VIOLENCE IN PRAYER: GOD'S "OTHER SIDE" IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS. A LITERARY APPROACH

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The Book of Psalms is one of the most beautiful collections of prayers in man's heritage. The different types of psalms range from hymns of praise and thanksgiving to poignant pleas for help. While in some psalms we can find radiant, bucolic images that fill our hearts with longing and blissful hope, in others the tone expresses the most distressing sorrow and, in some of them, a deep, tearing anger that sometimes bursts out in stark images of cruelty which defy our fiercest imagination.

I propose to analyse the violence contained in those texts, while trying to understand what caused its inclusion in the prayers, as well as their purpose and function, bearing in mind that what we call the "Book of Psalms" does not consist of a unit, but rather of a compilation of different traditions, with different origins and different historical periods.[1] Although the historical and social context of the psalmists should be considered, the emotions displayed are not new: the 21st century man feels the same anger, suffering or joy experienced by man in the 10th century B.C.E. We may ask, however, whether believers are still talking about the same God, or whether they see him with the same eyes as the psalmists did.

Violence has been defined as "the attempt of an individual or group to impose its will on others through any nonverbal, verbal, or physical means that inflicts psychological or physical injury, the act of mistreating someone, physically or psychologically, harming, abusing or outraging, ravaging, forcing, or compelling," but may be summed up in

[1] In order to avoid multiple footnotes, psalms are quoted in brackets. For the English translations I generally used the on-line NRSV, which I compared with the Hebrew (*BHS* 27th ed., 1994) and the Portuguese versions (*Bíblia Sagrada* 2nd ed., 2000).

two words: "forcible interference."[2] Carlson makes a distinction between violence and force: while the former lies outside the domain of reason, the latter is legitimate, even morally appropriate, whenever social constraints are at stake. As the author underlines, it is justifiable to use force whenever the means and the ends require it.[3] Zenger distinguishes between *violentia*, which he defines as repressed violence, and *potestas*, the so-called legitimate violence. Fretheim points out that the usual definition of violence is incomplete, because a) we need a broader designation comprehending both human and divine violence and b) it neglects many forms of systemic violence that we usually do not notice because it is already institutionalized.[4]

The biblical psalms are classified in hymns or songs of praise/thanksgiving, royal, songs of Zion, liturgical, wisdom and penitential or laments.[5] Expressions of violence are mostly found in the latter, although they are also included in the other types. More than just laments, some may be regarded as psalms of malediction or execration,[6] if we consider their aggressive intent. As we go through the book, we find three different ways of expressing violence:

1) The narrative or description of the subject's environment, the society he lives in and his feelings about his enemies or detractors;
2) Direct pleas for violence against them;
3) Vivid, repeated references to God's anger and its consequences.

1. The Psalmist's Environment

Royal Psalms were created for the theological legitimization of the Hebrew monarchy. Although they intended to celebrate events in the king's life, such as enthronements or weddings, they also mirrored the warring society of the time. They speak of rebellion, evil plots, conspiracies or battles, and some of them contain gratitude for victories against the enemies or prayers asking for God's assistance to defeat them.

[2] *OLD* 1968, 2068/2069; Tanner 2007, 5; Carlson 2011, 7-22. Nessan 1998, 451 quoted by Collins 2003, 4.
[3] Carlson, *ibidem*.
[4] Zenger 1996, 28; Fretheim 2004, 18-28.
[5] Limburg 1992, 522-536.
[6] Girard 1999, 387-392.

In a theocratic regime, in which the king was the Lord's anointed one and his delegate on earth, the monarch possessed the same warring attributes he ascribed to his God. Like the king of the universe, who restores order over chaos, the Hebrew king engages in a holy war to subject the peoples to the Lord's yoke; thus the people of Israel went into battle to help the Lord, who they trusted to endorse them with his own superior power in battle, as stated in Ps 44:5: "Through you we push down our foes; through your name, we tread down our assailants." Hence the king sings his praise to the Lord who "trains his hands for war, so that his arms can bend a bow of bronze" (18:34). God himself, as the fierce warrior he is, similarly to the Ugaritic Baal, "sent out his arrows and scattered (the enemies of Israel), flashed forth lightning and routed them" (18:14), "aims at his enemies' faces with his bows" (21:12), "breaks them with a rod of iron, and dashes them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (2:9). In Ps 18, the warrior-king makes a description of his dramatic victory over his opposers: "I pursued my enemies and overtook them; and did not turn back until they were consumed. I struck them down, so that they were not able to rise, they fell under my feet. (…) I cast them out like the mire of the streets." Finally, he chants blessings to "the God who gave him vengeance and subdued the peoples under him," thus "delivering him from the violent" (37-38; 40; 42; 48). This verse clearly states that the opposers he defeated were the violent ones, whereas he, who does not fall under such classification, is the messiah appointed by God to protect his people and save them from the wicked nations. The king "will sit at the Lord's right hand until he makes his enemies his footstool" (110:1), i.e., he will stand before his God and contemplate his glory as the defeated lie in the dust under his feet. He proclaims the Lord's kingship over the nations, together with his warriors, with "high praises (…) in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron" (149:6-8).

God as a fearful warrior is also present in the lament Psalms. "If the wicked does not repent, he will whet his sword; he has prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts" (7:12-13). We find prayers for the Lord "to deliver the supplicant's life from the wicked, by his sword," (17:13), to "take hold of shield and buckler, (…) and draw the spear and javelin against his pursuers" (35:2-3).

In the Bible, war has two different features. The kind of speech we have been looking at refers to military conquest of lands and peoples who worship idols and do not recognize the God of Israel, and therefore are considered unholy, violent and wicked. Hence it is essential to maintain the integrity of Israel's identity and its sovereignty over the land.[7] The other type was the so-called *ḥerem* war, or ban war, fought in particularly critical moments in the story of ancient Israel, and is found only in three books: Numbers (21:1-3), Joshua (6-7) and the first book of Samuel (15). This particular type of war seems to have originated in the old Canaanite beliefs in which God required human sacrifices as sacred offerings. In order to obtain victory over their enemies, the Israelites vowed to exterminate them and their families and to raze their cities. Commanded by God, the *ḥerem* war restored the order menaced by chaos and established his justice on the lands contaminated by unholy peoples.[8] If the *ḥerem* would not be carried out, the deity, deprived of the sacrifice of people and booty, would punish his own without mercy and make them surrogates for the sacrifice they had denied him, as recalled in Ps 106: "They did not destroy the peoples as the Lord commanded them." Instead, they mingled with them and "(…) poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan… Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people and he abhorred his heritage. He gave them into the hands of the nations…, their enemies oppressed them… (and they) were brought low through their iniquity (34; 38; 40-43)."

The so-called "penitential psalms," or laments, are filled with comparisons with wild animals and hunting strategies, which were surely also employed to ambush the enemies, and seem to have been quite common. The references to pits, nets and other entrapping devices are abundant: "they make a pit, digging it out and fall into the hole that they have made" (7:15); "the nations ("heathens" in the Portuguese version) have sunk in the pit they have made" (9:15); "the arrogant have hidden a trap for me, and with cords they have spread a net; along the road they have set snares for me" (140:5).

[7] Selengut 2011, 89-98; 2003, 25.
[8] Niditch 1993, 41.

The distress felt by the subject in danger makes him compare his foes with the most ferocious animals which he knew would prey on men, mainly lions and wild bulls:

> They lurk in secret like a lion in its covert… they stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might (10:9-11). Many bulls encircle me, they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion… for dogs are all around me, a company of evildoers encircles me … (22:12-13; 17). I lie down among lions that greedily devour human prey; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords (57:4).

The frequent mention of scavengers shows how often battles and fights occurred, and how death was a common scene. Ps 79 mourns the destruction of Jerusalem with pictures of desolation and inhuman cruelty: "The nations have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them" (79:1-3). But such sight can also be found in a collective psalm of thanksgiving (68), believed to be a liturgical hymn to celebrate God's covenant with the people of Israel,[9] which contains ghastly images mingled with rejoicing verses stressing the people's triumph. The Lord will "bring (their foes) back from the depths … so that they may bathe their feet in blood, so that the tongues of their dogs may have their share from the foe" (21-23).

Often the lament describes the subject's anguish due to enemy attacks and persecutions:

> Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin and meditate treachery all day long (38:12). Have they no knowledge, those evildoers, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God? (53:4). I see violence and strife in the city; … iniquity and trouble are within it; … oppression and fraud do not depart from its market-place (55:9-11). Protect me from those who are violent, who plan evil things in their minds and stir up wars continually (140:1-2).

[9] Limburg 1992, 522-536.

During exile, the distressing tone is more bitter, and the conquered people reminisce on the misery they suffered: "Your foes have roared within your holy place, they set your sanctuary on fire, they desecrated the dwelling-place of your name, bringing it to the ground. They burned all the meeting places of God in the land" (74:4; 7-8). "They crush your people, o Lord, (…) they kill the widow and the stranger, they murder the orphan" (94:5-6). The believers' voices rise against these afflictions, first in hope, then with certainty, emphasizing their Lord's power and his actions to punish their offenders:

> The enemies have vanished in everlasting ruins, their cities you have rooted out; the very memory of them has perished; the wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that reject God (9:6; 17). On the wicked, he will rain coals of fire and sulphur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup (11:6). He will repay my enemies for their evil (54:5, with a parallel in 1Sam 23:19-29).

While on the topic of "those who work iniquity", the supplicant assures that "their bones shall be strewn at the mouth of the Sheol" (141:7). However, these images conjured by the praying subject in distress are not sufficient to console his heart, and in many passages we can see that he longs for revenge: "The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked" (58:10). "Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (137:8-9). These awful expressions assess the horrors suffered by the conquered. They wish their enemies to suffer the same terrifying pain which had been inflicted upon them, according to the principle of retaliation, whereby a punishment should correspond in degree and kind to the offense.

2. Direct Pleas to God for Vengeance

The psalms illustrate the customary practice of the *lex talionis*, since it was natural to expect God to inflict upon one's offenders the exact same deeds they had committed against him. McCann observes that, when people are victimized, their wish is to do unto others what they have endured, thus expressions of rage are a sign of health. The psalms' prayers show that the psalmist surrendered his vengeance to God, instead of taking it into his own hands; as such, those

expressions can be considered as acts of non-violence.[10] The same opinion is expressed by Brueggemann, who feels that our destructive yearnings of rage, resentment and hatred are somewhat sublimated when we pour them into our prayers, entrusting them to God:[11] "Strike my enemies on the cheek and break the teeth of the wicked," (3:7) "break the arm of the wicked and evildoers," (10:15) "O God, break the teeth in their mouths! Tear out the fangs of the young lions, o Lord!," (58:6) "let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes" (79:10). In Ps 94:1 we finally come across a passionate cry: "O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth!" It is interesting that this psalm, particularly dear when in times of national crisis, is part of a collection which speaks of a God of justice in eschatological terms, the God who will come to judge those who have been violent and who will restore harmony on a desolated land, and is meant to be recited every Wednesday.[12]

The most emblematic example of an imprecatory prayer is given by Ps 109 (according to Gunkel, "the only pure psalm of imprecation in the psalter")[13], in which the psalmist invokes the Lord and complains about his detractors, who have slandered him and brought him to trial under false accusations. Verses 8-15 are a string of powerful curses, although there is an ongoing controversy between scholars as to the subject who utters them, mainly due to philological issues. Whereas some opine that the poet quotes his enemies' curses against him (the NRSV translation follows this view), which he asks the Lord to turn against them in v. 20, others believe that these "horrendous imprecations" are the poet's own feelings towards either his enemies, or the unprincipled judge that has been appointed to try his case (as in NIV's translation).[14] McCann gives both views setting side by side the two different translations, NIV's and NRSV's, while underlining that "certainty is not possible and commentators are divided almost equally on the issue", although, like Dahood, he prefers the NIV's version,[15] which I am quoting hereby:

[10] McCann 1993, 115.
[11] Brueggemann 1985, 152.
[12] McCann 1993, 45-46; Limburg 1992, 522-536.
[13] Quoted by McCann 1996, 1124.
[14] Dahood 1970, 99; 102.
[15] McCann 1996, 1125.

> May his days be few, may another take his place of leadership. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes; may a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labour. May no one extend kindness to him, or take pity on his fatherless children. May his descendants be cut off; their names blotted from the next generation. May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the Lord, may the sin of his mother never be blotted out. May their sins always remain before the Lord, that he may blot out their name from the earth. (8-15).

In this passage the subject goes so far as to curse his enemy for three generations, his parents and his children alike, asking God to erase their very existence, as he continues: "He loved to curse; let curses come on him!…He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones; may it be like a garment that he wraps around himself, like a belt that he wears everyday" (17-19).

We can observe than many passages do not only invoke calamities upon the subjects' enemies, but they also pray for the annihilation of their children, who are supposedly innocent and therefore do not deserve any punishment. Ps 127 shows us the importance that ancient peoples conferred to their children: "Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth" (3-4). As such, imprecations against them would be the worst possible tragedy bestowed upon an enemy.

3. God's Anger

Let us finally consider the repeated pronouncements of deep indignation in relation to God's feelings. Israel knows that the Lord will not bear the wicked to last, for he "puts an end to those who are false" to him (73:27). "He will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury" (2:5). "The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath and fire will consume them;" he will "destroy their offspring from the earth and their children from among humankind" (21:9-10). Ps 18, which has a parallel in 2Sam 22, gives us an impressive description of the Lord's anger, when "smoke went up from his nostrils, and

devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him; there broke through his clouds hailstones" (18:7-8; 12).

Sometimes, the Lord's anger arises against his own people, who warily try not to awaken such feelings, "or he will be angry, and they will perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled" (2:12). Whenever they sin, their punishment is violent:

> The anger of God rose against them and he killed the strongest of them and laid low the flower of Israel… (So) he made their days vanish like a breath and their years in terror…They provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols. When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel… Fire devoured their young men and their girls had no marriage song. Their priests fell by the sword and their widows made no lamentation (78:31; 33; 58-59; 63).

In their distress, the people ask: "How long, o Lord, will you be angry forever? Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?" (79:5) "Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations?" (85:5). They are completely helpless before the raging wave that sweeps them away: "Your wrath has swept over me, your dread assaults destroy me; they surround me like a flood all day long, from all sides they close on me" (88:16-17). "Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due to you" (90:11). "Therefore he said he would destroy them — had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them" (106:23). Hence it is no surprise that the people of Israel try to divert their God's wrath by evoking the behaviour of the unbelievers: "Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you and on the kingdoms that do not call your name" (79:6).

4. The Presence of Violence before God

The Book of Psalms contains every sentiment any human being can experience, and there is no doubt that violence is, indeed, one of its most pervasive aspects. In spite of mirroring ancient societies, the book encompasses much of our own feelings and reminds us that, in one way or another, we all suffer violence, or impose it onto others. Whether we call it force, *potestas*, or legitimate it with arguments which might be more or less just, we all have to accept violence in

order to live with one another. It is part of our nature, of our most basic instincts of survival. It is, then, more than natural that men include it in their prayers, although such primal drives are not allowed in Christian doctrine.

Among the many expressions of violence we have analysed, there are some so ferocious that our wildest imagination cannot fathom them; for instance, the terrible description of Ps 68, in which the people bathe their feet in their enemies' blood. In the hymn, even dogs (apparently regarded as despicable animals, if we think of the comparisons made between dogs and evildoers or wicked foes) are entitled to a portion of the enemies' bloodshed. We are not considering just another execration or imprecation; according to the psalm, this was a promise God had made to his people. This shows us that such situations did happen in a war context. However, we are in the presence of an epic recounting of the history of Israel and the people's triumph over the nations. Although their annihilation is to be included in the anamnesis, it would suffice to recall Og's defeat; how should we then explain the extreme violence it contains? It is as though Israel wanted to butcher their enemies again. Alternatively, the chosen people could be (re)enacting the *ḥerem*, (re)presenting their fallen enemies to their God in a sacred offering. Niditch tells us that the ban validated the enemy as a worthy human being, since it is valued by God as a sacrifice; on the one hand, he was considered as a mirror of the self, therefore he is not the unclean other; on the other hand, when trying to explain the underlying psychology of this act, she admits that in order "to cope with the horror of the killings the enemy must be felt as not being of human stock."[16] Ultimately, then, the enemy is perceived as inferior in value (like a ram or a dove), though acknowledged by their God as a worthy blood sacrifice, meant to obtain his favour and forgiveness. One of God's facets portrays a thirsty, jealous deity, requiring bloodshed in order to turn his attention to his creatures, though later on these Baalian characteristics fade away.

Some psalms depict their God with strong, frightening colours. Like a dragon, he sends forth a blazing fire that scorches both land and people; like a warrior-king, he breaks his enemies' teeth and arms and shatters their shields, armours, and skulls; he is a skilled archer,

[16] Niditch 1993, 50.

throwing deadly spears and javelins. As the king of the universe, God rules the peoples with a rod of iron, so he is harsh and severe and his discipline is strict. Rather than showing mercy, he slashes his enemies as if they were grass.

According to many scholars, however, the biblical God is not cruel. Wrath and violence are not divine attributes, but responses to human sin, thus implying the use of violent human agency (Assyrians, Babylonians, etc.) or natural agency, such as waves, tempests, draughts, etc. The Lord has two aims: judgment and salvation.[17] If there was no human violence, there would be no divine wrath or judgment.

Some of these scholars go even further in their analysis: Brueggemann says that the violence assigned to Yahweh is to be understood as counter violence, which has the function of eliminating other violence.[18] God's violence has salvific purposes for his creation, threatened by man's sin. Fretheim claims he "seeks to accomplish loving purposes."[19] The intention of these prayers would be to eliminate violence, not to encourage it. Selengut tells us that the Bible's portrayal of God as a warrior also shows mercy and justice, since he uses battle to create a peaceful and just world. When facing certain turmoil, wherein man's reaction is disapproval, God's "is something no language can convey." Violent human actions lead to violent consequences, which are a result of divine judgment. Fretheim does admit that it is not easy to understand "how God relates to the movement from sin to consequence," and resorts to Hos 4:1–3 to try to explain it: human "swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and bloodshed have highly adverse effects" not only upon mankind, but also upon the land and the animals.[20] Therefore, when the wicked sins, he is punished not by God's will, but by the logic of creation itself. Since men are part of this creation, such reasoning would explain why God would make human agency his instrument to punish their own kind.

As such, the loving, forgiving Christian doctrine has either turned into a metaphor or estranged itself from the creator's dark features.

[17] Alter 2007, 164; Fretheim 2004, 22.

[18] Quoted by Fretheim 2004, 25.

[19] Fretheim 2004, 27; 18.

[20] Silber 2013, 116-132; Selengut 2003, 20; Heschel quoted by Fretheim 2004, 21.

It converts the fierce, blood-thirsty God into a stern father whose heart aches as he must chastise his children, thus recognizing God's need to punish men for their terrifying sins, as well as the cathartic function of the calamities sent to them.

Insofar as we accept such explanation, we could use Zenger's *potestas* to define divine violence, thus assuming that God is incapable of violence. However, if we refuse that opinion, we would have to add *violentia* to the Lord's attributes, whenever his wrath goes beyond the boundaries of legitimacy. We have considered, for instance, that when Israel went to battle to help the Lord, performing the savage killing of enemies in flight, their humiliation and extermination was agreeable to God, and he punishes the people simply out of jealousy. These actions were not only the Lord's punishment, but also his "vengeance on the nations." Thus, the Lord himself sanctions sheer violence and revenge.

Who is then to decide, or set up the boundaries, between *potestas* and *violentia*? If the Lord responds to man's iniquity with the same violent disproportion (especially from the point of view of many 21st century beliefs), should man counteract by labelling his fatherly anger as *violentia*? However, we cannot ignore that even nowadays some believers still acknowledge the harsh, jealous God who commands them to engage in war, violence and mass murder, on behalf of religious truth and divine revelation. They are not allowed the choice between violence and nonviolence, because they are fighting the Lord's battles and proclaiming his message to the entire world, preparing the way to a messianic world of peace and harmony.[21] Therefore, their God still possesses most of the fierce characteristics we have been considering thus far.

Does violence presuppose malice? For those who are fighting the Lord's battles —provided their devotion is sincere — certainly not. It is deep, blind faith that drives them, not wickedness (although much has been, and should be, studied about the fundamentalism that pushes them towards these actions). As for the Lord, Ps 18:26 observes that God "with the pure shows himself pure, and with the crooked (in the *BHS 'iqeš*, "devious") he shows himself perverse" (in Hebrew, he will "emulate him"). It is undoubtedly a bold statement, which allows God's dark side to uncover and justifies *violentia,* at least when-

[21] Selengut 2003, 17-19.

ever someone is threatened by mischief or viciousness. In such cases, we may find a plain apology of the "just war" and try to defend its legitimacy, but there remains the problem of whom, or how, one applies for in order to define concepts such as viciousness or evilness.

Therefore, when the psalmist curses, be it an execration (expression of abhorrence, uttering of curses) or an imprecation (invocation of evil through a spoken curse), he does not feel he is offending his God, or violating his laws. On the contrary, his God is the "God of vengeance," and he is sure that he will smite his enemies without mercy. He is the God of wrath, whose burning fury guarantees the warrior-king's victory against the unbelievers, the God of rigour, whose righteousness ensures the believer that he will obtain the due payback which will comfort him from the wrong deeds committed against him.

Both Heschel and McCann remind us that anger is a sign of health, because it sublimates our socially unacceptable impulses or idealisations and, in certain ways, anger is a blessing we need against malice. Without it, we would be reduced to utter compliance and eventually to a disaster as harmful as unrestrained fury may provoke. Heschel even states that "complete absence of anger stultifies moral sensibility."[22]

Hence, when I picture the worst possible horror which could annihilate my enemy, somehow I sublimate what I cannot accomplish in practice. Violent expressions give voice to unthinkable actions experienced by man, so all languages and speeches are appropriate. As Brueggemann puts it, the subject allows himself to "face his own imagery of beastliness,"[23] and such catharsis is healing. Once he has spoken the execration words, or commended the vengeance to God, the enemy becomes virtually dead.

The Lord's dark attributes match those of man's: rather than "make humankind in his image, according to his likeness" (Gen 1:26), the author of the execration psalms made God in his own image, according to his likeness. As a stern, mighty punisher, God satisfies the natural, healthy need for revenge buried deep within most human beings' hearts whenever they are cruelly wronged. Thus, God's dark features maintain a sense of balance in this world, by sustaining those who feel aggrieved in their quest for justice.

[22] Heschel 2001, 360; McCann 1993, 115.
[23] Brueggeman 2001, 14.