



The Enemy in the Psalms

MARTI J. STEUSSY

The Psalms bristle with talk about enemies. Psalmists unabashedly declare their ill will towards enemies and even the enemies' families: "May there be no one to do him a kindness, nor anyone to pity his orphaned children" (Ps 109:12). They openly pray for God's partisan intervention on the psalmist's behalf: "In your steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries" (Ps 143:12). The pray-ers assume God's approval and assistance in their own destruction of enemies: "You made my enemies turn their backs to me, and those who hated me I destroyed" (Ps 18:40). Such talk seems a long way from Jesus' counsel, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44), and the Torah commandments, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself" and "Love the alien as yourself" (Lev 19:18 and 19:34).

What, if any, place should the enemy psalms have in Christian spiritual life? One might suppose we should simply set them aside, but I believe we need these psalms to help us grapple with the real presence of threat, hurt, and anger in human relationships. In this essay, I will first consider what is at stake in "negative emotions." Then I will discuss four approaches to praying (or not) the enemy psalms: avoiding them, spiritualizing them, praying them "straight," and praying them from multiple viewpoints.

Using the psalms to bring before God our fears and our hatreds allows us to express such emotions honestly and, perhaps eventually, even to pray such psalms from the enemies' point of view. In praying with Christ, we are permitted to identify with both parties to the conflicts described in the psalms.

“BAD” FEELINGS (OR NOT)

The “negative” emotions of fear and anger (along with associated feelings, such as desire for vengeance) arise from our *positive* desire for life and connection. The Bible generally portrays the physical world and embodied human life as *good*, gifts from a gracious creator God. The Hebrew word for “soul” (*nephesh*) denotes the aliveness of a living body and even has overtones of desire, like the longing of a thirsty deer for water (Ps 42:1–2). We yearn to live well, because that is what God intended for us!¹

“The Bible generally portrays the physical world and embodied human life as good, gifts from a gracious creator God. In present life, however, not all creatures flourish.”

In biblical visions of creation and redemption, creatures live in relationships of mutual flourishing, a state to which the words “blessing,” “righteousness,” and *shalom* (well-being or peace) all refer. Such a state of life is envisioned in Gen 1’s blessings and pronouncements of goodness, in prophetic visions of lions with lambs and every household having its own vine and fig tree (Isa 11:6 and 65:25; Mic 4:3–4), and in Ps 72’s portrayal of the realm of the ideal king (although 72:8–11 leaves us wondering how the other nations would feel about the arrangement the psalmist imagines). Jesus’ miracles of feeding and healing point towards fulfillment of God’s plan for *shalom*.

In present life, however, not all creatures flourish. Not every human enjoys health, wealth, and safety, and some must endure hunger to the point of starvation, without opportunity for appropriate satisfaction. Sometimes hurt and deprivation occur as a result of “natural evil,” a consequence of the workings of nonhuman nature. All too much violence and destruction in our world, however, arises from human action. Especially this humanly caused suffering (whether intended or a byproduct of thoughtlessness) leads us to speak of “sin” and to describe our world and human nature as “fallen.” And the humans who cause such suffering—or those whom we believe *might* cause such destruction—we call our “enemies.”

Just as our bodies respond to food deprivation with the feeling of hunger, they respond with fear and anger towards those who cause us threat, pain, or loss (fear and anger are the emotional side of the body’s “fight/flight/freeze” arousal). These feelings are part of the God-given desire for life. Too often, those who encourage us to squelch fear and anger, to “be polite,” are precisely those who stand to benefit from our not making a fuss. Allowing ourselves to feel the feelings, to

¹This idea that the physical world is our right and proper God-intended setting is also present in the New Testament. We read that the Son of Man came “eating and drinking,” to the point where gossips called him “a glutton and a drunkard” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). Even the most future-directed of the New Testament books, Revelation, culminates not in the lifting of individual human souls *from* earth, but the “rapturing” of God’s heavenly city from heaven *to* earth (Rev 21:1–2).

know that we don't like the situation, can be a first and very healthy move towards realizing that something in our lives needs to change.²

Fear and anger function as part of the compass that turns us towards life. Encounter a tiger, run! Somebody tries to snatch food from your baby, stop them! If those were the only problems we encountered, our compass might be unproblematic. But human life is far more complex, and most of the problems we face are ones that can't be solved by short-term responses of running, fighting, or freezing. Our physiological gearing-up actually interferes with modern problem-solving, because the body's preparation for physical action interferes with our ability to think rationally and creatively. We get tightly focused on one part of a problem and don't notice the contextual elements that might help us with the overall situation. Primed for action *now*, we have trouble evaluating long-term consequences. Neither hitting nor running help us deal with balky insurance companies, terrorist threats, traffic, or economic policy. Even images of physical violence, the kind of problem for which fight/flight/freeze developed, usually come to us via news media reporting on events that have already happened far away and cannot be mended by our fists and feet.

Now add to that our imaginations and the power of social suggestion, factors that can distort even a basic response like hunger (hence our difficulties with obesity and eating disorders). We don't just fear what *is* happening, but what *might* happen. Those who really *are* doing harm are often unidentified or out of reach, so our frustration with them gets displaced onto others, especially those who are incriminated by innuendo, who look different, or who in other ways aren't part of "our" group. However legitimately anger and fear originate in our desire for life, in our world they often hinder rather than help us. No wonder that wise persons the world over counsel against quick surrender to such emotions!

The complex question we face with regard to psalms of fear, anger, and desire for vengeance is then this: To what extent do such psalms help us reach effectively for life—for ourselves and others? And to what extent do their words of fear and anger enmesh us in feelings that are more likely to lead to harm than good—for ourselves and others? Are there ways of praying the psalms that will enhance their helpfulness while minimizing the potential for harm?

FOUR APPROACHES

1. *Avoiding the Enemy Psalms (or Not)*

Given the problems that fear and anger cause us, and the conviction that love and forgiveness are the responses we should cultivate toward enemies, it's no surprise that many Christians find the enemy psalms simply unsuitable for Christian

²For more on how these feelings help us recognize the need to change, see Walter Brueggemann on "psalms of disorientation" in *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) and Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

prayer life. My own denomination's *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1995) omits many verses and whole psalms from the Psalms section at the back of the hymnal, with enemy language apparently a key criterion for what is omitted.

While I absolutely agree that verses such as Ps 137:9 ("Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!") should give us pause, I do not agree that we should set them aside and ignore them. First of all, condemning the emotions expressed in these psalms shows a lack of human compassion towards the sufferers who speak them. While we may rightfully shudder at the image of babies dashed against rock, the mere presence of such language says much about what war does to its victims. What happened to give rise to such bitterness among Jerusalem's exiles? Without having undergone such suffering, dare we rush to quick judgment? Staying with this psalm, all of it, can help us come to grips with the deep and ongoing costs of violence in our own world.

Second, engaging with these psalms can open us to our own negative feelings. One reason for reading these psalms is to hear their message for us. I often invite classes and other groups to write prayers modeled on biblical laments (including the infamous Ps 137). A typical first reaction upon hearing the assignment is, "I haven't got anything to lament." A typical later reaction is, "Oh my. I didn't realize how much pain I was carrying!" Sometimes people discover that they need time to grieve a lost parent. Sometimes they realize that they have been avoiding a necessary decision. Sometimes fear or anger that can't be solved at the individual level calls one to a social ministry. In almost all cases, naming the issue leads to growth and more fullness of life. (For those who *aren't* carrying suppressed pain, the enemy psalms have a different value, which I'll discuss later.)

*"the psalms suggest that we should come honestly before
God with how we do feel, rather than wearing a brave
mask of how we ought to feel"*

Another reason for opening ourselves to our negative feelings is that this is usually the most effective way to get past them. We can and should use our willpower to avoid acting hatefully towards others. Whether willpower enables us to avoid *feeling* hate is a different question. Those of us who refuse to admit our fear and anger (even to ourselves) are the most at risk for suddenly exploding or just picking away in small ways at people who have nothing to do with our anger. Those who can recognize and name their feelings, by contrast, can more easily make suitable choices about dealing with them, and usually come sooner to the point of being able to say, "Never mind."

This brings us to a third, and perhaps the most important, reason for praying the enemy psalms: it helps us be honest before God. Many of us were taught that we should "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:18). That state of constant thankfulness is surely a worthy goal towards which to strive. But what if we don't

feel thankful? What if we feel like the woman in the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8)? Jesus offers her unremitting complaint as a model for prayer! Perhaps if we had perfect spiritual wisdom, we would always feel thankful, but in a world where most of us do not feel constant thankfulness, both Jesus’ advice and the psalms suggest that we should come honestly before God with how we *do* feel, rather than wearing a brave mask of how we *ought* to feel. We can do this because such worthies as Abraham, Moses, and Job have blazed the trail. We can do this because we know that God’s love for us begins while we are still sinners (Rom 5:8). We do not have to become pure and perfect before we enter into God’s presence. Rather we can bring what we have to God and let God help us transform it into something more beautiful, life-giving, and worthy. The wisdom of the world too often says, “Be good in order to be loved.” The message of grace is, “We can be loved into goodness.”

2. *Spiritualizing the Enemies (or Not)*

Always or almost always in Psalms, the “enemies” are human. Sometimes, as in Ps 44, the enemies are foreign nations and their armies:

Yet you have rejected us and abased us,
and have not gone out with our armies.
You made us turn back from the foe,
and our enemies have gotten spoil.
You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations. (Ps 44:9–11)

In other psalms, the enemies seem to be personal opponents. Psalm 127:5 speaks of a person who “shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (the “gate” of a city was a common site for conduct of legal business, like a county courthouse today). In some cases, as when Ps 41:5–7 speaks of enemies who “gather mischief” and “whisper together,” the implication may be that the foes are casting curses or malicious magic, something along the lines of the “evil eye” (this possibility is more clear in some translations than others). In a very few cases, such as Ps 22:12, “many bulls encircle me” (see also 22:16, “dogs are all around me”), threat is described so picturesquely that interpreters don’t agree on whether the enemies are animal, human, or demonic. For the most part, however, enemies seem to be the sorts of political opponents that a king or other leader might worry about, and certainly quite human.

One of the wonders of psalmic language, however, is its flexibility. If these prayers were only useable by ancient kings, they would not have been so treasured for so many centuries. As it is, all kinds of people in all walks of life, most of them *not* kings, have found the psalms meaningful. Many of these people, committed to Christian ideals of forgiveness and love for enemies, wouldn’t dream of asking God to smite other human beings. Instead, they interpret the enemies as “principalities” and “powers” (Eph 6:12 KJV) or “personal demons” such as depression and addic-

tion. Evocative modes of Bible-reading such as *lectio divina* especially encourage this kind of identification.

I believe that much of the Bible's power lies in its interpretability, and therefore I am not particularly bothered by the idea of reading our contemporary struggles into scriptural language that may originally have had a quite different reference. I know many people who have drawn strength and encouragement from reading the psalms in just this way. I do, however, want to register two cautions about "spiritualizing" psalmic enemy language. First, one's subconscious is likely to register the apparently human nature of the enemies even if one is consciously using a different interpretation, and so such a reading may suggest, deep down, that it is okay to curse other humans. Second, it may not always be helpful to characterize our problems as enemies "out there." Addiction treatment programs, for instance, generally advise that one needs to "own" one's addiction as a permanent part of who one is. One can and should ask God's assistance in resisting the addiction's urges. But asking God to help us manage an addiction that is part of us is spiritually different than imagining it as an outside enemy that we ask God to destroy. Again, it's important to recognize that God can love us *while we are still broken*, rather than supposing that love comes only for the pure.

3. *Praying the Enemy Psalms "Straight" (or Not)*

At the Society of Biblical Literature's 1999 Annual Meeting, Rabbi David Blumenthal conducted a remarkable demonstration. He passed out his translation of a particularly harsh section of Ps 109 (in which the psalmist calls for evil to fall upon enemies) and invited someone to read it aloud. He then asked someone else to read, requesting "more expression." After a series of readers had tried and failed to articulate the psalm with vigor, Blumenthal told the gathering that "this psalm is to be prayed—but only if you can sustain the anger."³

In line with my earlier comment about not rushing to judgment on the speakers of Ps 137, I agree with Blumenthal that when we genuinely feel the kind of rage expressed in such a psalm, it is right and proper that we bring such rage to God in prayer. In support of this point, I offer an observation about form in the lament/complaint psalms. Psalmic prayers for help draw on a standard structure: they typically call to God, explain the problem, ask for help, give reasons why God *should* help, and then close with words of trust or an anticipation of praise.⁴ What may not be clear, from standard commentary descriptions of that form, is that few psalms follow it exactly. One or two sections may dominate, being developed at great length or repeated over and over. Or—and this is important for the present discussion—some parts may be left out entirely. In particular, not all unhappy psalms end with trust or praise. Psalm 137 ends with the line about dashing babies,

³See Blumenthal's "Liturgies of Anger," *Cross Currents* 52/2 (2002) 178–199; also <http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/Liturgies%20of%20Anger.html> (accessed 20 July 2007).

⁴My own *Psalms* commentary (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2004) outlines this form on pp. 80–81 with Ps 13 as an example.

while Ps 88 ends, “You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend” (NIV). The lesson is this: in the long run, rage has a predictable course and, if worked through with God, often does end in trust or praise. But in the short term, the time in which we pray a particular prayer, we cannot assume that we will reach trust or praise. Sometimes the complaint and cry for help (or vengeance) are all we have—and if so, that’s what we should take to God, without trying to force an unfelt happy ending.

In lectionary-guided reading, however, psalms come up without any necessary correspondence to the passions of our lives. In such situations, I have more reservations about reading the enemy psalms in straightforward identification with the psalmist. Such a practice makes it too easy to assume that, of course, our enemies are God’s enemies, deserving of destruction. This brings me to a fourth proposal for reading the enemy psalms.

4. *Praying from Multiple Viewpoints*

Since God is the life-giver who wants us to live fully and well, it is appropriate that psalmists appeal to God, patron of life, for protection from their enemies. But by and large, the psalmists seem to assume that their enemies are also God’s enemies, so that God can attack the enemies without any compromise of divine nature or purpose. Are righteousness and guilt ever so simple? If postmodernism has taught us anything, it has taught us that almost anyone’s choices look right *from their point of view*, and that all of us are enmeshed, corporately as well as individually, in activity that brings harm to others.

“I now suggest that we need to pray the enemy psalms not only from the psalmist’s point of view, but also from the enemies’ point of view”

Thus I now suggest that we need to pray the enemy psalms not only from the psalmist’s point of view—a difficult enough experience, given how some of us deny our own hurt and anger—but *also from the enemies’ point of view*, because no matter who we are, there are assuredly others in the world who view us, rightly or wrongly, as the enemy from whom they need God’s protection. We can also pray these psalms from the viewpoint of compassionate outsiders, hearing the pain on *both sides* of the conflict as it summons us to peacemaking. For those who feel unfamiliar with the emotions expressed in the enemy psalms, praying them offers the chance to begin sorting through this aspect of human experience before it erupts—unexpected and uncontrollable—in our own lives.

I considered titling this section “Praying the Enemy Psalms from God’s Point of View.” I refrained, because I did not want to suggest that we can fully comprehend God’s point of view. But I do want us to notice that a God who loves *all* will indeed be experiencing our prayers of struggle in full knowledge of both the “vic-

tim's" pain and the experience of the "enemies" (who in all likelihood also consider themselves victims), as well as feeling the frustration of an observer who has the interests of both sides at heart. Dietrich Bonhoeffer ends up in a similar place by following Luther's and Augustine's recommendation that we pray the psalms through Jesus Christ.⁵ Bonhoeffer suggests that Christ (understood as the praying voice of the psalms) is the one person who can claim true innocence, but also the one who, voluntarily and through love for the human "enemy," takes upon himself the punishments being called for (thus identifying with the "others" of the psalms). In praying with Christ, then, we identify with both parties to the conflicts described in the psalms.

Is this a simple way to pray the enemy psalms? Certainly not. But we shouldn't expect grappling with human conflict—and our own insides—to be simple. Spiritual maturity requires us to deal with complexities. When we are so lost in our own pain that we can only pray from that standpoint, so be it: God will accept us in those prayers, and the acceptance will work toward our healing. When we have more strength, we can let a multisided engagement with these psalms help us experience the complex pain of human conflict. In so doing, we begin to share God's compassion for *all* concerned. ⊕

MARTI J. STEUSSY is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and MacAllister-Petticrew Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Her most recent book is *Psalms (Chalice, 2004)*.

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 5, *Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*, trans. James H. Burtness, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly. In (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).