



“WHATEVER IS IN PARENTHESIS WE DO NOT INCLUDE IN OUR PRAYERS”!?
THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF THE “ENEMY PSALMS” IN CHRISTIAN RECEPTION

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1. “Do we not have the Right to use Scissors”?! – The (post) Vatican II Debate about removing and shortening “unacceptable” Psalms from the Canonical Hours

If you asked a Catholic with what he/she would associate the concept of Psalms, many would reply spontaneously: “Monasteries”. It is there that psalms are still sung and prayed. According to the Rule of St. Benedict (around 500), the whole of the Psalter is expected to be recited, spread over the seven days of a week – following a certain plan – and then on every day over seven office hours, as it says in the verse of a Psalm: “Seven times a day I sing your praise”.¹ Around the time of the Council of Trent at the latest, the recital of the Psalter became obligatory also for the clergy – the so called “breviary” – which however, as a rule, was prayed individually.

Within the wide movement that in the sixties with the second Vatican Council (1962-65) deeply affected the Catholic Church, the renewal of the liturgy was given top priority. The basis of the reform was a paradigm shift: Church and world, clergy and laity are no longer understood as contrasting pairs – instead, all who are baptised are active practitioners of faith and consequently also of the liturgy; and the liturgy is not a collection of magic rituals, but the recollecting, praying, lamenting, celebrating activity of the whole of the people of God! It was for this reason that the Council Fathers were keen to open the (canonical) Hours and so the Psalms to all Christians. At the same time, the working groups received various requests asking them to adapt the Hours, their volume and their rhythm, to the needs of modern men and women.² And it is in this context that the debate arises whether it would not be appropriate to delete certain parts of some of the psalms and remove others altogether. Psalm 58, for instance, in which in verses 7-11 the language is pretty harsh caused great uneasiness:

“O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, o Lord! Let them vanish like water that runs away; like grass let them be trodden down and wither. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the untimely birth that never sees the sun. [...] The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.”

But other Psalms too were deemed to be unsuitable for the prayers of the people of God. The concern here was without doubt a pastoral one: to make available with the – revised and selected

¹ Ps. 119,164; RB 16,1.3.

² Basic for what follows: Bugnini, Annibale, Die Liturgiereform (reform of liturgy) 1948 – 1975, Zeugnis und Testament, Freiburg 1988.

– Psalms to as many people as possible a real treasury of prayers in which they would be able to participate without difficulties.³

Yet the general trend of the Council as well as of the study groups that followed went in the other direction⁴, the clear majority of the experts voted for keeping the entire text intact. Finally the decision was taken 1968 by Pope Paul VI.: The Psalms 58, 83 and 109 were to be removed from the Office, other Psalms should be shortened by taking out the controversial verses or rather, these verses were to be put in parenthesis,⁵ as in fact happened in the liturgical books for the Hours (1971) as well as in the *“Gotteslob”* [the Catholic book of prayer and hymns for the German-speaking dioceses]. There were many Benedictine monasteries which did not follow this practice; they sing the entire Psalter.⁶ But the dispute continues: Already in 1969 the Benedictine monk and Old Testament scholar Notker Füglistner published an essay with the title *“The courage to accept the whole of scripture”*⁷. He concludes: *“The elimination of the texts in the Psalter containing curses [...] is from a literary point of view not legitimate, from a bible-theological point of view not possible, hermeneutically not necessary”*.⁸ Erich Zenger calls this shortening and chopping up of many of the Psalms an *“act of official barbarism”*⁹.

³ Taking Psalm 18,43(42) as an example (*“I beat them fine as dust before the wind, I cast them out like the mire in the streets”*), Gemma Hinricher OCD provides powerful testimony to the difficulties which can be created precisely by praying in the mother tongue within a very specific context: In the Carmel Convent on the grounds of Dachau Concentration camp this verse and others remind of the destruction and burning of all those many people whose ashes were scattered across the grounds. Set against the background of this very special situation, the community of Sisters decided not to pray some of the Psalms contained in the official collection of the Hours. Comp. Hinricher, Gemma OCD, *Die Fluch- und Vergeltungspsalmen im Stundengebet. Überlegungen zu 15 Jahren Erfahrung mit dem gemeinsamen Chorgebet im Karmel Dachau*, in: *Bibel und Kirche* 2/1980, pp. 55-59.

⁴ Bugnini describes in detail the varied course of the work of the commission:

- 4th plenary assembly of the *“Commission”*: 21:4 for the preservation of the entire Psalter;
- 6th plenary assembly (October 1965): Spreading over 4 weeks, removal of the Psalms expressing curses or rather reserving them for *“suitable times”* (the aim: to be able to pray more meditatively, time for silence);
- December 1965: Questionnaire with 19 questions, among them also the *“Cursing Psalms”*;
- March 1966: Comment of the Pope: A selection of psalms for the *“Hours”*, reserve Cursing Psalms for certain times of the year;
- 7th plenary assembly of the Commission (autumn 1966): discourse about the solutions other denominations have found, among them the *Comunauté de Taizé*; no decision;
- 10 November 1966: Report to the Pope: Problems with Psalms, that *“contain expressions which sound harsh and are at odds with today’s sentiments”* (Bugnini p. 536). Solution: To put them into parts of the *“Hours”* which are predominantly prayed (and have to be prayed) by the clergy – i.e. by the theologically educated!
- 26 October 1967: Synod of Bishops; vote on a) whether all Psalms should remain: 117 yes, 25 no, 31 *“iuxta modum”*.
- 3 January 1968: Decision of the Pope: take out the cursing psalms!
- 10th plenary assembly (April 1968): Another debate. Arguing over the tradition of the unshortened Psalter, the danger of subjectivism and the possible damage to the knowledge and appreciation of salvation history. As demanded by the members, the question is put again to the Pope. Of interest for the question of contextuality is the vote of the East European laity which during the time of the Cold War saw themselves in a precarious situation: they urgently needed to keep the Cursing Psalms. *“Since we find ourselves in a threatening situation we have to have expressions, that are directed ‘contra diabolum’.”* (Bugnini 1988, p. 526, note 10).

⁵ The following parts were left over: Ps. 5,2-10.12-13; Ps. 21,2-8.14; Ps. 28,1-3.6-9; Ps. 31,1-17.20-25; Ps. 35,1.2.3c.9-19.22-23.27-28; Ps. 40,2-14.17-18; Ps. 54,1-6.8-9; Ps. 55,2-15.17-24; Ps. 56,2-7b.9-14; Ps. 59,2-5.10-11.17-18; Ps. 63,2-9; Ps. 69,2-22.30-37; Ps. 79,1-5.8-11.13; Ps. 110,1-5.7; Ps. 137,1-6; Ps. 139,1-18.23-24; Ps. 140,1-9.13-14; Ps. 141,1-9; Ps. 143,1-11 (Source: Bugnini 1988, p. 544).

⁶ Relatively new for the German sung version is the *“Münsterschwarzacher Antiphonale”* (1990), it can also be obtained in its pure textform as *“Münsterschwarzacher Psalter”*; comp. article by Norbert Lohfink in: *Bibel und Liturgie* 1/2003, pp. 71-81. With regards to the principle of the whole Psalter comp. also Puzicha, Michaela OSB, *Das Buch der Psalmen im Kontext der Benediktsregel*, in: *Bibel und Liturgie* 3/2004, p.188f.

⁷ Füglistner, Notker, *Vom Mut zur ganzen Schrift*, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 9 (1969), pp. 186-200.

⁸ L.c., p. 200. And provocatively (but in small print!) he adds, the Old Testament scholar, *“in defiance of all decisions by allegedly catholic authorities – every arbitrary selection, especially in the scriptures, is because ‘heretical’ (hair-esthai = to select) anti-catholic (catholic = all embracing) – is taking sides with the confessing Protestant Dietrich Bonhoeffer”* – in this way problematic papal decisions can become a vehicle for the ecumenical movement!

⁹ Zenger, Erich, *Ein Gott der Rache? Feindpsalmen verstehen*, Freiburg 1998, p. 9.

The de facto situation remains: when we are praying or singing Psalms we do so with a selection; in practice we have removed three whole Psalms and parts of further 16 Psalms. We don't disapprove of the difficult verses, but then again we don't know them any more! And I maintain: we miss them.

2. The history of a fatal error: "Christians can't possibly pray something like that!"

In polemical publications we often come across the argument, that the Bible – particularly the First Testament – is so full of the depiction of violence and violent language that an enlightened person cannot, on any account, make it the basis of his/her religious and ethical convictions, nor should he/she do so.¹⁰ The feeling of unease is of course not new; nor did it come into the world with Christianity: Already in the 2nd/3rd century BCE Hellenic philosophers attacked certain texts of the Jewish tradition.¹¹ From the history of early Christianity we know Marcion as the one who rejected the First Testament altogether. Fortunately, he was unable to assert himself with his radical politics of reduction!

The fundamental and almost exclusive hermeneutical pattern for the Christian way of dealing with the Psalms and the First Testament however, from the patristics (2nd-5th cent.) to the present day,¹² is the pattern of "promise and fulfilment" – unfortunately still very distinctive in the "*Allgemeine Einführung in das Stundengebet*" [= "General introduction to the Hours"] (1971)¹³: From a christocentric perspective the psalms are regarded as part of the First Testament and as such as incomplete;¹⁴ they only begin to make sense when they are read against the background of Jesus Christ;¹⁵ for use in the Christian service they therefore have to be embedded in unmistakably Christian contexts, something that can be achieved with the help of antiphons.¹⁶ That we are dealing here with theologically indefensible hermeneutics and the construction of a contrast where especially according to biblical self-understanding there is none, I need not elaborate further. And that the view, an image of an avenging God and an aggressive language in prayers are "typical of the Old Testament" – that this view, with regard to the Second Testament, can in no way be justified, has been expanded by, of all people, the critic of Christianity Franz Buggle.¹⁷ Yet in spite of it this image is, to this day, retained and passed on.¹⁸

¹⁰ Well known and much quoted: Buggle, Franz, *Denn sie wissen nicht was sie glauben. Oder warum man redlicher-weise nicht mehr Christ sein kann. Eine Streitschrift*, Hamburg 1992.

¹¹ Seidl lists Hecataios of Abdera, Lysimachos, Chairemon of Alexandria, Pompeius Trogus, Artapanos and also refers to the early Jewish apologetics, for instance in Philo and Flavius Josephus: comp. Seidl, Theodor, *Gewalt und Gewaltkritik, Vom Umgang des AT mit Konflikt, Aggression und Vergeltung*, in: Franz, Thomas / Sauer, Hanjo (ed.), *Glaube in der Welt von heute. Theologie und Kirche nach dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, vol. 2: *Diskursfelder*, Würzburg 2006, p. 425.

¹² Since Vatican II theologically and ministerially outdated, in practice however still virulent.

¹³ Unfortunately still very distinctive in the AES from 1971!

¹⁴ "... only a shadow of that fullness of time that dawned in Christ the Lord" (art. 101).

¹⁵ "Whoever prays the psalms in the name of the Church has to be mindful of their full meaning, especially their messianic meaning, for the sake of which the Church has adopted the whole book of the psalms" (art. 109).

¹⁶ "The tradition of the Latin Church knows three types of aid, in order to understand the psalms and to make them into Christian prayers: the headings, the psalm recitations and above all the antiphones" (art. 110); comp. Zenger 1998, pp. 52-55.

¹⁷ Buggle 1992, 95-98; he refers to such texts as for instance Mk 9,42-48 parr. Bishop Albert Martin was against it already during the Council (1963): "The whole of the Psalter belongs to the treasure of Holy Scripture, and we believe that it is also inspired in those parts which we, because of the limitation and the weakness of our mind, can not fully comprehend now. In an arbitrarily made selection of psalms we might even give in to a rationalist temptation; besides, it could evoke amazement in our segregated brothers (= the other Christian Churches i.e. US). 'Whatever is written is written for our instruction' (Rom. 15,4). Otherwise those parts of the Holy Liturgy, which are taken from the New Testament, but say the same thing (or even quote it) would also have to be eliminated" (quoted here following Zenger 1998, p. 50f). Comp. also Baldermann, Ingo, *Wer hört mein Weinen? Kinder entdecken sich selbst in den Psalmen*, Neukirchen 1999 (6th edition), p. 25f.

The picture darkens further when we look into the Christian history of interpretation: An attempt, through interpretation, to take the sting out of the “Enemy Psalms” or “Cursing Psalms”,¹⁹ which are felt to be problematic, is to apply the curses to the Jewish people themselves. The Churchfather Athanasius for instance prays Psalm 58, quoted at the beginning, against “the Jews” who he says killed Jesus and were therefore thrown into “eternal fire”²⁰. The desire for and the fantasies about revenge in the psalms are not infrequently reinterpreted into concrete prophecies which are said to have already come to be fulfilled in the Jewish people.²¹ This is certainly the most fatal perversion among the attempts of wringing some meaning from difficult verses in the Psalms, attempts for which theology and Church should not only be ashamed, but should ask for forgiveness.

Another method is that of allegorisation, that is, the symbolic interpretation of individual images and elements of images that refer to an inner-psychic or spiritual reality. In this way “the enemy” of the Psalms takes on the meaning of evil or the passions which are to be combated. A well-known example is Augustine’s interpretation of the last verses of ps. 137: “Happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” Augustine interprets “the daughter of Babel” as the godless world; her “children” are the evil inclinations in us, which we should dash against the “rock” which is Christ.²² However, such a spiritualisation is in the end no more than a helping device. If we want to pray the Psalms in such a way “that our mind and our heart are in harmony with our voice” (RB19,7), we need another horizon of understanding. In what follows I would like to attempt five ways of access to this horizon.

3. Five Ways for a new Understanding of the “Enemy Psalms”

3.1 *The Language: We can only pray in Images*

Psalms are poetic texts. Their language is full of images and metaphors.²³ In the so-called “Enemy Psalms” we find predominantly images of fear: “Fear and enemies are only two sides of the same coin”²⁴. Sometimes the threat is like a wild animal,²⁵ sometimes it is a human being or a group, depicted as hostile, and then again it can be peoples and tribes; occasionally the whole world seems to conspire against the person praying!²⁶ The latter has of course its background in the historical experiences of Israel, that small country that over and over again became caught up between two fronts. In spite of it, the names of the peoples, just as the lions and the dragons, act as ciphers for the manifold experiences of feeling threatened, experiences that can change all the time. Precisely because the images and metaphors of the language of Psalms keep open this pos-

¹⁸ Erich Zenger quotes numerous examples of Catholic and Protestant theologians, who alarmingly illustrate this: comp. Zenger 1998, pp. 26-37.62f.

¹⁹ Zenger 1998, p. 66.

²⁰ Quoted after Zenger 1998 p. 67.

²¹ So for instance Augustine in his interpretation of ps. 109: “The prophet (David) begins to prophesy what the Jews are going to receive for their godlessness, and he says it in such a way as if he wished out of a thirst for revenge that it may come to pass; however in reality he only prophesies what, with unfailing certainty, has to happen and what through God’s justice will only affect those who have deserved it.” (quoted after Zenger 1998, p. 67). Similar are interpretations of other verses of psalms; comp. the problematic understanding of Psalm 109 in Acts 1,15-20!

²² Comp. Zenger 1998, p. 69f; Ströle, Benedikta OSB, Psalmen – Lieder der Verfolgten. Gebete des Friedens in friedloser Zeit?, in: Bibel und Kirche 2/1980 p. 45; Hinricher 1980, pp. 57f.

²³ Comp. Schneider, Severin OSB, Das Denken in Bildern als Voraussetzung für das persönliche Psalmenbeten, in: Bibel und Kirche 2/1980, pp. 47-54.

²⁴ Baldermann 1999, p. 26; comp. also Ströle 1980, p. 4.

²⁵ Very concentrated for instance the mirror-image-like strings of animal metaphors in ps. 22: bulls and strong bulls (v. 13), lions (v. 14), dogs (v. 17 and 21), lions (v. 22a) and strong bulls (v. 22b); comp. Brüning, Christian OSB: „Gott möge ihnen einen Blitz ins Gesäß jagen!“ – Zu den Feindpassagen in den Psalmen, in: Erbe und Auftrag 2/2006, p. 130.

²⁶ Comp. Brüning 2006, pp. 133f.

sibility, they offer people a language for all times and for all sorts of different life-situations in which they might find themselves.

And not as a matter-of-fact description of their threatening situation, but in very emotional terms. Already in a 1969 treatise did Otmar Keel assembled 99 different Hebrew words for describing “enemies” in the Psalms.²⁷ But the Psalms are not to be understood as some sort of linguistic valve, rather they address a person opposite: their language is demanding and challenging – and already for that reason it does not want to be matter-of-fact, because it is not a reporting language. That is why the Enemy Psalms with their “strong expressions”²⁸ are an important impetus for our language of prayer,²⁹ in which lamenting and shouting out your fear are not exactly forbidden, yet silenced under the pretext of trust in God. However, only a powerful language is really strong enough to express our deepest anxieties and carry these to where our hope of salvation lies – to the ear of God.

In this connection I should briefly like to mention two specific problems; both have to do with the temporal and linguistic strangeness of the texts. Semantic analogies or non-analogies in translating from one language into another are not always easy to determine; in our connection it becomes problematic when we are dealing with concepts like “revenge” which have a complex legal and ethical background, but also an abundance of emotional connotations.³⁰ What exactly is meant and how I can come closest to this many-layered meaning in the target language: by addressing such questions, some of the obstacles and problems of understanding can already be significantly lessened.

The second difficulty: the quotation marks, which we of course do not find in the Hebrew text, yet imagine in many places. A much discussed example is Ps. 109,6-19 of which I shall quote a number of verses:

“May his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow! May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit! May the creditor seize all that he has. May strangers plunder the fruit of his toil! Let there be none who extends kindness to him, nor any to pity his fatherless children! May his posterity be cut off. May his name be blotted out in the second generation! He clothes himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones!”

Depending on whether these rather drastic curses are put into the mouth of the praying person or whether I understand them as a quotation from the mouth of the enemies, in each case the meaning will be different.³¹

3.2 Reference to Reality: Violence is part of Reality

The world of the Bible is not a “whole, harmonious world”. That has to do with the fact that the Bible looks at it realistically: there is no point pretending that violence does not exist; everyone experiences it directly or indirectly, in reality or in fiction. In our everyday life there are situations and systems which we experience as structural violence: the “administrative jungle”, which for the unemployed and those who are looking for help is impenetrable; the footsteps in the dark which follow a woman at night; the policemen who only do their duty when they escort a rejected asylum seeker to an expulsion centre and who nevertheless for him become “mortal enemies”.³²

²⁷ After Brüning, 2006, p. 130.

²⁸ Brüning 2006, p. 136.

²⁹ Comp. Zenger 1998, pp. 165-177.

³⁰ About the concept of “revenge” comp. Zenger 1998, p. 137ff; Baldermann 1999, p. 28f; *ibid.* about the meaning of “rescha’im” 1999, pp. 27f.

³¹ Comp. Lohfink 2003, pp. 76f; Zenger 1998, pp. 126ff.

³² Baldermann 1999, pp. 26f.

The Bible places these experiences of violence in the magic-mythological worldview of the Ancient Oriental World which sees the world in constant flux between chaos and cosmos.³³ This life that endangers and threatens human beings stands in stark contrast to the divine truth and thus challenges God. Together with God and against God the people praying the Psalms are fighting the chaos; they put into words how the world is and should not be and call on God to take their side.³⁴

Also within a mythological worldview and as exponents of the powers of chaos the “enemies” can be both concrete persons and actions; rather than effecting a disappearance of evil in mythological categories the biblical language discloses mechanisms of violence and those who are responsible for it – and brings them in prayer “into the midst of cultic and social everyday life”³⁵.

Everything that is, may be mentioned before God – including, perhaps precisely, that which is not as it should be according to God’s will. Here it manifests itself that violence and its perpetrators don’t have the last word. “Is it not one of the most sophisticated ways of ‘persecution’ that the one who is persecuted, as far as is possible, is silenced?”³⁶ Those Psalms in which people who have experienced violence can recognise themselves are texts of resistance against being silent; they bring the victims of violence out of their shame and loneliness and give voice to their plight.

There is another aspect that seems to me to be important: While in praying these Psalms we are making the suffering of others our own, we are not only quite openly taking the side of the oppressed; we also have to face up to our own share in this suffering,³⁷ our entanglement in the net of violence. If we are honest, other people could identify *us* with the “enemies” of the Psalms. In this way we could also learn from the Enemy Psalms the sort of things we bring about by what we do and fail to do and have to account for!³⁸

3.3 The Speakers: “Who is speaking may be ALL that matters”³⁹

So far it has become clear: In the verses from the Psalms against “the enemies” we hear the voices of human beings who are under real threat – for them it is a matter of life and death, and it is this predicament that they express in their prayer. The other thing that characterises these speakers: they are victims of violence, but they have refused to be silenced. They address a Thou, even if they find that this Thou is silent, absent and inactive; therefore they call with an even louder voice. These are harassed and threatened, but also resistant voices!

This perspective is important if we want to understand the Enemy Psalms: This is not about the director of a company who fears a “hostile take-over” of his firm – this is about human beings who are filled with deep anxiety and who cannot expect help from anything or anybody if not from God. It is from this place that we have to hear and understand the sometimes harsh words about and against “the enemies”; and whenever we lend these psalms *our* voice in prayer, we do so

³³ Even children are not free from experiences of violence and threat, they too often have concrete and well-founded anxieties; comp. Baldermann 1999, pp. 25-33 and the commentary to the hermeneutical existential decisions in the ‘Gütersloher Erzählbibel’ (Klöpper, Diana / Schiffner, Kerstin, Gütersloher Erzählbibel, Gütersloh 2004, pp. 387f); the selection of texts in this Bible for children includes also less cheerful psalms like Ps. 6 or Ps. 22.

³⁴ Erich Zenger comments: “Here the shrill tone of the enemy psalms is able to startle Christians out of their well-tempered sleep of their structural God-amnesia” (Zenger 1998, p. 145).

³⁵ Zenger 1998, p. 146.

³⁶ Ströle 1980, p. 42.

³⁷ Comp. Zenger 1998, p. 147f.

³⁸ Comp. Baldermann 1999, p. 27.

³⁹ Higgins, Lynn A. / Silver, Brenda R., Rape and Representation, New York 1991, p. 1, it is quoted here after: Bail, Ulrike, article “Die Psalmen”, in: Schottruff, Luise / Wacker, Marie-Theres (eds), Kompendium Feministische Bibel-auslegung, Gütersloh 1998, p. 181.

either because we ourselves are in such a situation of anxiety or because we say these prayers consciously in solidarity with those who are at present harassed and anxious. There is no other way.

The question, whose voice we are hearing in the Psalms, has also been reflected on by feminist theology. "Texts and readers are never 'gender-neutral', and often texts tell a different story depending on whether they are read as 'male voice' or as 'female voice'."⁴⁰ A fresh discovery are for us the "female voices": "These songs can also be heard and spoken as voices of women".⁴¹ A feminist re-reading of the psalms also works with the headings of Psalms and reading instructions, as we find these in the Hebrew text: Ps. 51 for instance, only becomes the voice of King David in a particular life-situation, through the sub-headings. This is what female theologians do today, addressing concrete situations in which women find themselves: "This might be the prayer of a woman who was raped" (about Ps. 6).⁴² That and how the Psalms always sound new again, depending by whom they are spoken and in what sort of situation, we shall see later on, when we give examples of contextualised renderings of Psalms.

3.4 The Addressee: The Theocentricity of the Enemy Psalms

To whom do the Psalms speak? The answer seems to be simple: to God as the (only) possible addressee, who listens and has the power to help. The explosive content is inherent in the implications: What sort of God are we dealing with?

The God of the Psalms is not an indifferent onlooker, someone not interested in the world. He is the judge of world and history,⁴³ before whom those who do wrong have to account for their deeds and before whom the harassed and deceived find justice. In this context of justice the Bible speaks of the wrath of God.

"This wrath is a specifically political affect [...]. It is not the passion of a 'desert demon' as one previously liked to imagine, but on the contrary, the highly cultural idea of justice which conditions this wrath. [...] Idolatry and oppression evoke the wrath of God and both are violations of the covenant made with God."⁴⁴

God is angry precisely because he is and cannot be indifferent towards the world and the people in it.

"The irritating and provocative talk of the [...] 'wrath of God' says first and foremost something about the violent and corrupt state of society and the world – and about the fact that this state is neither god-given nor as god-given allowed to be legitimised or tolerated. Not by us humans and certainly not by God himself."⁴⁵

For God it is a question about his nature, how things are in the world and with the people in it; in championing the oppressed and in his wrath against the oppressors it is shown whether he keeps his word and remains faithful to himself. Nothing less than his God-nature is at stake, when over and over again the speakers of the Psalms call to him in the words: "For the sake of your name, help us, you God of our salvation! For the sake of your name deliver us!"⁴⁶ Yet precisely this is not taken seriously in a world in which so often the ruthless seem to have the power. Again and again the Psalms put denials into the mouth of the opponents, as they call into question or deny the

⁴⁰ Bail 1998, p. 181, going back to the concept of Brenner / Van Dijk-Hemmes.

⁴¹ Ibid. p.180.

⁴² Rienstra, Marchienne Vroon, Swallow's Nest. A Feminine reading of the psalms, Grand Rapids 1992, p. 44. Examples for the "female reading" of selected psalms are found in Bail 1998, pp. 183-190.

⁴³ Comp. Zenger 1998, pp. 130-137.

⁴⁴ Assmann, Jan, Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten and Israel, München 1992, pp. 85-93 passim (quoted here after Zenger 1998, p. 142).

"The wrath of God" comp. also Seidl 2006, p. 439ff and Jeremias, Jörg, Der Zorn Gottes im Alten Testament: Das biblische Israel zwischen Verwerfung und Erwählung, Biblisch-Theologische Studien 104, Neukirchen 2009.

⁴⁵ Zenger 1998, p. 143.

⁴⁶ Ps. 97,9.

power and existence of God: “There is no God”⁴⁷ – and that is so to speak the height of their wickedness. Here the help God gives to the oppressed and the actions he takes against the oppressors become virtually a proof for the existence of God. It is all about God himself! The struggle against injustice and violence and against those who are accountable is, so to speak, declared a matter for the “boss”; revenge is not a matter for humans, but is passed on to God.⁴⁸

God is stronger than the power of evil: That is the creed that the speakers of the Psalms confess in their prayers. Yet part of this belief is also that God can sometimes stay his own hand, because he/she feels compassion – as Jonah had to learn.⁴⁹ Whether in wrath or compassion, God always remains beyond our control.

3.5 The Intention: What are the Enemy Psalms about?

From the preceding reflections we already derive the answer: they are about being saved from the perils of death, an act which is expected of God. Here lies the heart of the matter: “Not the enemies are important, the emphasis is on God helping the one who prays to him!”⁵⁰

This help arrives just by expressing one’s fear. Whoever prays the enemy psalms “wants to free himself from fear, wants to pray himself out of fear.”⁵¹ After that, if a person is not exactly suffocated by his troubles, he will be breathing a little more easily.

The real aim is directed at the You: It is about getting God to intervene; he/she is supposed “to put an end to the actions of the enemies”!⁵² Various images in the so-called “curses” are directed at making the enemy harmless: when for instance the teeth of the wicked are to be broken in their mouth (ps. 58,7), it means that their weapons with which they threaten others should be destroyed.⁵³ Their wicked actions should be prevented or, at least, brought to an end as fast as possible!

It is always about limiting or reducing violence. Not in blind hatred, but in a well-considered manner, God is being asked to paralyse the power of evil, to destroy the tools of violence, to make them unusable and so to give breathing space to those who are harassed. Yet as these actions are left up to God, there still remains a glimmer of hope for the “enemies” – perhaps for them too salvation is possible, but if so then only by way of repentance. In this respect, the Enemy Psalms have to be read as texts critical of violence.⁵⁴

Salvation and liberation come of course at a price. They are not available without justice and “avengement”, that is, not without real or symbolic compensation. The anger about injustice and injury must be allowed to find expression, along with the desire that violence should be stopped and that the wicked should be called to account. Whoever rashly – perhaps even in the name of Christianity – demands forgiveness and love of enemy wants to take the last step before he has taken the second-to-last.

The Psalms, especially the Enemy Psalms, keep awake in our midst the awareness of injustice, of threat and violence. They insist that justice is an unrelinquishable postulate. And they live in the

⁴⁷ Ps. 14,2 = 53,2 similarly in Ps. 10, Ps. 71 and Ps. 73; comp. Zenger 1998, p. 133.

⁴⁸ So for instance Ps. 94,1; comp. also Rom. 12,19, going back to Deut. 32,35 LXX. Comp. Zenger 1998, pp. 137-143.

⁴⁹ Comp. Zenger 1998, p. 141.

⁵⁰ Brüning 2006, p. 131.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 130.

⁵² Ibid. p. 135.

⁵³ Comp. *ibid.*; comp. Baldermann 1999, p. 30.

⁵⁴ Seidl 2006, p. 439.

hope that things do not have to remain the way they are – even if those hopes contradict what they see in reality. In this sense the Psalms are realistic and resistant, even and particularly in the shrill tone of some of their verses.

4. Contextualisations – Three examples

To this day, the Psalms have a creative power that inspires poets to use their own words.⁵⁵ In what follows I would like to give you three examples.

4.1 Ernesto Cardenal, “Psalm 7”

Ernesto Cardenal is the poet of Latin-American liberation theology. Particularly in his early texts like “Salmos” (1964) we find reflected on the one hand his biographical experiences as a monk, on the other the global political situation of the sixties: the Cold War, the dictatorship in Nicaragua and other countries of Middle and South America. Also the deep emotional upset about the National Socialist tyranny can still be felt; it is evident in his rendering of Psalm 7.

Free me Lord,
From the S.S. and the N.K.W.D. from the F.B.I. and the G.N.⁵⁶
Free me from councils and their vicious regimen
You are the judge of all judges
You judge the ministers of justice
You are the energy from which all justice is
Defend me then from falsity
The exiled, the lonely, the deported
The accused of espionage and found guilty
And to forced labour transported
But the weapons of God more terrible are
And “sub specie aeternitas” accurate
than the judgement of those judges whose judgement will occur
I will celebrate you in my singing
Where you sit on your seat in the high court of no thing⁵⁷

In hard contrasts the familiar biblical language is contrasted with political concepts, with abbreviations of secret services and army troops, with ministeries and even nuclear weapons – in short, with the brutal reality of the world. At that time Ernesto Cardenal’s Psalms became a mouth piece for many people: For their analysis of reality, for their powerlessness and fear, but also for their hope that God in their struggle for a more just world is firmly on their side.⁵⁸

4.2 Carola Moosbach, “A Psalm of revenge”

As described above, the process of re-reading texts from the psalms with a feminine voice, against the background of their own experiences as girl and woman, is carried out by Carola Moosbach

⁵⁵ About the necessary contextualisation in every reading process, so also when reading the psalms, comp. Ballhorn, Egbert, Kontext wird Text. Die Psalmen in der Forschungsgeschichte, in biblischer Zeit und in christlicher Liturgie, in: Bibel und Liturgie 3/2004, pp. 161-170.

⁵⁶ N.K.W.D. = Short for russ. “Narodny Kommissariat Wnutrnich Del”, i.e. “the people’s commissariat of the interior” of the USSR; G.N. = Guardia Nacional, Nicaragua’s army and police.

⁵⁷ Cardenal, Ernesto, Psalms, translation from the sixth edition of 1974 by Thomas Blackburn and others, Crossroad Publishing, 1981, p.45.

⁵⁸ After the deposal of the Nicaraguan dictator Samoza in 1979 Ernesto Cardenal became minister of culture in the Sandinista government and stood up for a “revolution without revenge”.

(* 1957) in her poetry books. “Feminist and Christian, author and survivor of sexual violence in childhood – all that belongs to me”, she writes on her homepage.⁵⁹ In many of her psalm-poems she expresses the life-threatening and soul-murdering experience of sexualised violence:

I demand your justice God
Help me plead for me
Let him tremble with fear this murderer of childrens' souls
to nothingness his soul shall shrink
you shall be my avenging angel God
help me plead for me
let him not get away this respectable allotment gardener
invent a new hell for him
you alone are stronger than he is God
help me plead for me
let my body be again my very own God
expel him from my soul
liberate me from him God
help me plead for me
and tell your people to stop their whispering
one has to hear them as far away as the allotments
inside me everything is hurting so much Sister God
help me plead for me
don't let it be this dirty lout who has the last laugh God
and deliver me from my father for ever
Amen⁶⁰

Here too we find the contrasting interplay of biblical and everyday language, even abusive words. Here, a language is found for the violence experienced by girls and women and also many a boy, a violence that was suppressed and hushed up in our churches for a long time. “Right from the start, I felt it was important and necessary that my texts should be used, that they should be ‘widely-used texts’ in the best sense of the word”, so writes Carola Moosbach in her blog.⁶¹ Her lament and cursing psalms hold fast to the idea that there is an opposite; for herself as for many others this is surely not the “heavenly father” – but what then? Her struggle with who God is, who she/he is for me and by what name I shall call on her/him, winds its way through many of her texts.⁶²

4.3 Hans Dieter Hüsch, “Blessings for All-the-World”

I'd like to end with a text, which Hans Dieter Hüsch published shortly before his death in 2005. Different from the biblical Psalms and also different from the two contextualisations we considered above, here we do not have a situation of seriously life-threatening violence out of which a person writes and cries for help to be rescued. It is more about our everyday experience, the “normal madness” of hectic disorder and noise, of unemployment and Mafia methods and the ever faster turning rat-race of life. Yet it becomes obvious: all of this wears us out! We don't want it! At the same time one can sense a deep longing for life, which is able to flower with God's intervention: that she/he should thwart those who use the deadly mechanisms of war and capital for their own gain and that he may bless those who seek goodness and do it together with others.

And by the way, what I mean is
That God our Lord
May give us a great summer
A basket full of rest for families
And many hopeful views of green and blue
Meadows and water and white beaches

⁵⁹ www.carola-moosbach.de/editor.htm, accessed on 7/7/2010.

⁶⁰ Moosbach, Carola, *Gottesflamme Du Schöne. Lob-und Klagegebete*, Gütersloh 1997, p.71.

⁶¹ www.carola-moosbach.de/archiv/k2005.htm, accessed on 7/7/2010.

⁶² For this she was given in 2000 the ‘Gottespoetinnen-Preis’ (the prize for ‘God's poetesses’).

Quiet months
 That he gets rid of the screaming in the world
 And orders stillness
 For that it is necessary that he takes away the weapons of those who make war.
 And the hopelessness from those without work
 And that he does not allow the powerful to become Mafiosi
 All of us can join in and help
 That life runs at a slower pace
 That the world loses all its excitement
 And people can look at each other for longer
 To tell each other: We love you!
 God our Lord may bless this stillness
 May this stillness be breathed into the ears of those
 Who want to make our time move even faster
 And so make it even shorter and more breathless
 God our Lord we pray: Do it!
 So that our heart can gasp for air again
 Our eye stops twitching
 And our ear can hear properly again
 And does not forget everything
 Those who would like to knock all those things out of us
 May God the Lord drive into their backside a flash of lightning
 So that they understand the inhumanity of their deeds
 And leave the people of his favour in peace
 In the truest sense of the word leave in peace
 We want to pray to our Lord God again
 To bless our concern everywhere
 And because it has to be immediately and for evermore!
 Thank you and Amen.⁶³

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Sources and Abbreviations

- RB Regula Benedicti (Rule of St. Benedict)
- AES Allgemeine Einführung in das Stundengebet (General Introduction to the Liturgical Hours)
- EG Evangelisches Gesangbuch (The hymnbook of the Protestant Church in Germany)
- GL Gotteslob (Catholic book of prayer and hymns for the German-speaking dioceses)

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