it did not happen so far did not diminish his expectations. The expectation of the destruction of Babylon was popular as can be seen from Jer 51:24- for example.</p>
תִּגְמֹלֶם	<p>Literally "with your dealings". The author is expecting that the same methods that were used by the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem will be used in the destruction of Babylon (So also NASV, KJV, Elberfelder).</p>

2.1.2.9. Verse 9

סל	<p>The meaning here should not be confused with a simple stone. It can refer to a rocky area (2 Sam 23:28; Judges 15:8+11), cliffs or a cleft. Jer 51:25 refers to the "rolling down [of Babylon] from the crags[same word as here]"<sup>25</sup>. Therefore this word can also refer to the foundational stones of Babylon. Jerusalem was plundered to its foundations and so will Babylon be.</p> <p>Kellermann's contention that there were no rock-formations in Babylon might be true, but since the range of meaning of סל also allows it to be used for the foundations of the buildings in Babylon there is no need for rock-formations. The conjecture that this would refer to the capital of Edom is very clever but unnecessary. There is no reason to emend the text and change the reference from Babylon to Edom<sup>26</sup>.</p> <p>The capital of Edom is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all except by scholarly conjecture<sup>27</sup>. It figures not prominent in any prophecies making it difficult to suppose a link to Edom.</p>
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The killing of babies as a method of war to totally eradicate a nation appears sometimes in the Old Testament (II Kg 8:12; Isa 13:16; Hos 10:14,14:1; Nah 3:10)<sup>28</sup>. It can be assumed that this happened at the fall of Jerusalem. The psalmist expects - as already expressed in Verse 8 - a revenge by Yahweh using the same methods.

**2.2. Structure**

There are some structural elements that group parts of the Psalm together into bigger units.

<sup>23</sup>Kellermann, p.45

<sup>24</sup>A.A.Anderson p.900

<sup>25</sup>BDB p. 701

<sup>26</sup>Kellermann p.46-48

<sup>27</sup>BDB p. 701, Kellermann p.47-48

<sup>28</sup>Kellermann p. 47

### 2.2.1. Verse 1-4

Verse 1+2 have parallel beginnings. They both begin with "At" and a noun in the plural: At the rivers ... At the poplars... . Verse 3 is giving the reason for the verse 2 and leads over to the first complaint in Verse 4 that the song of Yahweh cannot be sung anymore.

This passage is characterized by the contrast we (the people of God) and they (our enemies, our mockers, our captors) and is a review of the situation in exile.

#### 2.2.1.1. Time of Verse 1-4

It has been attempted to translate the perfect verbs here with a present meaning. This would mean that the psalmist was in exile when this psalm was written. Kellermann sees a conflict with verse 5-9 because Yahweh is directly addressed in verse 7 and Kellermann sees that this is forbidden by the inability to sing the Song of Zion in 4. Moreover verse 6 - according to Kellermann - curses the one not singing of the Song of Zion<sup>29</sup>.

A look at the text shows something different. Verse 6 does **not** talk about the Song of Zion but about lifting Jerusalem to the highest joy. It is debatable if this necessarily includes singing the Song of Zion in a situation of exile. Verse 4 forbids to sing the Song of Zion. Yet this could mean that only the regular joyful songs are not sung. Does it really prohibit even lament in exile? I do not think so<sup>30</sup>.

The **ז** in verse 1 and 3 is more indicative of an event that is past since **ז** usually indicates a distance to the event mentioned<sup>31</sup>. Therefore the perfects have to be taken as referring to a past event. The exile seems to be over for the psalmist.

### 2.2.2. Verse 5+6

Here the psalmist moves into the first person. He heaps curses on himself if he would not stay loyal to Jerusalem despite the situation. This is a proof of his faithfulness to Yahweh in sight of the difficult circumstances. A characteristic of this passage are the three If-I's. If I will forget, If I do not remember, If I do not lift up. There is a chiasm here at work

.	<i>B:Curse: My right hand be forgotten</i>
<i>B:Curse: My tongue be dumb</i>	<i>A:If I (will not remember Jerusalem)</i>
<i>A:If I (will not lift Jerusalem to my highest joy)</i>	

The repetition of the second "if" strengthens the confession by making the point that Jerusalem must be the highest joy and the utmost aim in life despite its having been destroyed. The chiasm is already over but the repetition in its violation of the chiastic principle makes the point.

Kellermann's thought that the non-singing of a Song of Zion leads to a curse is pure conjecture which is not directly expressed by the text<sup>32</sup>.

### 2.2.3. Verse 7

This finally is a direct address to Yahweh signifying a climax is reached within the psalm. A petition is made for revenge in a sort of indirect form. After the trust has been confessed now God should act

<sup>29</sup>Kellermann p.49

<sup>30</sup>Neither does Kellermann. Just two paragraphs after claiming that verse 4 forbids even to mention the name of Yahweh in a foreign land, he sees a lament to Yahweh fit for such a situation. Which would surely mean (from our knowledge of lament) that the name of Yahweh will be mentioned!

<sup>31</sup>Kellermann p.49

<sup>32</sup>Kellermann p.49

accordingly and judge the Edomites that helped in the destruction of Jerusalem<sup>33</sup>. The "I" is gone now it is up to Yahweh.

Interesting is that God shall remember. In the previous section the psalmist affirmed his remembering of Jerusalem. Now Yahweh shall remember<sup>34</sup>.

It is surprising that Babylon as the chief culprit is not mentioned in this way. Is it due to the words of Jeremiah (Jer 51) that already indicated that God's judgment would come about Babylon? But God shall also remember what the Edomites did (See also Lament 4:21).

#### **2.2.4. Verse 8+9**

The last section is exclusively concerned with the revenge in the form of blessing. And again the theme of lament is coming up. Apparently the psalmist wants the same that happened to the Israelites to happen to Babylon. The worst that he knew about was the killing of the infants (See also Lament 4:4+10). The wish of retribution is expressed using a synthetic parallelism. Blessed who... Blessed who...

The psalmist is sure that the revenge will come and does not bother asking for it, he just blesses those that are the instruments of God's judgment.

Kellermann's assumption that verse 8+9 are also originally aimed at Edom would destroy the unity of the psalm. Why would anyone start in Babylon and end up with cursing only Edom?<sup>35</sup>

#### **2.2.5. Overall**

Through the four sections we have a movement from "we in Babylon" to "I am cursed" to "Yahweh" to "Blessings".

### **2.3. Genre**

Psalm 137 is a community lament with slight modifications necessitated by the worst calamity that could hit the people of Israel<sup>36</sup>. Some inverted elements of a Song of Zion show up in the psalm. Parallels to other psalms in this form are missing.

Allen and Kellermann want to categorize this as a modified Song of Zion<sup>37</sup>. There is no joy about Zion in this psalm. Jerusalem is mentioned but not as in a Song of Zion. The blessings at the end of the psalm are what is the most like a Song of Zion, but the rest fits rather nicely into the common lament-form.

A.A.Anderson classifies this as a communal lament ending with a call for revenge.

In the following an attempt is made to identify the common elements of communal lament in Psalm 137.

#### **2.3.1. Address to God**

The address is totally lacking here. The situation is so bad that the Psalmist does not dare to address God at the beginning but waits till the petition.

#### **2.3.2. Complaint**

Verse 1-4 show the situation that Israel is captive in a foreign land. The complaint ends with the impossibility of even to sing a Song of Zion in an unclean land. The situation is so bad that the Israelites cannot even worship their God. Here already a hint of a petition comes up<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup>Kellermann p.49

<sup>34</sup>A.A.Anderson p.897

<sup>35</sup>Kellermann p.49

<sup>36</sup>A.A.Anderson p.897

<sup>37</sup>Allen p. 238

<sup>38</sup>Kellermann identifies this with communal lament too p. 49

Kellermann suggest that [ ] here is a hint of a charge against Yahweh. The change between I and We in lament is commonly found also in the book of Lamentations<sup>39</sup>.

### 2.3.3. Confession of Trust

Verse 5-6 contain a confession of trust in a self-cursing of the psalmist if he would forget Jerusalem. The psalmist forces himself to stay in his faith to Yahweh in a desperate situation that does not allow a positive expression of his trust and neither a glorification of God's great power. Instead curses are the only way to express his sorrow.

Kellermann sees the psalmist already back in Jerusalem. Therefore elements of a Song of Zion appear here in that for example the name Jerusalem is mentioned. Yet circumstances are difficult and the psalmist cannot joyfully praise Yahweh. Only curses come from his lips<sup>40</sup>.

I would see this part as a part of a song that was used in exile to emphasize the dedication to Jerusalem. There is no need that the psalmist should be back in Jerusalem to mention the name of Jerusalem. This is no proper Song of Zion but just direct address and a commitment to Jerusalem in a very desperate way.

### 2.3.4. Petition

Verse 7 contains the petition that Yahweh would remember what the enemies have done to the people of God. It is a cry for revenge that is not made explicit.

After Jerusalem is mentioned in verses 5 and 6 the fact of its destruction is brought to mind.

Kellermann sees here another hint of a Song of Zion which praises the firm setting of the town of God. But we see here talk about it's destruction. This could be taken as an inversion of a element of the Song of Zion<sup>41</sup>.

### 2.3.5. Vow of Praise

There is no "Vow of Praise" here. Instead verse 8-9 has the formal language of blessings. Blessed is... but this ends up as a curse on the enemies. The psalmist wishes that what was done to the Israelites would also be done to Babylon, especially singled out the killing of infants.

That is what will praise God if he will perform the revenge that is overdue.

A song of Zion usually has the element of blessings. The form is copied here but the meaning changes to a curse against those who ruined Jerusalem<sup>42</sup>.

## 2.4. Place / Setting

Verse 1-4 talk about a distance from the event. The exile must be over. It therefore presupposes the return of groups from exile (around 520 BC.). It seems that the temple and Jerusalem are still in ruins. It is the period before the reconstruction of Jerusalem (445 BC.)<sup>43</sup>. This was a time of general frustration (see Haggai) and the psalm would fit neatly into that time. The Jewish tradition uses this psalm to remember the destruction of Jerusalem on the 9th of Ab since the exile. Might the song have been written for that occasion?<sup>44</sup> The mentioning of the "Day of Jerusalem" is especially an indication that the writing of this psalm might have been especially for memorial purposes<sup>45</sup>.

## 2.5. The Role of Edom

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<sup>39</sup>Kellermann p.50

<sup>40</sup>Kellermann p.50

<sup>41</sup>Kellermann p.51

<sup>42</sup>Kellermann p.52

<sup>43</sup>A.A.Anderson p. 897

<sup>44</sup>Kellermann p.52

<sup>45</sup>Kellermann p.54 The reference given in Kellermann to Mi 7:7-20 is purely conjectural and cannot be a base for his argumentation.

The hate of Edom is caused by the actions of the Edomites when the state of Judah was destroyed. When Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians (v.7) the Edomites were there (Obadia 11-13). The Edomites seem to have broken a coalition (Jer 27:3) with Judah and other small states shortly before the fall (Amos 1:9). That is why Obadia 11 sees the inaction of the Edomites as guilt. The Edomites might have encouraged the Babylonians to destroy the city, killed and handed over fugitives to demonstrate their new faithfulness to Babylon<sup>46</sup>.

Noteworthy is that verse 7 does not mention the killing of Jews and the handing over of refugees to the Babylonians (Obadia 14) but focuses on the support of the Edomites to destroy Jerusalem (Amos 1:11). Is this focus conditioned by the memorial day of Jerusalem? The concern here would have been only for the city itself. The theme of condemning Edom instead of Babylon for the lament over Jerusalem is common in the Old Testament (Lament 4:22; Obadia)<sup>47</sup>.

### **3. Reflection: The Problem of the Cursing Psalms**

In the following sections different opinions concerning the offensive nature of "imprecatory" passages in the Old Testament and especially Psalm 137 are discussed. Each section deals with one author and finally I offer my own conclusions.

#### **3.2. Victimized People (C.S. Lewis Reflections on the Psalms)**

C.S. Lewis is offended by some of the hatred that is expressed in some of the psalms. The worst example is Psalm 109 where all kinds of hate are expressed against a personal enemy and the killing of babies in Psalm 137. These "vulgar" thoughts appear interspersed through the whole Psalter. They intertwine with the best passages in the Psalter and cannot be removed.

Lewis then asks if the Psalter can be used at all. The offending passages should not be explained away rather the hatred should be acknowledged as to be there as reflecting feelings of resentment in us that we know too well. They are put in the open here because there was less restraint in the expression of these in that society than today. They come from a primitive violent time and allow us to identify with the persons and see that forgiveness is not easy. We ourselves might struggle with thoughts of revenge against people who hurt us. These might come back again and again although we have forgiven.

The cursings are devilish but a reaction to something. They are victims. Lewis foreshadows a highly esteemed modern concept here. Although their reaction is natural it is wrong. In Judaism the corrective to such behavior already existed ("Forgive your enemy" Prov 24:17 also quoted by Paul).

The imprecations are curiously not found in ancient pagan literature. The impression is that the Jews were much more vindictive than pagans. Jews could sin more in this respect because they were nearer to God.

Lewis is fighting a battle between the hatred that he rejects and the biblical authority. He copes with this situation by seeing the imprecations in the Psalms as a result of victimization and not as the will of God. In my opinion C.S. Lewis is rejecting the authority of a major part of the Bible and instead of accepting the biblical authority tries to fit the Psalms into his expectations. The suggestion that pagan literature is free of these kinds of calls for revenge is probably due to his lack of knowledge of ancient texts. For example the Akkadian Creation Epic contains calls for revenge similar if not more intense than the Psalms<sup>48</sup>.

#### **3.1. Wishing for God's justice (John W. Wenham The Goodness of God)**

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<sup>46</sup>Kellermann p.57-58

<sup>47</sup>Kellermann p.55

<sup>48</sup>Pritchard p. 33

Wenham is familiar with Lewis' critique and shows that an overwhelming majority of the Psalms contain objectionable elements. He acknowledges - as Lewis' did - that there is no way to cut them out without losing a majority of the Psalms. Wenham finds these imprecations also in other places in the Old Testament especially in the prophets. He even finds passages where God speaks through the prophets promising fulfillment of revenge like in Jer 11. Psalm 137:9 is in harmony with a lot of prophecy concerning Babylon. Even the Pentateuch contains such curses even directed against the Israelites themselves should they forget the covenant with Yahweh (Dt 27-28). God was as "cruel" against the Israelites as he was against other nations.

Interesting is that these imprecations are even found in the New Testament. Paul curses the preachers of the false Gospel and others. Revelation is full of prayers for judgment and praise for judgment done. Even Christ is cursing the ones that he will judge on Judgment day (Mt 25:41) and curses towns that have not received his word (Lk 6). The imprecatory psalms are not alien to the New Testament but rather frequently quoted.

Vengeance belongs to God. This is evident in New Testament and Old Testament. Job states that he is free of rejoicing over the punishment of his enemies (Job 31:29+30). David was ruthless to his national enemies but showed generosity to personal enemies, even those that attempted to kill him.

The biblical cursings are not "vulgar". They are not addressed to the enemy but are a cry to God to give revenge. They express trust in God and a longing that God will perform justice. God also is not delighting in punishment but these actions are the final reaction after the "soft answer" did not work (Eze 33:11). The result of punishment is that men acknowledge that there is a God that punishes evil and that there is sense in righteousness. Psalm 137 is inspired by zeal for Jerusalem and by the remembrance of what was done to the city and its citizens.

The first allegiance is to God, not to our neighbor. It is an unbiblical Christianity to assume that God does not punish, not wills the destruction of sinners and that he does not cause pain. Even the believer learns many lessons only through suffering. The imprecatory psalms are based on "the certainty of judgment of the ungodly". We should hate evil with an utmost hatred.

### **3.3. Political Implications (Eberhard Gerstenberger Enemies and Evildoers)**

Gerstenberger sees that the Psalms do speak a lot about adversaries, but this is often shunned. Instead Christians focus on Mt 5 or Rom 13:1-7 and seem to exclude resistance against evil. The enemies in the Old Testament are the root of all evil. The "Deuteronomistic school" put forth extermination proposals that reflect the contemporary life and death struggles and "ideological thinking" of the time.

There is the need to draw conclusions for our own time from this. Gerstenberger classifies the psalms concerning the "enemy-problem" into three groups.

- Personal complaints mentioning unjust adversaries that seek to destroy the life of the one praying. The wrongdoers are enemies of God and are expected to experience the retribution by God for their deeds.
- National laments contain a merciless condemnation of the oppressors (See especially 137:8f). Yahweh is responsible for the misery of his people and has to intervene now on their behalf.
- Victory and royal songs coming from a position of strength and not misery like the ones before. Yahweh's ruler is to execute judgment against the nations.

Especially the royal psalms express domination over others. That "Arrogance of Power" is evident even today in international relations. Christians have to rally with the oppressed, organize resistance etc. Militancy of the poor against exploiters is justified. The psalmists sought for a resolution to conflicts and had a vision for peace. Weapons are put away and God will govern the earth.

There is a marked difference between ancient time and the development that we have experienced. There is no simple transfer of Old Testament experiences to our own environment. Faith in "one solitary God" may be tested in different ways today.

- ◆ Identification of enemies as the causes and causers of evil is easier today. It cannot be simplistically separated into dualistic ideas of good and evil. We have to focus on the biblical perspective of a world that awaits purification. There is no way of singling out the guilty ones.
- ◆ This does not prohibit legal persecution of evil and evil-doers. Most catastrophes are man-made. But justice has to be administered with caution. No death penalty. Utter destruction was aimed at eradication of the causes of suffering in the psalms. This would be recommendable today too. Oppressor has to be considered bloodsucker or dehumanized man. The poor have to fight for their own liberation. Enemies are the privileged classes and nations.
- ◆ We should "preach the solidarity with the exploited masses as Jesus would certainly have done". The enemy problem is very necessary for our worship. Enemies are now treated "in the presence of a divine judge".

Gerstenberger departs far away from the biblical basis in engaging in political speculations that have at their root popular views but are not biblically sound. To argue against the death-penalty for example is kind of ridiculous in this context especially in view of Psalm 137:8ff. To argue against the domination over others expressed in the Psalms is to go against what he reads in the Psalms. What kind of authority does the word of God have for Gerstenberger? Gerstenberger totally frees himself from the restrictions of the biblical message and takes off in his own dreamland which is apparently shaped by the thought in the Universities of Western Germany in the seventies. He proposes that people should take the law into their own hand to get justice which is quite contrary to the psalmists calling on God for justice.

### **3.4. A Sinful World (B.W. Anderson Out of the Depths)**

Anderson's view is that the revenge wish appears here because the psalmist lived in a primitive society depending on the military force for protection. It is an expression of the difficulty of serving God in a sinful world.

I cannot see our world nowadays having progressed from "primitive society". In Yugoslavia and in other places it becomes very evident that we still depend on military force for protection.

### **3.5. Liturgical Prayer (Christoph Barth Introduction to the Psalms)**

The enemies identified in the psalms are of a fairly generic nature. They are men whose godlessness was realized based on the law. These evildoers are hated by God. It is not the evaluation of the psalmist but of God that is important here. God's will shall come to pass. The psalms are not to be taken as outbursts of anger but as liturgical prayer directed against the enemies of God in general.

### **3.6. Need the Gospel (John Bright The Authority of the Old Testament)**

Bright found the later offensive part of Psalm 137 omitted in a hymn book. This seems to devalue that passage. What role does this passage have? The biblical message has to be received in its whole humanity. The Bible does not always give safe moral and correct teachings! The psalm cannot be purged by letting the last part go like in the hymn book but we have to hear his full message. The psalmist hated so much because he loved so much. This is a man full of hatred. It is a hate rightly directed against the enemies of God. He is yearning for the intervention of God for the Gospel.

This text is not in itself God's word to us. It must be read in light of the Gospel. Here is a man on his way to Christ. He is a picture of things in ourselves that have to be redeemed. We are also on our way

to Christ. His hate must confront Christ. A Christian cannot wish his enemies blown into pieces. Christ judges this mans hate. He needs the Gospel.

Brights view is very dispensationalistic. He does not see that the New Testament also expresses the "hate" that he is referring to. Does he want to bring the Gospel to Paul when he curses the ones that preach a false Gospel?

His approach to the Bible is very troubling from an hermeneutical point of view. Any passage can be declared as having to be read in the "Light of the Gospel" meaning whatever one might understand as being the "Light of the Gospel". In effect this allows one to believe according to the passages one likes and to reinterpret the rest to conform to ones own views<sup>49</sup>.

### **3.7. Wish for Justice (J. Barton Payne Theology of the Old Testament)**

Payne understands biblical imprecations as an affirmation of God's ultimate vindication of the righteous. An imprecation is prayer for the overthrow of the wicked and is usually found in places where the writers of the Old Testament were confronted with ungodly people. Their enemies had to be eliminated if God is just.

Payne sees the imprecations as inspired works of the Holy Spirit and not just purely human product. The Christian can pray for vindication and justice.

The Old Testament does not teach hate for the enemies (Ex 23:4,5; Lev 19:17,18). Jesus condemned the antibiblical traditions of the Pharisees not the Old Testament.

Payne has a good way of seeing things but the given passages from the Old Testament condemn hate against enemies from the people of Israel not hate against foreigners.

## **4. Conclusion**

I follow Wenham and Payne on their view that the imprecations are calls for God's vindication of the righteous. Here a summary of important points concerning the understanding of these passages:

- A. The so called "imprecatory" passages are common to both the Old and the New Testament and cannot be separated from the biblical text without loosing the meaning of the text altogether. "Imprecations" are therefore in the core of the biblical message.
- B. Cursing and "hateful" passages are not a call or permission for the individual to avenge oneself but are a call to God to intervene by punishing the sinners.
- C. Punishment of the sinners is at the heart of the Gospel that Jesus proclaimed (See Matthew 24:31). If the Old Testament is rejected on these ground then the whole biblical message is rejected.

The problem with the imprecatory psalms are largely due to contemporary views that are at variance with the biblical message. I noticed that especially here in the American society it is the ideal to be nice and friendly at all times. Jesus was not nice and friendly. He confronted bad thought even in his closest associates. For example he says to Peter "Get behind me Satan!". The western society lives in an illusion as if a happy world would be possible with a society of sinful human beings. The always being nice and friendly leads to diffuse and deceptive relationships manifesting itself in disoriented people. God is not diffuse but clear. That is why he is truthful and punishes the sinners. Love is only real when accompanied by truth.

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<sup>49</sup>A good illustration is also Paul K. Jewett God, Creation and Revelation. He defines understanding of the biblical message in exactly this terms(p. 126ff).

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