

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

Giant Despair, they have either been consigned to his dungeons, or left to fumble and tumble among the tombs, proving, as "the shepherds" said, the truth of the words, "He who wandereth out of the way of understanding, shall abide in the congregation of the dead."

"GRACE BE WITH YOU, AMEN."

H. R. REYNOLDS.

---

*THE VINDICTIVE PSALMS VINDICATED.*

CONCLUSION.

IN Psalm lviii. it is not the imprecations which it contains that constitute its chief difficulty. It is quite true that some of these, to the cursory reader, wear an appearance of malevolence; but on examination, as we shall see presently, they are found to be capable of an easy and satisfactory explanation. The real difficulty lies in the vindictiveness and ferocity which seem to have inspired the 10th verse—"The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked." And so real a difficulty has this been felt to be that even Dr. Perowne, whose defence of the Vindictive Psalms accords in the main with that to which this and preceding papers have been devoted, abandons—if I understand him aright—this and similar passages as indefensible.<sup>1</sup> We can hardly be wrong, therefore, in regarding this verse as a *crux criticorum* and as likely to test our theory more severely than anything which has as yet come before us.

But before we attempt to vindicate even this

<sup>1</sup> Note on Psalm cix.

verse, let us first dispose of the imprecations of verses 6-9, which may be done in comparatively few words. That they are directed against the *wicked* is obvious. The Psalm is universally allowed to be a "protest against unrighteous judges." Such perverters of the justice they were appointed to administer have ever been the scourges of the East,<sup>2</sup> precisely as in our own times they have been the reproach and the ruin of Turkey. The men the Psalmist has in view, so far from holding the scales of justice evenly, "weighed out" of them only violence and wrong (verse 2). So baleful was their influence, he could only compare it to the deadly virus of the serpent (verse 4), and so dangerous were they, so desperately and irrecoverably wicked, that the foul adder, deaf to the incantations of the charmer, was not more to be dreaded, or more to be despaired of (verse 5).

And such being the case, seeing that such men could not be reclaimed, and that no earthly power

<sup>1</sup> Perowne : The aim and object of this Psalm is obscured and almost lost to view in the mis-translation of the Authorized Version : "Do ye indeed speak righteousness, O congregation?" (verse 1). It is true that considerable doubt still attaches to the word here interpreted "congregation;" but critics are generally agreed that this rendering is indefensible, and that the reproofs of the Psalm are levelled at corrupt and profligate judges. The statement of Ewald, "Für אלהים ist unstreitig אלהים zu lesen," i.e. for "O congregation," read "O ye gods," is perhaps too positive; but it seems to me to have much to recommend it. It is admitted that rulers and judges, especially among the Heathen, assumed the name and enjoyed the honour of gods (or demi-gods), nor are they entirely unknown by that designation in Holy Writ. Cf. Exod. xxi. 6, "His master shall bring him to the judges" (Hebrew, gods); Exod. xxii. 8, 9; Psa. lxxxii. 1-5; and the defective form אלהים (for אלהים) is found in Exod. xv. 11. The absence of any word corresponding to this in the LXX. and other Versions may, however, favour the conclusion that it has been interpolated by a transcriber.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 1 Sam. viii. 3; Isa. v. 23; Prov. xxix. 4; St. Luke xviii. 2; &c

could or would check them, is it to be wondered at that the Psalmist cries to the Supreme Judge for help, and prays that the power which they possess for evil, and which they only use for evil, may be broken? For this is precisely what he does pray for in verse 6. Whether we understand him in the first hemistich ("Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth") to keep up the figure of the serpent, or whether we regard him with some commentators as here changing abruptly to his favourite image of a lion (the image of the second clause), the meaning is still the same. The poison of the serpent, it is well known, is not in the tongue, but in a little sac at the root of the fang, or tooth. And it is the pressure of the tooth upon this sac which injects the venomous deadly fluid into the wound which at the same moment it has made. It is necessary consequently, in order to render the serpent innocuous, to extract all its teeth,<sup>1</sup> and in this simple expedient, it is very generally believed, the art or trick of charming consists.<sup>2</sup> Be that, however, as it may, it is clear that this expression, "Break their teeth," &c., is the precise poetic equivalent of "Deprive them of their power to harm." And none other is the meaning of the second clause, "The jaw teeth of of the young lions break out, O Lord."<sup>3</sup> In neither clause, consequently, is there anything vindictive.

<sup>1</sup> "The way to disarm a snake is to deprive him of his teeth."—Hammond, Annotations on Psalm lix. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, "Oriental Illustrations of the Sacred Scriptures." See, however, Smith's "Dictionary of the Bible," art. "Serpent charming."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Psa. iii. 7, "Thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly."—"An image taken from beasts of prey, which, when their jaw is broken and their teeth are extracted, can no longer do harm."—Gesenius *in loc.*

Each is a humble petition for the repression of wrong-doing, for the defeat of wicked counsels. And the same remark applies to the language of verses 7-9. If the Psalmist would have these unjust and rapacious judges pass away like the running brook (verse 7); if he would have their arrows—their instruments and agencies of mischief—broken (*ibid.*); if he would fain have them waste away as the slug (verse 8) seemed to him to do,<sup>1</sup> marking its track by a loss of its substance; if he would see them suddenly swept away, before their plots were ripe (verse 9),<sup>2</sup> as he had seen the fresh kindled camp fires of the desert, fed with quick thorns, whirled into the air by the tempestuous simoom long before the cauldron was heated or its contents cooked; it is always for the same reason, that only thus could their base designs be defeated and the peace of society be insured. In the interests of religion, of justice, of morality, he is compelled to pray for their more or less sudden destruction. For their destruction, not merely because there was no hope of their recovery, but also because their sin had been high-handed and notorious, and therefore the retribution must be conspicuous and exemplary. We are led to the

<sup>1</sup> By reason of the slime which it deposits as it crawls along. See Smith's "Dictionary of the Bible," art. "Snail;" and Gesenius, "Thesaurus," *sub. voc.* שִׁבְלִיל.

<sup>2</sup> "The meaning of this obscure and difficult verse appears to be, 'Before your pots feel the thorn (*i.e.* before the fire of the thorns makes itself felt), so be it (the thorn) quick or dry, the whirlwind will sweep it away.'"—"The Speaker's Commentary."—"The imagery seems to be drawn from an incident of desert life. A party are cooking the flesh they have taken in hunting; but they have barely begun to do so when the fierce *samûm* wind rushes on them and sweeps all away."—Kay.

conclusion, consequently, that the so-called imprecations of verses 6-9 are lawful and right, and that they are the breathings, not of revenge, but of justice and piety.

We now turn to verse 10. The prayers for retribution found in verses 7, 8, pass, in verse 9, into a prediction of the sudden and complete overthrow of the wicked. The writer sees them already scattered by the whirlwind of Divine wrath; he sees them overtaken by the vengeance they have provoked and for which he has prayed. And then he says that the sight will afford joy, not to himself alone, but to all "the righteous." But is there anything to offend us here? Nay, why should it not be so? Can any reason be assigned why those who had longed and prayed for the vindication of right should not rejoice over the answer to their prayers? Was it possible for righteous men, however they might mourn over the wretched fate of those on whom the vengeance had fallen, to view the overthrow of the oppressor, the re-establishment of right and the public vindication of God's providence and holiness without a thrill of thankful joy? No, but the more "righteous" the beholder, the greater would be his rejoicing over the triumph of righteousness and truth.

And in confirmation of this view we have the striking fact that precisely such a joy as is pictured to us here is prescribed in the New Testament: "Rejoice over her," we read (Rev. xviii. 20), "thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her." Is it, then, the case that a triumph and an exultation which is enjoined upon the celestial host, and which is commendable in

apostles and prophets, is nevertheless reprehensible in the Psalmists? Or, is it not rather the case that the Psalmists, like the apostles and the heavenly host, may rejoice, and ought to rejoice, at the just judgments of God on the despisers of his law and the destroyers of his people.

But, allowing all this, still it may be asked, Is it right to dance over the grave even of the victims of God's judgments? Is it right for the righteous to "wash his feet in the blood of the wicked"?

We must carefully consider what this last-quoted phrase implies. It is often explained as though it derived its imagery from the field of battle. The Lord of Hosts, it is said, has given the victory to the righteous. The armies of the alien are put to flight; the scene of the conflict is strewn with dead bodies and steeped in gore. Over it rush, in hot pursuit of the fugitives, the soldiers of the Lord; and as they press onward over the bleeding and the "garments rolled in blood," their feet are necessarily stained with the "red rain." Hence, according to this view, "the language simply amounts to a declaration of complete victory;" it is "simply a poetic exaggeration of the fact that in treading the battle-field . . . their feet shall be wet with blood."<sup>1</sup>

I should have been glad, on some accounts, if I had found myself at liberty to accept this explanation, for it certainly affords an easy solution of the difficulty. But while allowing that the imagery *may* be taken from the shock or the sequel of battle (as in Psa. lxxviii. 23), I am unable to accept this as an adequate exegesis of the phrase, "*Wash* his feet in

<sup>1</sup> Hibbard, "The Psalms," p. 116. ; similarly Phillips, vol. ii. p. 21.

blood,"—an expression which appears to me to be idiomatic, and the force of which elsewhere is too clear to permit us to doubt its significance here. For example, in Job xxix. 6, we find the words, "I washed my steps with butter" (literally, curds), where we have evidently "a common figure for overflowing abundance."<sup>1</sup> Precisely the same idea is conveyed by the expression found in Genesis xlix. 11, "He washed his garments in wine," &c. Consequently, the washing of the feet in blood must surely signify, as I find Dr. Hammond<sup>2</sup> interprets it, "the plentiful effusion of blood." And, such being the meaning of the phrase, the only question that remains to be considered is this: "Was it right, was it necessary by Jewish law, that there should be this plentiful effusion of blood? In other words, was it necessary, not only that these profligate sinners should be destroyed, but that they should be destroyed signally and unsparingly? We have already proved the first of these propositions,<sup>3</sup>—that only by the summary and exemplary destruction of open and incorrigible offenders could justice be satisfied and God vindicated. The second follows as a matter of course. For, if blood needed to be shed, then obviously, it was needful that a sufficiency of blood should be shed; sufficient, that is to say, to satisfy the demands of justice and to establish the righteousness of the Most High. In the eye of the pious Israelite every drop of the blood of these impious men was a "token of the righteous judgment of God" (2 Thess. i. 5). And if this was right, if this plentiful blood-shedding

<sup>1</sup> "The Speaker's Commentary," *in loco*.

<sup>2</sup> Annotations, p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> Page 215.

was God's good pleasure, what should hinder the righteous from rejoicing at the sight? There had been a dearth of temporal retribution. The judges, the delegates and representatives of God, had sinned flagrantly, openly, and with impunity—to the distress of the pious and the scandal of true religion. When at last the thunderbolt fell, and the blood that proved a special Providence (verse 11) was poured, is it to be wondered at that those who had hungered, and thirsted, and prayed—with the purest motives—for the retribution, should rejoice in it, and rejoice too that it was signal and sufficient?<sup>1</sup> But *was* it with the purest of motives? some one may say. In the last verse of the Psalm the writer tells us what his motives were,—and they were these: the triumph of justice, the confusion of atheism, the vindication of the righteousness of God. He desires and prays, he hungers and thirsts, for the terrible vengeance, not for his own secret satisfaction, but because it will prove to all gainsayers that “verily there is a reward for the righteous, verily there is a Deity<sup>2</sup> that judgeth in the earth.”

## PSALM LIX.

That this Psalm was really composed under the circumstances with which its superscription connects

<sup>1</sup> The words, “He shall wash his feet,” &c., do not necessarily imply that the righteous should exult in the blood-shedding. They may be merely a prophecy that the vengeance should be abundant and complete. I have already pointed out (THE EXPOSITOR, vol. iii. p. 45) that in Psa. lxxviii. 23, similar words are found in the mouth of God Himself. Compare also the prediction of Psa. cx. 6

<sup>2</sup> Kay quotes, from Alison's “History of Europe,” a story which admirably illustrates this verse. After the execution of Robespierre a poor man came up, and, seeing the corpse, exclaimed, “Ay, Robespierre, there is a God!”

it, is to me simply inconceivable,<sup>1</sup> despite the ready acceptance which this inscription has met with at the hands of some modern critics. To me it seems to be every way much more probable that the Psalm was inspired by the plots of the Philistines against David during his sojourn with Achish at Gath.<sup>2</sup> (1 Sam. xxi. 10-15). But whatever the *genesis* of the Psalm, the imprecations—so far as it will be necessary for us to notice them—are found in verses 11-13 “Slay them not, lest my people forget; scatter them by thy power; and bring them down. . . . Let them even be taken in their pride. . . . Consume them in wrath; consume them, that they may not be.”

In verse 11, that is to say, the writer prays God that his enemies may *not* be summarily destroyed. “He would see them come to a lingering end; he would have God take them, as it were, in their own infatuation; he would see them reel and stagger in the intoxication of their own pride and under the strong buffeting of God’s hand, a spectacle and a warning to all, before they are finally cast down.”<sup>3</sup> Of this prayer Perowne writes: “It is a very fearful one.” In verse 13 “he would have

<sup>1</sup> The repeated allusions to the Heathen (verses 5, 8, 13), the statements of verses 6, 14, and the general language and tenor of the Psalm are incompatible with this view. But, above all, it is, I think, morally certain that a poem penned under the circumstances recorded in 1 Sam. xix. 11-18 would have been directed against Saul, not against men who were merely his tools.

<sup>2</sup> Psa. xxxiv. is referred by its title to this period; but the acrostic arrangement points to a later date. Of course, the identification of Psa. lix. with this, or any other, period of David’s history (or of Jewish history) must necessarily be precarious; but this connection seems as probable as any other that has been suggested.

<sup>3</sup> Perowne, *in loco*.

his enemies destroyed at last, but only *after* they had been, by a protracted miserable existence, a warning to men.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, what apology can be offered for such imprecations as these? *We* should scruple to lay such cruel curses<sup>2</sup> even on the carrion of our race. What can justify them in the lips of the Psalmist? I submit that the following considerations afford a complete vindication of these words:

1. The men against whom this terrible vengeance is denounced were not merely “workers of iniquity” and “men of blood” (verse 2, *Heb.*); not merely perfidious (verse 5, *Heb.*), blasphemous, impious (verses 7, 8), but they were also plotting against the life of the writer (verse 3), they were conspiring to murder an innocent man (verses 3, 4). It is evident, therefore, that his curses were not wholly causeless.

2. The prayer of verse 12, “Let them be taken in their pride,” is, practically, a prayer that their sin may bring its own punishment; that the pride which “goeth before destruction” (Prov. xvi. 18) may procure their fall. And, therefore, it is according to the will and purpose of God, who “taketh” (same word in all three passages) the wise in their own craftiness (Job v. 13), and the wicked in their own iniquities (Prov. v. 22). Nor is the denunciation of verse 12, “consume them,” &c., at all disproportionate to their deserts. True, it contemplates their

<sup>1</sup> Perowne, *in loco*.

<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps worth remarking, as shewing what has been the popular idea of these “cursing Psalms,” that the Welsh of the present century have recited them to put a ban upon their enemies. (See “Contemporary Review,” vol. xxvii. p. 403.)

*destruction*, but that is precisely what they had planned for the Psalmist. This prayer, therefore, is just, because it is *retaliatory*. Besides, as we have already seen,<sup>1</sup> the writer had been taught, and that repeatedly, that "destruction was the doom denounced by God against the enemies and oppressors of his people." What wonder, then, if he prays for it here?

3. The suffering and disgrace which he desires for them before their final destruction, he desires, by his own shewing, not for the sake of the suffering and disgrace, but for the sake of others, for the general good. He believed that the exemplary punishment of these persecuting Heathen was necessary for the instruction and warning of the chosen people. If they were destroyed forthwith, the lesson of their fate would soon be forgotten. If, on the other hand, they were kept alive, a spectacle to the world and a public token of the just judgment of God, then "all Israel" would "hear and fear and do no more any such wickedness." It was such thoughts as these which prompted the prayer, "Slay them not," &c., a prayer for a punishment which, if more than the *crime*, was not more than the *occasion* demanded.<sup>2</sup>

4. The spirit in which the Psalmist prayed, and the object he had in view, are described in verse 13. It was not the desire for vengeance that inspired him; it was not the gratification of a fierce hatred that he set before him: it was, as in the preceding Psalm, that God might be vindicated and society purged and evil-doing repressed—"that men" might "know

<sup>1</sup> THE EXPOSITOR, vol. iii. pp. 194, 195.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. vol. iv. p. 57.

that God ruleth in Jacob and unto the ends of the earth." (Cf. also verses 16, 17.)<sup>1</sup>

We see, then, that the imprecations of this Psalm, interpreted on the principles we have laid down, are cleared of all suspicion of malevolence. There is one sentence, however, which still remains to be noticed. It is the second clause of verse 10: "God shall let me see my desire upon mine enemies,"—words which have a thoroughly vindictive ring, and upon which something must be said. All the more so, as a similar expression is found in four other places in the Psalter (Pss. liv. 7; xcii. 11; cxii. 8; and cxviii. 7), and it is one, therefore, which is forced upon the notice of the reader.

Now the vindictiveness obviously lies in the words "my desire." Of course, "the desire" of the Psalmist may have been, and in view of what has been advanced, it would be but reasonable to suppose it was, a righteous desire for the glory of God, and not in the least a malevolent longing to witness the sufferings of his enemies; but still, I apprehend, the idea which the words convey to most minds is that of the long-cherished and gluttonous desire for

<sup>1</sup> It may be well to remark here that the imprecations found in the Authorized Version of verses 14, 15, "And at evening *let them return,*" &c., may, and perhaps should, be interpreted as comminations, "They shall return," &c. Some writers, indeed (Delitzsch, Cook, Kay, &c.), see in verse 14 simply a repetition of the *statement* of verse 6; but I agree with Perowne (following Calvin, Hammond, &c.), that, "a different turn is given to the expression. There the conduct of his enemies is described; here their punishment." But, however the words are interpreted, one thing is clear, viz., that the punishment denounced or predicted, if any is denounced or predicted, is a just and equitable one, for it is based on the law of equivalents. As they had meted to him (verse 6) it should be measured to them again.

revenge. It is, therefore, proper to observe, what will hardly have escaped the notice of the reader, that these two words are not found in the Hebrew text. All that the Original conveys is this, "God shall make me *look upon* mine enemies," and in Psa. liv. 7, "Mine eye hath *looked upon* mine enemies." And the LXX. contains no more than the Hebrew. Moreover the two words (ב ראה) on which the interpretation turns, are found in a great number of passages, where the Authorized Version simply renders them by "look," "see," or some such word. Such are Pss. xxii. 17 (*Heb.* 18), "They *stare upon* me;" xxvii. 13, "*to see* the goodness of the Lord," &c.; xxxvii. 34; cvi. 3; Job iii. 9; xx. 17; Obad 12. And a glance at the Hebrew Lexicon (*e.g.* Gesenius, *sub. voc.* ראה) will shew that all that the expression strictly and necessarily means is to "look at,"—the idea of looking at (1) with complacency and triumph, or (2) with sorrow, or (3) with scorn, being sometimes read between the lines, but at the same time being always subsidiary, and therefore not to be forced into the text. The holy Psalmists would probably look down on their prostrate foes "calmly and leisurely, as a conqueror might on the field of battle."<sup>1</sup> They would see them smitten by the hand of God with some such chastened feelings as "Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore" (Exod. xiv. 30)—feelings of thankfulness that Jehovah had granted them deliverance and "plentifully rewarded the proud-doer." And who shall blame them for this? Who shall blame them if they looked on their enemies even with triumph

<sup>1</sup> Kay.

and exultation? For they would see in their destruction, in their blood, not merely so much humiliation and human suffering and death; they would see in it "that great work which the Lord did" (Exod. xiv. 31), and which, therefore, must be just and right, and every way a matter for rejoicing.

PSALM LXIX.

Whether this Psalm was written, as Hitzig and others maintain, and as seems not at all unlikely, by Jeremiah when lying in the cistern of Malchiah the son of Hammelech<sup>1</sup> (Jer. xxxviii. 6; cf. Lam. iii. 53-55), it was certainly composed by some one who at the time had grim death staring him in the face. The man who wrote these words, whoever he may have been, either was or was like one struggling for life in the waters, and expecting every moment to be engulfed in the rising flood (verses 1, 2, 14, 15). He was one, too, who had long suffered bitter persecution and wrong. Long had his name been a byword (verse 11); long had it figured in coarse jest and ribald song (verse 12). Friendship and sympathy had he none (verse 20). His nearest and dearest, his own mother's sons even,

<sup>1</sup> It is no argument against Jeremiah's authorship of the Psalm that verses 22, 23, are ascribed by St. Paul (Rom. xi. 9, 10) to David, "David" with the New Testament writers being simply a *nomen generalissimum* for the Book of Psalms. Nor is it of any moment that "we are expressly told that there was no water in" the cistern of Malchiah (Canon Cook), for the words of verses 2, 14, 15, may have been used figuratively by Jeremiah, as well as by any other writer. It is clear, indeed, from their use elsewhere (Psa. cxxiv. 4, 5; Isa. xliii. 2, &c.) that the expressions are common figures for a deadly peril. But his imprisonment in the cistern (which was designed for water) may very well have suggested these figures to his mind.

were estranged and hostile (verse 8). And now, at last, his confusion and wretchedness have reached their culmination; now the implacable hate of his enemies, who are numberless (verse 4), seems about to triumph. The grave they have dugged for him threatens to close upon him (verse 15). And yet he is guiltless, guiltless at any rate of the charges brought against him (verse 4). More than that, the agonies he has endured and the sharper agonies still in store for him have been incurred, one and all, in the holy cause of religion. He is a *martyr* in the primary sense of the word. Because of his steadfast witness for God and the truth (verse 9) is he now in the jaws of death. But he will not perish without an earnest prayer for deliverance. Out of the horrible pit and the miry clay rises his *De profundis* to Heaven. Powerless in the grip of his foes, he appeals to the Avenger of men, to Him who "helpeth them to right that suffer wrong." With strong crying and tears he pleads for dear life. Is he to be abandoned to his fate? Is the Judge of all the earth to look on, silent and unpitying, whilst his loyal servant is done to death? Are the righteous too to be perplexed and put to shame by the un-avenged shedding of innocent blood? (Verse 6.) Surely, God will deliver him; yes, and will recompense his would-be murderers. For he now prays for recompense. The so-called imprecations of verses 22-28 (by which we now find ourselves confronted) are nothing else, as I shall hope to prove presently, than prayers for a just and equitable retribution, prayers such as on a most memorable occasion (2 Chron. vi. 23) had been commended to

the pious Hebrew. He prays, in the first place (verse 22), that "their table may become a snare," but it is because they had made *his* table a snare; because, with ingenious cruelty, they had stealthily introduced gall (or possibly poison) into his food.<sup>1</sup> As they have done to him so he would have it done unto them. He prays again that their table may be a trap to them *in their security*;<sup>2</sup> that when they feasted themselves without fear (cf. verse 12, the "drunkards"<sup>3</sup>) then vengeance may overtake them at their board; but here again he only asks for *re-tribution*, *i.e.* for a paying back in their own coin. When *he* was secure and unsuspecting they

<sup>1</sup> It makes little difference to the argument if we read, with the Authorized Version, "They gave me gall for my meat;" but I am almost inclined to think that the Original points not only to cruelty and mockery, but to attempted murder—murder by the favourite Eastern device of secret poisoning. The words *may* be rendered "they put poison into my food" (as Ewald, "Man gab in meine Speise Gift," though he interprets the expression figuratively), and I prefer this rendering for the following reasons: (1) The ordinary significance of  $\text{בָּרַחַן}$  is "to put into." (See, *e.g.* Gen. i. 17; ix. 13, &c.) (2) This is the rendering of the LXX. (*καὶ ἔδωκαν ἐς τὸ βρωμα μου, κ.τ.λ.*), and of the Versions generally. (3)  $\text{שִׂיֵּר}$ , literally "head," here translated "gall," is a word of doubtful meaning, but Gesenius, followed by the highest authorities, suggests that it designates the "poppy" (we speak of "poppy heads"), a poisonous plant. Be that as it may, it is indisputable that the word elsewhere (Deut. xxxii. 33; Job xx. 14; cf. verse 16) indicates something poisonous. (4) This rendering lends a fresh significance to the imprecation of verse 22, "Let their table become a snare," &c. They had concealed a snare *for his life* in his food.

<sup>2</sup> I am unable to decide whether  $\text{לְשָׁלוֹמָם}$  should be rendered, as by most modern writers, "to them in peace"—*i.e.* when they are in peace and unsuspecting—or, as by the LXX. (*εἰς ἀνταπόδοσιν*) and "all the older Versions" (Perowne), "for retributions." If the latter, then the prayer is *expressly* a prayer for a punishment correspondent with the crime; if the former, it amounts to no more than this.

<sup>3</sup> Ewald remarks that the Psalmist's oppressors were probably men given to rioting and feasting.

had mingled his food with gall. The prayer of verse 23, "Let their eyes be darkened, . . . and make their loins to tremble," may possibly be another petition for retribution ;—"retribution for their malignant joy in gazing upon the sorrows of the righteous ;"<sup>1</sup> but it seems preferable to see in it an earnest cry that they may be checked in their wickedness ; that the understandings which have conceived such foul designs may be darkened, and that the limbs which have executed them may be paralysed. (Cf. Isa. vi. 10 and Nahum ii. 10.) Verse 24 needs no remark. If the righteous God is furious with the wicked (Psa. vii. 11), why should not the Psalmist pray that his anger (same word) may be openly displayed ? Why should not he pray, again, as he does in verse 25, that the Divine anger may result in their complete destruction, and that their desolate habitations alone may remain as a memorial of their folly, and of the just judgments of God. To pray thus was, as we have already seen, a simple religious duty. We may now turn, therefore, to the imprecations of verses 27, 28.

Now, it has been already stated,<sup>2</sup> that there is some reason to think that these words, like the curses of Psa. cix., are a citation. I do not propose, however, to adduce any evidence in support of this view, for I cannot persuade myself that it is conclusive. It will be necessary for me, therefore, to assume that the words are the Psalmist's, and as such I shall hope to vindicate them.

As to the first hemistich. The meaning which these words, "Add iniquity unto their iniquity,"

<sup>1</sup> Canon Cook.

<sup>2</sup> THE EXPOSITOR, vol. iii. p. 28.

convey to most minds is, I apprehend, this, "To the iniquities which they have actually committed, let others of which they are guiltless be added, and for all these let them be held responsible." But if this were their true import we might well despair of their vindication, for of course *that* would be a prayer for the just Judge to perpetrate a rank injustice. It is hardly likely, however, that the Psalmists, whose constant cry is that God will defend the right, can have craved this wrong at his hands.

By some (Cook, &c.) it is suggested that the writer refers to the record of sins in God's book, and prays Him to add to those already committed those which they will commit hereafter. But I do not see that, even if we could adopt this exegesis, we should be much better off, for the prayer would still betray an unseemly, uncharitable eagerness for punishment. Still less can I accept the kindred explanation offered both by ancient and modern writers (Augustine Piscator, Hammond, Phillips), "Permit them to add iniquity unto their iniquity,"<sup>1</sup> for this meaning has been *forced* into the words, and then it is found to be a prayer for the perpetuation and increase of evil—of that which is abominable, and of all things most hateful to the Majesty of Heaven.

But, let us now remark, (1) the idea of addition is not in the Original. The word translated "add" (תָּבַח) is, literally, "give," *i.e.* "put," "set" (as in verse 21). (2) The word rendered "iniquity" (וַיִּשֶׁן) means (see Gesenius, "Thesaurus," p. 1000), not only "sin" (ἀμαρτία, *pravitas*), but "guilt" (*culpa peccando contracta*). (3) It is not necessary to render it alike in

<sup>1</sup> "Adde, non vulnerando, sed non sanando."—Aug.

both instances. The fondness of the sacred writers for *paronomasia* is well known. We are quite justified therefore in translating the clause, as Kay does very happily, "O set the stamp of guilt upon their guilt."<sup>1</sup> And so, we find the Psalmist's prayer is, (very much as the margin interprets it) a prayer that the impieties and atrocities which have so long flourished unreprieved, to the great distress of the faithful, may now be publicly reprobated by God, and receive the punishment they deserve.

And very similar is the meaning of the next clause: "Let them not come into thy righteousness." To the writer, whose view was limited to this life present, it seemed that their sins were such as the Lord ought not to pardon, and could not pardon (cf. 2 Kings xxiv. 4), without danger to morality and piety. To receive such men into favour, to account them as "righteous," would be to weaken the sanctions of religion and encourage men in crime. Morality needed their punishment. Justice cried aloud for their destruction. And, accordingly, the Psalmist concludes by praying for their destruction: "Let them be blotted out from the book of life, and with righteous men let them not be written" (verse 28). I observe with surprise that Professor Perowne describes this as "the most terrible imprecation of all." No doubt it is, if it means, as he maintains, "exclusion . . . from all hope of salvation." But *is* this its meaning? Was it the meaning of Moses when he prayed (Exod. xxxii. 32), "Blot me, I pray thee, out of thy

<sup>1</sup> Similarly Ewald: "Gib Schuld nach ihrer Schuld," though he understands the words differently. "*Gib Schuld, Strafe, nach ihrer Schuld, so viel ihre Schuld verdient, Wort-und Gedankenspiel*" is his note.

book." It is not denied that this is the import of similar phrases in the New Testament (Phil. iv. 3; Rev. iii. 5; xiii. 8, &c.; cf. St. Luke x. 20), but it is impossible that Moses can have meant this. It is not in human nature thus to forswear eternal felicity. And what he did mean, and what the Psalmist meant, is not difficult to discover. The figure is borrowed, as Perowne allows, "from the civil lists, or register, in which the names of citizens were enrolled." But these lists were lists of living men; when a name was blotted out, it was the name of one actually or civilly dead. And the list referred to in the Psalm is distinctly stated to be not a register of the saved (a subject about which the writer probably knew but little), but a "book of the *living*," of those "who not only live, but are deemed worthy to live." (Cook.) The prayer, consequently, is a prayer for their destruction, for the curtailment of their earthly life.

Nor does it seem to me to make against this view that in the second hemistich, the Psalmist adds: "And not be written with the righteous." For he may here, and probably he does, refer to a different register,—the book of the righteous, in which case the imprecation is the exact equivalent of the second clause of verse 27. But even if he identified the register of the righteous with the roll-call of the living, still there is nothing to indicate that he desired the exclusion of his enemies from eternal life,—from that life indeed which at that time had not been brought to light. (2 Tim. i. 10.)

I find nothing, therefore, in the imprecations of this Psalm to warrant the conclusion that the writer,

in defiance of the religion he professed, has "suffered his mouth to sin by wishing a curse" to his enemies' souls.

PSALM CXXXVII.

The comminations of this Psalm differ from those which have been already discussed, in this particular, that they are levelled, not against individuals, but against nations,—against Edom and Babylon. For this reason, however, their vindication will be all the less difficult. For,—

1. Nations, as such, *can* only be recompensed in this present life, inasmuch as national existence is limited to this present life. And, therefore, not only were the states and kingdoms of antiquity under the law of temporal retribution, but so also are the kingdoms of Christendom and of our own time. Still is the commonwealth scourged by the despot, the revolution, the reign of terror; still, as the present generation has witnessed, are a nation's luxury and profligacy the sure precursors of that nation's degradation and defeat.

2. The sins of communities are more public and notorious than those of private individuals, and therefore call the more loudly for open and visible retribution.

3. The principle of strict *retaliation* is, perhaps, more necessary in the case of nations than of persons. And for this reason, that the finger of God cannot, as a rule, be so easily traced in national prosperity or national disaster as in the fortunes of the individual man.

4. Provision is made for the punishment, at least in part, of the sins of the individual by the powers

that be. But a nation's guilt can only be requited by the God of battles, by the Lord of the locust and the caterpillar and the palmerworm (Joel ii. 25). There was all the stronger reason therefore for calling upon Him to "judge among the nations."

And now let us consider what had been respectively the sins of Edom and Babylon. The charge against the former is that they, the kinsmen of Israel, had exulted in the woes of Jerusalem (Obad. 12, 13), that, in the sack of the city, they had clamoured for its complete destruction (Psa. cxxxvii. 7), that they had revelled and "drunk upon the holy mountain" (Obad. 16), that they had betrayed their brethren to death by intercepting the flight of the fugitives (*ibid.* 10, 11, 14; Ezek. xxxv. 5). Such was the false and cruel part they had played in the hour of Jerusalem's distress, and the Psalmist simply asks, in the name of justice and according to the voices of the prophets (Ezek. xxv. 13, 14; xxxv.; Lam. iv. 22; Jerem. xlix. 13, 17, 18, &c.), that it might be remembered and required.

It is needless to inquire particularly into the sins of Babylon. That they were great a glance at Jeremiah l. li., will shew. And it needs no record to tell us that, in the siege and carrying away of Jerusalem, great atrocities were committed by the conquerors. We may be quite sure that

"Many a childing mother then  
And new-born baby died,"

for the wars of the old world were always attended by such barbarous cruelties.<sup>1</sup> The apostrophe of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 2 Kings viii. 12; xv. 16; Isa. xiii. 16; Hosea x. 14; Nahum iii. 10. &c.

verses 8, 9, consequently merely proclaims the certainty of a just retribution—of the same retribution that the prophets had foretold (Isa. xiii. 16; xlvii.; Jerem. li.; cf. “who art to be destroyed,” verse 8),<sup>1</sup> and the happiness of those who should be its ministers; who should mete out to her what she had measured to the conquered Jew. It was the decree of Heaven that their “children” should “be dashed to pieces before their eyes.” The Psalmist simply recognizes the decree as just and salutary; he pronounces the terrible vengeance to have been deserved. To charge him with vindictiveness, therefore, is to impugn the justice and mercy of the Most High. And there is nothing to sustain the charge, for his words are simply a prediction, like that of the prophet. “As thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee; thy reward shall return upon thine own head” (Obad. 15).

With the discussion—and I would hope vindication—of this Psalm my task is almost accomplished. For though expressions seemingly vindictive are found in other Psalms than those which we have had under review, yet there are none, it is believed, which are not on all fours with one or other of the verses which have come before us, or, at any rate, none of which, on the principles here laid down, we cannot

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Hosea xiii. 16, where it is the judgment of God that the “infants” of Samaria should “be dashed in pieces.” שָׂרֵי־רֶחֱם, rendered “Who art to be destroyed” in the Authorized Version, is variously interpreted, as (1) active, “Thou destroyer” (ἡ ληστρίς,—Symmachus. *Du Verwüsterin*,—Ewald); as (2) passive, part. pres., “Thou that art destroyed” (*vastata*,—Jerome); and (3) as pass. part. fut. (*vastanda*), as above. If we adopt (1), the word affords a reason for the commination of verse 9; if (2), we see in it an intimation that retribution was already begun; if (3), a prediction that retribution was certain and imminent.

give a good account. Whether I have been too bold in my title; whether the "Vindictive Psalms" are thoroughly "vindicated" by the considerations which I have advanced, it is of course for others to judge. But I may perhaps be permitted to say that the argument appears to me to be irresistible. For if it be conceded, as it surely must be, that those who penned the imprecations knew little or nothing of a future state of rewards and punishments, or if it merely be granted—and this, at all events, cannot be denied—that they were taught to expect for "every transgression and disobedience" a "just recompense of reward" in this life, then every step of the reasoning follows almost as a matter of course till at last the conclusion is reached that the so-called "imprecations" are, in reality, impassioned entreaties for justice, for a necessary and salutary retribution. Viewed from this standpoint they lose their aspect of malevolence and are glorified with the consecration of equity and religion: they resolve themselves into prayers to the Theocratic Ruler of Israel to deal with the enemies of Israel and of Israel's king according to the just laws of the Theocracy.

But whether my readers agree with me in these general conclusions or not, and whatever construction they may put upon these "vindictive" passages, one point is, I take it, indisputable, viz., that so far from being out of harmony with the rest of the Old Testament, as Dr. Hessey maintains, and as is very generally believed, they are the natural and inevitable products of the dispensation under which the writers lived. The spirit which inspired them is, beyond all doubt, the same which breathed in the

utterances of the law and in the voices of the prophets. The prayers which they embody have their parallels and precedents in the pages of Jewish history. In fact, they are simply the echo of the legislation of Sinai; they are thoroughly homogeneous with the revelation of which they form a part, and with that they must stand or fall.

And I see in this fact—that the imprecations are in perfect unison with the genius of the Legal Dispensation—a fresh solution of the difficulty, or rather a fresh contribution towards its solution. So far I have rested the defence of the “Vindictive Psalms” on the fact that the first dispensation was one of temporal rewards and punishments,—one that contained no revelation of a recompense hereafter. But it was not only in respect of the doctrine of a future life that it was inferior to the Christian verity; it was also inferior in its moral tone and teaching. In all its conceptions of human duty, in its ideal of human charity and human piety alike, it occupied, naturally, a lower level than the religion which was designed to supersede it. And if this be so, is it to be wondered at if the Psalms partake of the inferiority of the inferior dispensation, from the soil of which they sprang?

And surely it is no disparagement of that earlier revelation to affirm that it was inferior—inferior in its ethics—to the beneficent religion of the Christ. I am well aware that such a view has been denounced as dishonouring to Moses. But to me it seems to be dishonouring to our Lord to dispute it. For is it conceivable that the Son of God should have come into our planet, that the Infinite Wisdom and the Infinite Love should have taber-

naced with men and not have shewn to men a more excellent way than they had trodden before? Is it, then, the case that "the Light of the world" has given the world no new light, not only as to the future life, but also as to the duties and charities of this life present? Has Christianity no higher standard, no nobler and lovelier ideal than Judaism had? *Credat Judaeus, at non Christianus.* For if this be so, then surely the "Teacher come from God" has come in vain; surely "the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father" has declared the Father's love to little purpose.

But it is to be remembered here that Christ has distinctly claimed for his teaching a superiority over that of Moses and the prophets. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, He "sets forth his relation as Lawgiver to the law of Moses," and draws an elaborate contrast between the teachings of Christianity and Judaism. The keynote of that sermon is, "It hath been said to them of old time, . . . but I say unto you." And in respect of murder, of adultery, of swearing, of divorce, and the like, He shews how different, how much higher and more spiritual were the doctrines He taught. More than that, in the course of this same sermon He notices that essential principle of the Mosaic code, the *jus talionis*, and *virtually repeals it*. "It hath been said, 'An eye for an eye,' &c. But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil," &c. Not only do we find, that is to say, on the testimony of its Founder, that the moral code of Christianity is in advance of that of Moses, but we find that the very law which lies at the root of the imprecations, and which, no doubt,

suggested many of them, gives place in the religion of the Son of God to milder and purer provisions.

Nor was this the only occasion on which the Lord proclaimed that the whole spirit and *ἡθος* of his religion was gentler and more gracious than that of the law and the prophets. The sons of Zebedee, after the example of the prophet Elijah, sought to call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritans. But our Lord "rebuked them." He did not say, indeed, that it was wrong in Elijah to act as he did. He could not have asserted this without condemning the Power which ratified Elijah's prayer. And we have seen reason to believe<sup>1</sup> that that prayer is abundantly justified by the circumstances which provoked it. But He *did* teach that the prayer which was right in the prophet of a past age would nevertheless be wrong in the apostles of the new faith, and wrong because they were of a different spirit, the children of a more merciful dispensation, a dispensation the object of which is not "to destroy men's lives, but to save them."<sup>2</sup>

"To *destroy* men's lives"—"to *save* them"—have we not in these few words, whether they were spoken by Christ or not, two characteristic features, and therefore one of the cardinal differences of the two dispensations? The first, as we have seen, dealt with the sinner by summarily destroying him; the

<sup>1</sup> See THE EXPOSITOR, vol. iii. pp. 460-463.

<sup>2</sup> The argument is not affected materially if we allow (which I should be slow to do) that the words of the Received Text, *ὡς καὶ Ἠλίας ἐποίησεν* and *καὶ εἶπεν, Οὐκ οἴδατε. κ.τ.λ.* are interpolations. For it is clear that the two disciples had the example of Elijah in their mind as they spoke, and the mere *rebuke* proves that what was lawful for him would notwithstanding be wrong in them.

second seeks to reclaim him. The first rigorously recompensed evil for evil: that is to say, it visited moral evil, which is sin, with physical evil, which is pain and death; the second overcomes evil with good. Indeed, it is hardly too much to say that destruction is a prominent feature, a watchword almost, of the Old Testament. How many of its records, how many of its miracles, are simply records and miracles of death? The antediluvians were destroyed; the cities of the plain were destroyed; the Egyptians, Canaanites, Amalekites, Assyrians, were all destroyed. The plagues of Egypt, again, the miracles of the desert, and the wonders wrought by the prophets, constantly involved the destruction of men's lives. But we turn to the New Testament and we feel at once that we breathe a different atmosphere. "Grace and truth" have come "by Jesus Christ." The thunders and lightnings of Sinai are heard no longer, but there is seen the descending dove. Now the miracles are miracles of healing and mercy. Now the lives and souls of men are treated as unspeakably precious. The Son of Man judges no man, condemns no man; his mission is to save.

And hence we see more clearly, not perhaps why the imprecations which have been discussed were lawful on Hebrew lips, but certainly why they still sound harshly to Christian ears. It is because since they were spoken the standard of duty has been raised. It is because the Son of Mary has taught men something of the unutterable love and tenderness and patience of the Most High; it is because we have before our eyes the beautiful

vision of the meek and gentle and silently suffering Christ. "The Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding." The imprecations are alien, perhaps even repugnant, to our Christian ideas, because they are Christian, because

"through the ages one increasing purpose runs,  
And the thoughts of men are widened by the process of the suns."

It must not be supposed, however, that because Christianity teaches a *more* excellent way, the way of the Psalmists was not excellent in its time and place. Each dispensation is the offspring of the Deity; each was designed to further his purposes of grace; each aimed at the ultimate regeneration of humanity. But they were framed for, and were adapted to, different periods of the world's history. The first was for the childhood of our race, the second for its manhood. The Law was not the Teacher, not the Saviour, but it was the slave, the παιδᾶγωγός, who should take man by the hand and lead him to Christ. And the office of the slave, though incomparably below that of the preceptor, was nevertheless necessary and salutary. The stern, repressive discipline which would *gêne* our manhood may be requisite for the hot blood of youth. The Law was a lower step, it is true; but, all the same, it was a step by which humanity might rise to the economy of reconciliation and to the vision of God in Christ. And its imprecations, if they served no other purpose, must have emphasized "the sinfulness of sin;" and thus they may have been so many "voices crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"                   JOSEPH HAMMOND.