



Translation, Interpretation and Exposition of Psalm 58 (and 137) in the Context of Psalms of Imprecation (“Cursing”)

“While some religious traditions will not even permit Psalm 58 to be read in publicⁱ because of the offensive imagery of 58:10, the idea of the righteous washing their feet in the blood of the wicked makes the picture of divine justice very real, albeit too real for some readers. Nevertheless, the graphic nature of this picture. . . draws out the gravity of evil and the urgency of justice.” (Bullock, 444-45.)

“The blood of the righteous can never be silenced until God weighs out justice on his own scale, measured by the standard weights of his own character.” (C. Hassel Bullock.)

*“The modern Western world is correct to insist on an appropriate measurement of punitive justice, but a total elimination of that aspect would make the system lopsided and essentially ‘unjust’. By the same analogy, we cannot eliminate the punitive aspect from the biblical profile of God and still maintain the profile of a just God.” (Bullock, *Psalms*, 269.)*

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THE TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Psalm 58

For the choir-director. Do Not Destroy.ⁱⁱ A Miktamⁱⁱⁱ concerning David.

Sarcastic Rebuke of Wicked Rulers

¹ Can you really in silence^{iv} make just decrees?*

Do you judge people equitably?

² Surely, with intent^v you devise wrongdoings,^{vi}*

The violence of your hands is meted out on earth.^{vii}

The Nature of the Wicked

³ The wicked are estranged from the womb,*

Those who speak lies have strayed from birth.^{viii}

⁴ Their venom is like the venom of a snake.*

Like a deaf cobra that stops up its ear,

⁵ So that it does not hear the voice of charmers,*

Or the expert caster of spells.^{ix}

Call for God to Intervene^x

⁶ O God, break their teeth in their mouth,*^{xi}

Smash the fangs of young lions, O Yahweh!

⁷ Let them flow away like the water that walks off with them.*

When he aims his arrows, let them be as without tips,^{xii}

⁸ Like a slug that dissolves as it moves,^{xiii}*

Or a woman’s stillbirth that sees not the sun.

⁹ Before your pots can discern [the fire of] thorns—*

whether they be fresh or already ablaze—may He sweep them away.^{xiv}

Expression of Confidence Whereby God's Justice is Vindicated

¹⁰The righteous will rejoice when he sees recompense,^{xv*}

He will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.^{xvi}

¹¹And humankind will say:*

**"Truly there is a reward^{xvii} for the righteous,
Surely there is a God who judges on the earth."**

Psalm 137

Signs of Despair

¹By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, so too we wept*

When we remembered Zion.

²Upon the willows^{xviii} in her midst

We hung our harps.*

Reason for Despair

³For there our captors asked us
for the words of a song;*

Our tormentors, for enjoyment [said]:

"Sing for us one of the Zion songs!"

The bottom line

⁴How can we sing a song of Yahweh*
In a foreign land?

Oath

⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem,*

Let my right hand forget its skill.^{xix}

May my tongue stick to my palate

If I don't remember you,*

If I don't elevate Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Call for retribution

⁷Remember, O Lord, against the sons of Edom
The Day of Jerusalem,*

When they said, "Raze it, raze it,

To the last foundation in her."

Retribution Envisaged

⁸O Daughter of Babylon,

The devastator,*

Happy is the one who wholly renders your recompense

In keeping with what you have done to us.

⁹Happy is the one who seizes and dashes*

Your little ones against the rock!

ⁱ For example, the 1962 Canadian *Book of Common Prayer* does not contain the following imprecatory prayers: Psalm 58, 69:22-28; 109:6-20; and 137:7-9. Other omissions are Ps 55:15, 104:35a, 140: 9-10; 141:6-7.

ⁱⁱ The title segment “do not destroy” is often thought to refer to a tune; the term applies also to the preceding and following psalm. Apart from 57-59, the only other place where it appears is in the title of the Asaphite Psalm 75.

ⁱⁱⁱ The word *miktam* either comes from a root meaning “stain” (as in a blood-stain), “cover”—some thus suggest ‘atonement’ but the context doesn’t especially suit that term—or from a similar root of unknown meaning. The noun *miktam* occurs only in the psalms and always with psalms attributed to David (16:1 [A *Miktam* of David], 56:1, 57:1, 58:1, 59:1, 60:1). Wilson (820): “The constellation of so many common elements leaves a strong impression that these psalms constitute a purposeful collection and arrangement.”

^{iv} Here I resist amending the Hebrew word ‘silence’ (*’ēlem*) to either ‘rulers’ or ‘gods’ (*’ēlīm*). Nevertheless, it remains likely that superhuman spiritual powers are in mind in verse 1-2 and the wicked humans who do their bidding in verses 3-5.

^v Literally “in heart.” Wilcocks: “Could we arraign the villains of history, we should not simply express our horror at their deeds; what really appals us, we should tell them, is that coldly, deliberately, *in your heart you devise* such things.” (209.)

^{vi} The lack of justice in the world is not some impersonal natural inevitable condition of human life. It is the intended work of the hearts and hands of responsible powers. . . . The lie is the belief that their heritage of privilege is theirs to use in selfish destructiveness of the society in which they hold power.” (Mays, *Psalms*, 211.)

^{vii} Overlooking differences in translation Wilcock notes the common thread: “the psalm is addressed to those who govern or administer justice. That at least is what they are supposed to do, but instead it is violence which the scales of justice in their hands weigh out.” (p. 209.)

^{viii} “The meaning here is that their whole life has been devoted to evil (cf. Ps. 51:5; Isa. 48:8). Ibn Ezra . . . translates, ‘The wicked are estranged from the womb,’ meaning the wicked are different in nature at birth from other newborn children.” (Bullock, *Psalms*, 442.) But are they? I concur with Wilcock who notes, that it is not (at least only) “an infamous minority who happen to be born bad, for even David, just seven psalms back, has admitted that he was ‘sinful at birth’ (51:5). So are we all ‘separated from the life of God’ [Eph. 4:18], until the grace of God in Christ takes away our sin and baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. Without that, any of us may be capable of unthinkable wickedness.” (210.) This verse is of course consistent with the Christian’s understanding of original sin, that all sinned in Adam and must be redeemed by the second Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12) (Here I follow Bullock 446.)

^{ix} Wilson aptly notes, “The image draws on the awe that the street-performing snake charmer must have produced in the spectator by his seeming ability to control the deadly and vicious cobra. Here, however, the human vipers are so intent on their evil from birth that they have become completely inured to any persuasion or control, wanting only to lash out and harm” (NIVAC, 844).

^x The images that follow combine to express the psalmist’s desire for the proactively wicked to become ineffective to the point of no longer existing. “Verses 6-9 are in the form of prayer. They are not in the form of incantations or impersonal curses but are framed as petitions to God for the destruction of the evildoers.” (Brueggemann and Bellinger 261.)

^{xi} Wilson: “To ask God to break the teeth of the enemy sounds like a desire for an incredibly violent and harsh attack, unless the imagery of the beast of prey is kept in mind. The psalmist is not asking for a preemptive strike against those he dislikes. Rather, he is calling on God to break the deadly grip of the ravenous beast on the trapped prey in order to free and deliver it.” (NIVAC, 841.)

^{xii} “The NRSV rendering takes it to be grass on a path beaten down by those who trample on it. Others suggest the treading is a reference to the bending of the bow with one’s foot in order to prepare the

weapon to shoot arrows but that here the arrows wither or fade and so are of no use; the weapons of the deliverers lose all effectiveness.” (Brueggemann and Bellinger, 261.)

^{xiii} The motifs seem to refer to becoming harmless and defenceless respectively, the first through having arrows that do not penetrate and the second through a snail whose slimy diminishing trail makes it appear to have melted away.

^{xiv} Translators differ on how to make sense of the words, literally: “Before their pots can understand thorn[s], whether alive or ablaze he will sweep them.” JPSV renders differently than most others: “before the thorns grow into a bramble, may He whirl them away alive in fury.”

^{xv} As Wilson notes, “It is generally accepted that *nqm* has the meaning of ‘defensive or punitive vindication’ rather than vengeance. . . . The utter defeat of the enemy is seen as public confirmation of the cause and claims of the righteous.” (NIVAC, 842.)

^{xvi} This is strong language. We prefer to think of the eradication of the wicked in more abstract terms, but that is a luxury for those privileged to live in times of relative peace. Significantly both the NT as well as the OT describe the destruction of embodied forms of evil similarly; cf. Ps. 68:21-23; Isa. 63:2-3; Ezek. 28:23; Rev. 14:19-20, 19:13-15.

^{xvii} Literally, “a fruit.”

^{xviii} Or *poplars*.

^{xix} In other words, seemingly, “May I lose dexterity.”