



## Psalm 109: Three Times, ‘Steadfast Love’

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In its main assertions, the book of Psalms divides into hymns of praise and songs of complaint and lament.<sup>1</sup> For most of us, this second group is much more difficult theologically and liturgically, because those psalms articulate themes that are not congenial to popular and habitual religious notions. In the general grouping of songs of complaint and lament, a number of different voices are heard, including songs of grief and abandonment (Ps 22), songs of remorse and guilt (6, 32, 38), communal laments (74, 79), and Yahweh’s responding voice of judgment (50, 81). Perhaps the most difficult are the psalms which voice raw, unrestrained vengeance which surprises us in the Bible. Obviously this voice contradicts the invitation of the Gospel that we should love our enemies (Matt 5:43-48, Rom 12:17, 21).<sup>2</sup> That these psalms are difficult for us is evident in the way they are ignored and often skipped over in the liturgical sequence. In what follows, I shall argue, a) that these psalms are an undeniable part of serious piety and liturgy in the Psalter and cannot be ignored, and b) they are crucial resources for faith and for pastoral activity in our own time. Psalm 109 is considered as an extreme case of the meaning and value of such resources.

### I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALM

Psalm 109 in a very general way has the tone and form of a lament psalm, but it takes great liberties and develops in a way that is peculiar to it:

1. The initial appeal (vv. 1-5) for God’s intervention is a statement of the basic trouble. Governed by the word *for*, v. 2 introduces the cause of the complaint. The words point to the presenting problem as “slander,” “deceit,” “lying,” “hate,” “accuse.” In v. 4 the language suggests a *breakdown of equity*.

<sup>1</sup>Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965) has pursued this simple organization of Gunkel’s more precise delineation. While this two-fold grouping is somewhat reductionistic, it is a helpful way to organize the Psalms for beginning in theological reflection.

<sup>2</sup>See my general comments on vengeance in the Psalms, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minn.: Saint Mary’s Press, 1982) chapter 5.

Good should evoke a responsive good.<sup>3</sup> Love should receive a responding love. But instead, this speaker has experienced *evil and hate*.

The terms of trouble are quite general and we cannot tell what they are specifically. Indeed, the wording would not suggest that they are too serious or flagrant. But the remainder of the Psalm suggests a depth of resentment and an urgency of redress, indicating a serious betrayal.

The wrong seems to have been done by speech, so we may suspect it is *false evidence in court* that has led to a miscarriage of justice. We are not dealing simply with a skewed personal relation but somehow with a public problem that has far-reaching implications, such as loss of wealth and *property* or violation of *honor*. I suggest only a violation of property or honor could evoke such a harsh response.

2. The *long middle section* of the Psalm (vv. 6-20) falls into two major sections, with an introductory appeal.

a) *The introductory appeal of vv. 6-7* is particularly interesting. The imperative (“appoint”) would seem to be addressed to God, but the appeal asks for the function of an *actual court* of human judgment. This interplay of religious and judicial motifs is an important one to which we shall return. The initial request to appoint “a wicked one” presumably means to appoint a severe judge, or as we might say, “a hanging judge.” This is balanced by an accuser (*satan*) in the second half of the verse. The third line presumes the verdict, that the accused should be declared guilty, because in fact he is. So far as the speaker is concerned, this is not in doubt and need not be examined any further. The speaker wants the trial quickly, wants God to institute the action and is very sure of the outcome.

b) *The hoped-for sentence* (vv. 8-15, 19-20) is a fervent suggestion to God and to the court concerning what would constitute a fair sentence. The hope and wish (which clearly is energized and informed by great hurt) is that the guilty one should be *socially nullified*. Notice that the judgment is “this worldly.” There is not any hint of “other worldly” judgment or eternal damnation. Rather, the hope is for *economic ruin* (vv. 8-11), *disintegration of the family* and its *disappearance from social existence*. The conclusion of this section in vv. 19-20 is interesting. V. 20 speaks of the “reward” (*pa‘al*) for the guilty who is called my “accuser.” The term is *satan*, the same as in v. 6. As this one is “my accuser,” so an accuser is needed (in v. 6) against him. The last line in v. 20, reminiscent of vv. 2-5, is about “speaking evil” which again sounds like court slander.

c) *The reasons* for such vociferous judgment are given in vv. 16-19, introduced by *ya‘an*, which parallels *kî* in v. 2. The reason for this deep wish for social nullification is that the subject has not been attentive to the poor, but has in fact exploited the poor until they are destroyed. The subject must have been some-

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<sup>3</sup>It is foundational for Biblical faith as indeed for any religion that is morally serious to assume that deeds have corresponding consequences. This is an assumption that is made about social processes and arrangements, as it is made about cosmic fairness. Cf. Klaus Koch, “Is There A Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” *Theodicy in the Old Testament* ed. James L. Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 57-87, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982). On the theological function and problematic of such deed-consequence theology, see my article, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology (I: Structure Legitimation),” forthcoming in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.

one with power to bring life (blessing), but has instead worked to bring death. The “curse” of v. 17 may be spoken speech. More likely it is the *practice of policy* toward the poor which causes economic ruin. If curse is a mode of public action, then the wish for judgment is that the offender should have ruin like that he has worked in this case. Thus the prayer addressed to God is for retaliation as brutal as the initial offense. This is a prayer for strict retribution.<sup>4</sup> As the initial affront may have been committed in a judicial process, so the appeal of vv. 6-7 (and the general

form) is that a judicial process should also be the place and context of precise redress.

3. The third section of the Psalm (vv. 21-31) is something of a surprise. This is *a prayer of trust and petition addressed to God*. God has been addressed in v. 1, so that we may assume that the long series of optatives in the middle body of the Psalm is intended for God. But the Psalm has moved in a juridical direction. We do not readily expect a prayer at this point. After v. 1, God has not again been mentioned, except for the conventional uses of vv. 14-15. Thus, v. 21 represents an important shift of tone, mood and intention. The intervening verses (vv. 6-20) may well represent a shift of address, an appeal to a human agent. Then in v. 21 there is seemingly a shift to address God directly. This shift of address and tone is the major interest and problem of the Psalm.

This third unit is organized around two strong appeals. In v. 21 the strong pronoun *'attah* is used with an appeal based on Yahweh's reputation (name).<sup>5</sup> This is supported by the motivational reference to Yahweh's goodness and loyalty. The first petition is filled out in vv. 22-25 with familiar motifs of complaint to characterize the situation of the speaker. The second petition is followed in vv. 27-29 with more malevolent wishes, perhaps more theological, while the earlier ones in vv. 8-14 are more concerned with economic and juridical matters. But the distinction between the two sets must not be pressed too cleanly. The Psalm concludes in vv. 30-31 with thanks and praise, standard for laments, with a closing formula of certitude, repeating the word *yasha'* from v. 26. The affirmation thus corresponds with the petition.

## II. SOCIAL PROCESS AND GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

The two major sections of the Psalm suggest a very important juxtaposition. After the introductory appeal of vv. 1-5, vv. 6-20 are cast in juridical language. In this section references of a theological kind are minimal and subdued (cf. vv. 14-15, 30). One cannot even be sure that the initial imperative of v. 6 is addressed to God.

<sup>4</sup>Following the discerning analysis of P. D. Miller, *Sin and Judgment*, it is important to recognize that the expectation of strict retribution is not generated in this moment of rage and resentment, but is a foundational conviction of this religious tradition. The speaker simply appeals to a common assumption.

<sup>5</sup>Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983) 11, 14, has argued that prayer in the Bible seeks to establish that the petition addressed to God serves the interest of God, as well as that of the speaker: "In the motivation, the prayer appeals to a common value, some identity of interest between him and God, some ground on which he can expect God's sympathy and a demonstration of solidarity...a principle of which is to persuade the one appealed to that his interest and one's own coincide."

The impression left by this section is that we are dealing with a human judicial process in which the speaker has confidence that real justice will be administered. The language of vv. 6-7 (even if addressed to God which is by no means clear) makes it certain that this is an actual, real-life judicial procedure.<sup>6</sup> The petition to the court is for the designation of an adversary, real judgment that brings a verdict and condemnation. The language makes clear that the speaker is not expecting "heavenly" judgment like a bolt out of the blue, but that God's justice should be mediated through institutional, legitimated human actions out of due process. This is an actual court case. The subsequent language of economics concerning creditors means a reassignment of property and wealth. It is God's judgment, but given through established processes, the only way in which reassignment of property can happen (cf. Gen 23, Jer 32, Micah 2:1-5).<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, vv.21-31 has no reference to human mediation or public institutions. This is genuine theological language in the mode of the standard lament which expects *Yahweh's direct intervention*. This language is not about due process, but about the powerful fidelity of Yahweh who is able to right wrongs.

The language of the two sections stand in clear contrast. In the latter, the two imperatives of vv. 21, 26 look to God's direct intervention. This is echoed and reiterated in v. 31. But the action of vv. 6-7 which is explicated in vv. 8-20 does not look to Yahweh's direct action but to political processes that function in reliable and predictable ways. Juxtaposed are the *immediate language* of plea and praise, and the *mediating language* of juridical action. These two sections are linked by some common motifs, noticeably the reference to the needy (vv. 16, 22, 31) and the double wish for a curse (vv. 18, 20, 29). But they do seem to reflect contrasting social intentions.

It will not do to assume that the two sections are only late and mechanically joined. We must assume some intention by this juxtaposition that lies at the heart of the Psalm. I suggest that the structure of the Psalm is concerned *with reliable social structures and procedures of vengeance*, i.e. "reliable courts, and *the certain sovereignty of Yahweh's judgment*. The two are of course not the same. The first presumes adequate dependable court personnel and procedures (vv. 6-7). The latter assumes Yahweh's attentive fidelity (vv. 21, 26, 31). Or said another way, they count on *human institutions and divine guarantees of fidelity*.

The relation of the two and the poignant articulation of them together is not simply an emotional binge. It is rather a careful discernment of what it takes

<sup>6</sup>The judicial context of laments has been suggested by H. Schmidt, *Das Gebet der Angeklagten im Alten Testament* (BZAW 40; Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1929), and pursued by W. Beyerlin, *Die Rettung der Bedrängten in den Feindpsalmen der Einzelnen auf institutionelle Zusammenhänge untersucht* (FRLANT 99; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970), and L. Delekat, *Asylie und Schutzorakel an Zionheiligtum* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962). However their proposals were still dominated by the temple without taking into account the social realities that are operative through the language. That is, the interpretation tended to be "idealistic," without linkage to social processes.

<sup>7</sup>On the reassignment of property as an actual social possibility, see A. Alt, "Micha 2:1-5, GES ANADASMOS in Juda," *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel III* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1959) 373-81. See Robert B. Coote, *Amos among the Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 24-45, for a fuller consideration of the social processes at work in land distribution.

to form a just and functioning society. On the one hand, such a society requires *due process* that can be trusted, that functions in visible and daily ways. Such due process must show that there are norms which endure and operate in all circumstances without respect to party. Vv. 6-20 insist on this and fully expect it. At the same time, society must have *symbolic underpinnings of legitimacy* which may go by the name of religion, myth or ideology. In Israel, of course, such underpinnings of legitimacy necessarily take the form of Yahweh's sovereignty and fidelity. That is the presumption of vv. 21-31, the outcome of which (vv. 30-31) shows that this legitimacy does indeed work in practical, public ways.

Both elements are here and both elements are essential. If one has only the latter (the underpinnings of legitimacy) without daily and visible process, religious fanaticism is invited, which regards every decision as a direct act of God. This leads to an escalation in which every act of retaliation becomes a form of religious indignation, which Jacobi terms "wild justice."<sup>8</sup> Such

vengeance that appeals directly to divine legitimacy is evident in the public behavior of Iran against offenders, but also in acts of violent retaliation in interpersonal relations. Moreover, one may suggest that forms of religious insistence in American society breathe the same air, for the desire in some quarters is that *civil process* should serve mainly to sustain *religious ideology*.

On the other hand, if one has only the daily and visible process without legitimacy beyond the reach of political arrangements, one settles for positive law which is difficult to sustain against powerful interests which legitimate, control and benefit from social processes. This would seem to be the issue in the perverted courts which the prophets condemn (cf. Amos 5:7, 6:12). Without the transcendent guarantor, the weak and powerless have no source of appeal, or even a basis for claim against what may become a manipulative process.

A “materialist” reading of this Psalm shows that the two factors are both present, both necessary, never to be confused. This insight is rooted deep in Israel’s memory. The key words used to address Yahweh in petition are words which in Israel are located in the Exodus-covenant memory:

deal (*‘ašah*) v. 21

save (*našal*) v. 21

help (*‘azar*) v. 26

save (*yaša’*) v. 26

save (*yaša’*) v. 31.

The appeal to God stands squarely in the memory of this God who is peculiarly aligned with the poor and needy and who has intervened powerfully on their behalf (cf. Ps 82). That is the source of the Psalmist’s hope and resolution of the problem.

It is clear, however, that the Exodus memory and the appeal to covenantal tradition is not a *religious appeal* without relation to real life. The Exodus tradition, particularly as explicated in the tradition of Deuteronomy, has immediate

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<sup>8</sup>For the phrase and a most compelling analysis of fanaticism and indignation in response to the breakdown of due process, see Susan Jacobi, *Wild Justice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).

and enormous implications for social practice and public institutions.<sup>9</sup> The management of God’s liberating justice is not an occasional abrupt intervention,, but is embodied in the social practice and social norms which guarantee and sustain the initiative taken by God.<sup>10</sup> For that reason the same Psalm which asks for God’s attentiveness also asks for the right kind of judge.<sup>11</sup>

### III. THE CRUCIAL FACTOR: *HESED*

The peculiar suggestion I have to make concerning this Psalm concerns the fourfold use of *hesed* (vv. 12, 16, 21, 26). I propose that the main flow of the argument of the poem can be traced through the uses of this word.

The word *hesed* has been much studied. N. Glueck<sup>12</sup> has provided the basic study in showing that the word bespeaks covenantal loyalty and solidarity and not simply an impulse of kindness. It is therefore odd and misleading, that in this Psalm the word is helpfully translated ‘steadfast love’ in vv. 21, 26 (in the RSV) when referring to God, but in vv. 12, 16 when the same word refers to human interaction, it is weakly rendered (in the RSV) ‘kindness.’ The argument of the Psalm, I submit, depends on being able to recognize that it is the same word in

all uses, however it is translated and whether it refers to human action or the action of God. Katharine Sakenfeld<sup>13</sup> has greatly refined the work of Glueck and has paid particular attention to the processes of human interaction subsumed in the term. Given that background, we may consider our four uses, for the Psalm is in one sense a reflection on the *cruciality of hesed in the ordering of human life*.

1. In v. 16, the key indictment brought against the one who is vigorously prosecuted is:

He did not remember to show *kindness*,  
But pursued the poor and needy  
and the brokenhearted to their death.

<sup>9</sup>On the concern of the text for actual public practice, see Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979) 608-621, and more specifically in relation to Deuteronomy, Norbert Lohfink, "Distribution of the Functions of Power," *Great Themes from the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982) 55-75. More generally on the significance of "materialist" interpretation, see Kuno Füssel, "Materialist Readings of the Bible," *God of the Lowly*, ed. Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984) 13-25.

<sup>10</sup>For an analysis of the ways in which religious Yahwism shapes social policy and social practice, see the analysis of Exodus 21-23 by Paul D. Hanson, "The Theological Significance of Contradiction within the Book of the Covenant," *Canon and Authority*, ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 110-31.

<sup>11</sup>The Old Testament is insistent on the notion that the sovereign judgment of God is mediated through social public processes. In another paper, I shall argue that for both Jeremiah and Job (who most vigorously raise issues about the equity of God's judgment), God's judgment is indeed mediated through social practice. With Jeremiah, the gift of land (32:1-15) is clearly made through proper legal procedure. With Job, the restoration in 42:10-11 asserts not only that "the Lord gave," but in fact this giving is done through members of the human community.

<sup>12</sup>Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967).

<sup>13</sup>Katharine Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978). See also her forthcoming study from Fortress Press, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*.

The moral sensitivity of this Psalm (contrasted with our usual dismissal of it) is rather remarkable. The condemnation is based on a lack of solidarity with the socially marginal. The poor and needy, the ones who are unable to sustain themselves politically and economically, are dependent on the active support of the powerful. That is the only thing that makes a viable social process possible. Where that support is not given, death will come. If the hoped-for sentence of vv. 8-15 may be trusted, the guilt here concerns vigorous economic exploitation. Israel, deep in its memory, expected God to be engaged on behalf of the poor and needy. Israel, in its best royal theory, had presumed this responsibility for the poor is definitional in the work of kingship (Ps 72,<sup>14</sup> Jer 22:15-16<sup>15</sup>). Job is the exemplar of covenant fidelity who takes his stand precisely in his solidarity with and loyalty toward the poor and needy (Job 31:16-23).<sup>16</sup> What is detailed for Job is summarized in Psalm 112:5-9. Whereas our Psalm articulates the *wicked man who brings death*, so Job 31 and Psalm 112 present *the righteous man who brings life*. The issue turns on *hesed* which society must have in order to remain human. The key indictment here is that one who has had the capacity for such *hesed* has not in fact done it.

2. In v. 12, the wished-for sentence against this one who did no *hesed* is that he should

have to live without *hesed* from others;

Let there be none to extend to him kindness,  
nor any pity (*hanan*) to his fatherless children.

Two things are evident. First, the poem proposes a precise match between guilt and punishment. The one who does no *hesed* should not receive *hesed*. It becomes clear that this Psalm is not excessively vengeful, but only asks treatment in kind. A first reading suggests it is more blood-thirsty than that, but a close reading shows otherwise.

Second, the real issues seem clearly to be economic. This is not a proposal for any other kind of punishment or suffering, but only that the condemned person should live without economic aid, until he is ruined. That reading of v. 12 is required by its context. The hoped-for sentence is, to be sure, a kind of excommunication, but the specifics concern economics. This Psalm seems to conclude that economic self-sufficiency is finally not possible. If one does not receive solidarity in the economic sphere, ruin will surely come. The land will be lost. Notice that the verb “cut off” in v. 13 is the preferred verb for land loss in Psalms 37:9, 22, 28, 38. What is proposed is not a theological judgment but the working of economic processes.

3. The third usage (vv. 21, 16), as we have seen, shifts from the human juridical process to make direct appeal to Yahweh’s intervention. The Psalm

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<sup>14</sup>Thomas Hanks, “The Kingdom and the Poor: Perspectives from Psalm 72, the Promised Liberating Ruler,” *Occasional Papers, Latin American Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies CELWP 10*<sup>0</sup> (June, 1983) 50-82, has offered a splendid analysis of this Psalm, showing how liberation terms and motifs are pervasive and decisive.

<sup>15</sup>On this passage, see the discussion of Jose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974) 44-53.

<sup>16</sup>On this passage, see Georg Fohrer, “The Righteous Man in Job 31,” *Essays in Old Testament Ethics*, ed. James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis (New York: KTAV, 1974) 1-22.

now asks that Yahweh should enact and make available the *hesed* that has not been found in the economic realities of the day, where one might best expect them. The reference in v. 21 to the “name’s sake,” asserts that to care about such matters belongs to the very character of Yahweh.

But what is it that is asked for? We are pressed again to ask how the two parts of the Psalm hold together. In the first half, through v. 20, the speaker a) has noticed the *lack of hesed* and b) has wished *hesed to be withheld* from the object of scorn and rejection. But now the mood has changed. One now does not seek *hesed* in the old places of the wicked, but in the only place where it is available, at the hand of Yahweh.

But what is asked for? We proceed on the assumption that the key word *hesed* retains its same meaning throughout the Psalm. Thus if it alludes to economic solidarity in vv. 12, and 16, we may expect it not to lose this concern in vv. 21, 26. Thus we must beware of any excessive spiritualization as we move to the “Yahwistic” second half of the Psalm. We may suspect that the yearning of the speaker is still for economic equity and well-being, assurance that there is an orderly, reliable norm against those who are rapacious and exploitative. The appeal is that Yahweh should become involved in the public process of the weak against the strong, of the poor

against the well-off,<sup>17</sup> in order to rectify a social situation that has become unbearable.

#### IV. SOLIDARITY IN THE SOCIAL PROCESS

This reading of the *hesed* of Yahweh in vv. 21, 26 is reinforced by a comparison of vv. 16, 22 which contain the same words “poor and needy.” The first use (in the juridical human part of the Psalm) is general and sounds like a “class action” suit. The protest is made in a generic way to include a whole group of people who have not received *hesed* from the one accused.

However, the same language in v. 22 is brought much closer home. Our interpretive inclination is to reduce this to a one-on-one appeal from a pious believer to the God who looks only on this one. But v. 16 guards against such a reduction. The one speaker in v. 22 is one of the social group identified in v. 16. The appeal to Yahweh is made on behalf of the voiceless group in v. 22.

So, what does the group in v. 16 and then their representative voice in 22 want? The voice wants at least religious consolation. But surely more. I submit that they want enough *solidarity in the social process* so that the structure and the system may work toward equity. This religious petition runs very close to judicial and economic practices. Appeal to Yahweh is made as a participant in and guarantor of social processes that guard against what has happened here, namely, slander, sharp dealing or whatever has denied the poor and needy their just claim. Yahweh is drawn deeply into the public processes of human life. Given the Exodus memory, that is not an inappropriate petition to make to Yahweh, for since his first intervention, he has been the one who hears the cry of the exploited and intervenes publicly on their behalf (Ex 2:23-25). This Psalm

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<sup>17</sup>On Yahweh’s commitment to the poor who receive *hesed* nowhere else, see Thomas D. Hanks, *God so Loved the Third World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).

simply asks for that primal intervention to be replicated in this particular situation.

#### V. A VOICE FOR THE POOR

With that interpretation in hand we may consider the possible resource this Psalm could be in the life of the church.

1. Whatever else this Psalm may suggest, it is unarguable that the problem of the speaker is *submitted to God*. The angry speaker in this Psalm appears to be deeply enraged. But there is no hint that the speaker undertakes any willful act of vengeance. Just the opposite is done. By v. 20 one might have imagined that the rage had reached such a state of excitement that acts of violence and/or terror would follow. They do not. What follows is the recognition that such rage belongs in one’s prayer life and in the continuing conversation with God who is trusted even with such matters as these. To be sure, such a prayer strikes us as strange and offensive. We may prefer to say that we should not feel the way this psalmist does. Of course we should not. But in fact we do not choose our feelings, especially those of rage, resentment, anger and hatred. Moreover, we may believe that such powerful inclinations are not wrought out of fantasy. Behind such an inclination we may expect there has been serious injustice that cannot be ignored and pretended away. Instead of a dismissal of such a prayer, we may take note that this Psalm models what to do with such negative destructive yearnings. I submit that where such prayers are



censored and such liturgies are denied, these sensibilities are driven underground or moved into lesser modes of articulation. The theological problem with such ways of handling these feelings is that such a sense of injustice in fact does concern Yahweh and cannot be handled in any lesser scope. That is who Yahweh is and has been known to be since the Exodus. The throne of Yahweh is indeed the place for such complaint and petition. I submit that this Psalm is a bold act of faith, for it insists that such wrong belongs in the scope of God's governance. Liturgy must give speech to that reality among us.

2. The split in much of our thinking between religion on the one hand and political, economic and juridical processes on the other hand is dangerous and destructive. It results in a faith that is finally irrelevant to the great issues of the day. This Psalm is a splendid example of how such processes live very close to the person of God. Ours is a public faith and this is a public God.

Now it may be urged that this God can hardly be held close to such mundane matters because God has other agenda. To that, two responses can be made. First, we do not really believe God is remote from life issues. We only pick the issues. Thus, many who prefer God to be remote from political and economic matters have no trouble at all articulating God in relation to sexuality, both as norm and as judge. This Psalm moves in another direction, but strongly insists that life in all its aspects be submitted to Yahweh's liberating agenda.

However, the second response is more important. That this kind of Psalm is screened out of use, that we do not expect God's engagement with economic and judicial process is a measure of our protected ideological reading of the Bible. Such an avoidance reflects the fact that these areas of life have become in-

creasingly autonomous and not vividly perceived as belonging to the rule of God. Indeed, when we are well enough off, we cannot understand the depth of such rage, nor the appropriateness of turning to Yahweh. This Psalm is an invitation to rethink our own "class commitments," which tend to protect us from the Bible.

In other contexts, of course, the engagement of Yahweh in the economic, judicial process belongs easily to the life-world of Israel. Thus in the Book of Covenant, it is written:

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them and *they cry out* to me, I will surely hear their cry and my wrath will burn and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. (Ex 22:21-24)

If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be to him as a creditor, and you shall not exact interest from him...if *he cries to me* I will hear, for I am compassionate. (Ex 22:25-27)<sup>18</sup>

In both uses the structure of "cry-hear" (*za'aq-shema*) is like that of the Exodus (Ex 2:23-25).<sup>19</sup> The law is rooted in the oldest narrative. To be sure, the law, any more than our Psalm, does not say *how* this response of Yahweh happens. It only is very sure that Yahweh is actively attentive to wrong social process.

While that may reasonably be an affront to our thinking (which has accepted matters of economics as autonomous) such linkages are not as difficult or incredible to the oppressed, to the Blacks in this country and to the peasants in Latin America, who can appeal from the abuses of *hesed* in the social process to the *hesed* of Yahweh in the social process. Such an appeal is not an act of religious resignation or escapism, but a source of energy for transformative action.

3. The interesting claim of this Psalm is that the *public structures of justice* and the *just intent of Yahweh* are linked to each other in inalienable and definitional ways. This Psalm opens the door to recognizing that vengeance is an urgent agenda in our society. I am not speaking of the repressive inclination of the strong against the weak, but rather the sense of victims of wrong that there must be *redress through due process*. I find this Psalm greatly illuminated by Susan Jacobi<sup>20</sup> who argues that justice requires that there be visible, prompt, disinterested vengeance according to due process, if a society is to believe in its own modes of justice. I find her discussion illuminating and commend it. What is clear in her analysis (as in this Psalm) is the fact that a romantic religion of love

<sup>18</sup>This double use of “cry-hear” is important and suggestive, because the two uses move in opposite directions. The first one evokes from Yahweh a *sword of vengeance*. The second evokes from Yahweh an act of *compassion*. The two together provide a juxtaposition of *vengeance and compassion* which we have separated but which a socially realistic reading insists upon holding together. See George Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 69-104, on the juxtaposition.

<sup>19</sup>See the stylized utilization of this construct in Psalm 107.

<sup>20</sup>The analysis of Susan Jacobi, *Wild Justice*, shows how religious sentimentality and romanticism have detracted from appreciation of serious effective social processes and institutions. An “idealistic” embrace of a love ethic does not touch the real issues of justice which require social realism.

and forgiveness is largely irrelevant in a society where there is great unanswered wrong and in which there are no effective processes for redress. This Psalm does not ask for supernatural intervention, but for credible due process guaranteed by Yahweh who intervenes against destructive social practice.<sup>21</sup>

4. This re-reading of the Psalm suggests that our “class reading” of the Bible has caused us to misunderstand this Psalm. It is bracketed out of almost all church usage. We have thought in so doing we were witnessing to a “higher” ethic. With this reading I propose that unwittingly the disregard of the Psalm leads to a disregard of serious public issues that concern our faith. The truth is that the God of the Bible is committed to public justice which is not sentimental. There is in history a moral norm that will not be mocked. Moral accountability, as suggested here, is not assigned to a remote final judgment, but belongs to the here and now in public processes that resonate with God’s loyalty to the poor. The voice of this Psalm is the voice of the poor who insist that human solidarity (*hesed*) matters to the quality of our common life. One dares to imagine that the petition to the God of Exodus is a welcome petition. It is the sort of petition which Yahweh finds most congenial. We might use our usual rejection of this Psalm to learn something about us. Our propensity is to have a Bible which does not touch so directly the dangerous issues of systemic exploitation. But by ignoring this Psalm, we disregard the voice of the poor and afflicted. When that voice is absent from our conversations, we likely will end with a protected religion and with a God who is not pressed enough about abiding commitments to the poor. It does not surprise us to find this motif sounded in the prophets for we have come to

expect that, but it does surprise us to find the same agenda in Israel's hymnal (the Psalter) and to find songs in which the poor have their say. This say of the poor is important to the faith of the Bible. Suddenly what we thought was a poisonous yearning for vengeance sounds more like a just claim submitted to the real judge.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

In this interpretation, we may draw the following conclusions:

1. *Hesed* as social solidarity is a legitimate expectation of all persons, but especially of the poor and needy.
2. The absence of such social solidarity, because it is death-bringing, rightly evokes social rage.<sup>22</sup>
3. That social rage drives the poor to address even Yahweh, who is taken to be the ultimate agent of justice and the final practitioner of social solidarity.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Thus the juxtaposition in this Psalm of a comment on *judicial process* and an *appeal to Yahweh* is not an accident, nor simply a literary arrangement. Yahweh is a function of questions of justice/injustice in the operation of a social theory. The structure of the Psalm and the various uses of *hesed* reflect a fundamental conviction about the nature of social life.

<sup>22</sup>On the reality and function of social rage, see Frank Anthony Spina, "The Concept of Social Rage in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East" (Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1977).

<sup>23</sup>On the legitimacy and creative power of pain, see my article, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology (II: Embrace of Pain)," forthcoming in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.