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Bishops, Baby-Killers and Broken Teeth: Psalm 58 and the Air War

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Abstract: Do the imprecatory psalms authorize reprisal attacks against civilian targets? This question was at the heart of a controversy that arose in Britain during July 1917, which brought together the unlikely combination of the German bombing campaign and the Church of England's process of liturgical reform. When a meeting of the Canterbury Convocation approved the removal of Psalm 58 and several other imprecatory psalms, there was an immediate stir in the Press. This public debate about Convocation's decision offers a valuable window through which we can discern the ongoing vitality of British biblical culture during the First World War.

Keywords: Bible; Imprecatory Psalms; Church of England; World War I.

O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!

The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.
People will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."

(Psalm 58:6, 10–11)

Should Christians pray these words about their enemies, even in wartime? The curses of Psalm 58 stood at the heart of a controversy that flared up in Britain during July 1917. This controversy brought together two apparently unrelated issues: Church of England liturgical revision and the morality of reprisals for German air raids. My aim in what follows is to explore the unlikely combination of the imprecatory psalms and the air war, and what this can tell us about the place of the Bible in Britain during 1914–1918.

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1 The Psalmists and their Enemies

Even a casual reader of the Psalms will quickly become aware that this is a book rather full of enemies. The Psalmist is confronted by evildoers on all sides, both individual and national. Intimately connected with the presence of the enemy is imprecation or curse, as the Psalmist pleads with God to destroy his enemies, and even, most famously in Psalm 137, their children. How, then, did wartime readers respond to the Psalmist's enemies and to the curses rained down upon them? An anonymous *Times* article of August 1916 on "The Bible in War-Time" exclaims that "[t]he Psalms might almost have been waiting for such an hour: they needed the leaping up of the fires through the crust of life to make them clear."¹ Whereas before they were lost in the past and people had told themselves that "men do not do such things," now "suddenly the conditions were restored; we were in the presence of enemies; the peoples imagined vain things, the heathen were come into the Divine Inheritance; the honour of God was threatened. Psalm upon psalm smote us with a strangely modern power."²

From its earliest days, the First World War was seen across Europe through the lens of the eschatological battle between good and evil. Annette Becker goes so far as to claim that: "Hatred of the enemy became the strongest expression of a sacred love of God and the fatherland and was virtually obligatory once the war had been agreed to."³ The Old Testament, and especially the Psalms, could offer a degree of religious legitimacy to that patriotic hatred, but not without complications. On the one hand, the Psalms contain a repertoire of images of the enemy wide enough to portray every wartime atrocity, along with language intemperate enough for the curses of even the most ardent Germanophobe. On the other hand, the guardians of the biblical tradition in Church and academy had long tended to "de-fang" the Psalms, most recently by distancing them from the contemporary world as examples of pre-Christian and "oriental" morality, far removed from the Christian gospel of love.⁴

¹ "The Bible in War-Time," *The Times*, August 19, 1916.

² "The Bible in War-Time," *The Times*, August 19, 1916.

³ Annette Becker, "Faith, Ideologies, and the 'Cultures of War,'" in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 238; cf. also Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), especially chs. 2 and 3.

⁴ So, for example, W. T. Davison argued that the psalms display a collective nationalism typical of Roman law, but even more of "Oriental countries and still earlier times": *The Praises of Israel: An Introduction to the Study of the Psalms*, 2nd ed. (London: Kelly, 1902), 176; cf. also Rudolf Kittel, *The Scientific Study of the Old Testament* (ET London: Williams & Norgate, 1910), 140–3.

We gain a good impression of the professional biblical scholar's response during the war from the Glasgow Old Testament Professor John McFadyen's essay on "The Psalter and the Present Distress," serialized in the *Expository Times* between March and May 1917.⁵ Like the *Times* article, McFadyen emphasizes the continuity of experience between our world and that of the Psalms. This continuity applies to enemies as much as anything: "Throughout the whole length and breadth of the Psalter, and even in the gentlest Psalm like the twenty-third, you can hear their stealthy tread and listen to their venomous words."⁶ Later it becomes clear that these enemies have much in common with the Germans of British propaganda. Quoting Psalm 2 McFadyen claims:

To-day too, and on a more terrific scale we have we have seen "kings of the earth conspiring, And rulers consulting together," to snap the bonds and fling away the cords that bind human society together. To-day, as then, we have the policy of frightfulness. To-day, as then, we have baby-killers, and today, as then, there is the thirst for reprisals.⁷

McFadyen turns to imprecation:

We used to shudder at the imprecatory psalms, and let us hope we shudder still [...] but we, who have seen in these latter days what antecedently we could never have believed of the horrors and the inhumanities of war, are able to understand these Psalms as they have seldom been understood since the flaming words leaped from torn and bleeding hearts. We could not take their dreadful prayers upon our lips; we could not ask God to feast our eyes upon our foes, or to grant that our feet might be washed in the blood of the wicked. But too well we understand to-day the mood from which such prayer can spring.⁸

When McFadyen says "we could not take their prayers upon our lips," he reflects a view widely represented in the Psalms literature of the period. For example, the 1902 commentary by A. F. Kirkpatrick, Dean of Ely, contains an extensive discussion of imprecatory psalms, arguing that they reflect the Old Testament world of law and retaliation rather than the New Testament dispensation of love, and concluding that they can never be used on the lips of Christians.⁹ Kirkpatrick

⁵ John Edgar McFadyen, "The Psalter and the Present Distress," *The Expository Times* 28, no. 6 (1917), 245–9; no. 7 (1917), 305–7; no. 8 (1917), 373–7.

⁶ McFadyen, "The Psalter and the Present Distress," 246.

⁷ McFadyen, "The Psalter and the Present Distress," 247. On the terms "frightfulness" and "baby-killers" during the First World War, see Lynda Mugglestone, *Alien Enemies: the Politics of Being Frightful* (March 16, 2015), accessed December 7, 2016, <https://wordsinwartime.wordpress.com>.

⁸ McFadyen, "The Psalter and the Present Distress," 248.

⁹ A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms: With an Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: CUP, 1902), lxxxviii–xciii.

is an instructive example, not least because he was the only serious Hebraist on the Archbishop's Psalter committee, whose outcome lit the fuse of the 1917 controversy.¹⁰

2 Convocation, the Gotha Bomber and the Psalms

What does any of this have to do with the air war? A little context is required. In the summer of 1917, a wave of aerial bombardment hit London and the South East, killing and injuring hundreds of civilians.¹¹ The numbers are tiny compared to the mechanized slaughter of the Somme or the thousands who died in Dresden in 1945, but the bombings had enormous psychological impact. To target civilian populations from the air still felt like a new and terrifying aspect of total war, and the Germans' recently introduced Gotha bomber was more effective than the Zeppelin raids of previous years. News reports emphasized the deaths of women and children, the innocent victims of "Hun brutality." German airmen were denounced as "baby-killers." There was a strong popular desire for revenge, and a vigorous debate about the need for so-called "reprisals." Many believed that

10 Kirkpatrick's attitude is by no means unusual in pre-war scholarship. For example, the German Rudolf Kittel in his influential textbook, *The Scientific Study of the Old Testament* contrasts the poetic and religious value of the psalms, and admits that there are authors who "like the mean-spirited persons of all times, think only of rewards, or thirst after conquest and vengeance" (142–3). Or S. R. Driver, who in a sermon on Psalm 109 offers a sympathetic account of the moral orientation of imprecation, but regrets that it contains a degree of personal hatred and animosity that is not consonant with Christian ethics: *Studies in the Psalms* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 223. One contrary voice is C. A. Briggs, who argues that only an "excessive individualism" cannot make space for imprecations, that Jesus himself pronounced woes and imprecations against his enemies, and that "there is a place [...] for imprecation in the highest forms of Christianity, only it is more discriminating than in the Old Testament religion and more refined": C. A. Briggs and G. E. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), xcvi–c. The debate about the imprecatory Psalms of course continues to the present day, with perhaps a greater tendency to see the value of imprecation. See e.g. Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), or Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms," in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms*, ed. Rolf Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 77–92. A more cautious note is sounded in Joel M. LeMon's essay in the same volume: "Saying Amen to Violent Psalms: Patterns of Prayer, Belief, and Action in the Psalter," in Jacobson, *Soundings*, 93–109.

11 For a full account of air raids during the war see Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: The Air Raid in Britain From the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

German barbarism could only be answered in kind, by reciprocal raids against German towns. Others, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and many church leaders, argued that one atrocity does not deserve another, and that reprisals would debase “the whole moral currency of international life.”¹²

Into this febrile atmosphere lumbered the Church of England and its ongoing process of Prayer Book revision, which had been under way since 1906. In the first week of July 1917, the Convocation of Canterbury (predecessor of today’s General Synod) received a report on revision of the Psalter.¹³ Among other recommendations, this report proposed that the whole of Psalm 58, together with the imprecatory verses from several other Psalms, be removed from liturgical use.¹⁴ The report had been long in the making, and the progress of liturgical revision had little to do with the immediate needs of the war or the current mood of the country. Nevertheless, newspaper reports suggest that the members of Convocation did have some awareness that recent events made the question of “reprisal psalms” especially sharp.

In the Upper House (of bishops), the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, referred directly to reprisals for air raids. He had recently published a letter in the *Times*, claiming that the sight of dead babies in London did not encourage us to wish for “a heap of dead babies in Germany.”¹⁵ A flood of letters had arrived in response saying, “that is exactly what we want,” reminding him of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and that Samuel hewed Agag in pieces.” Davidson claimed that this response demonstrated a shocking misunderstanding of Scripture, which should strengthen Convocation’s determination to take “a bold line in what is before us to show that we are not adopting for ourselves phrases which were used in Old Testament times, but not under the dispensation of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

The Lower House (of clergy) held a rather more vigorous debate the following day. Kirkpatrick, the liberal Dean of Ely and one of the authors of the report, argued that while these psalms had a historical significance, they were “scarcely

12 Randall Thomas Davidson, “Policy of Reprisals: The Views of the Archbishop of Canterbury,” *The Times*, June 22, 1917.

13 *Use of the Psalter: Convocation of Canterbury: Report of the Joint Committee for the Revision of The Lectionary to Which the Questions Relating to the Use of the Psalter Were Referred By the President* (London: n. pub, 1917).

14 Beyond Psalm 58 the offending verses were Pss 55:16, 24–25; 68:21–23; 69:23–29; 109:5–19; 137:7–9; 139:19–22; 140:9–10; 143:12.

15 Davidson’s words to Convocation as reported in “Canterbury Convocation,” *The Guardian: The Church Newspaper*, July 5 1917.

16 “Canterbury Convocation,” *The Guardian: The Church Newspaper*, July 5 1917.

suitable for Christian worship.”¹⁷ Canon Hay Aitken of Norwich claimed that they were “little short of an insult to the divine Majesty.”¹⁸ Even if the Germans had committed horrible atrocities, we should plead with God that they be brought to a better mind, and not invoke curses upon their head. On the other hand, H. F. Wace, the conservative Dean of Canterbury suggested that removing the verses damaged the unity of these Psalms, and that, “[t]he denunciations of wrongdoing and the calls for vengeance were in many cases peculiarly appropriate for the present time.”¹⁹ Moreover, with some foresight, the Archdeacon of Sudbury observed that by removing “all the Psalms which gave expression to righteous indignation” the Church “would get more and more out of touch with the feeling of the country” and risk a “national disaster.”²⁰

In the end, both Upper and Lower Houses of Convocation approved the resolution to remove Psalm 58 and the other imprecatory verses by very large majorities. The ecclesiastical authorities of the Church of England had spoken decisively against imprecation and, by implication, against reprisals.

3 “The Boycotting of David”

Convocation’s decision quickly provoked a stir in the press. On July 6th the *Daily Express* ran a front-page banner headline: “BISHOPS BOYCOTT DAVID’S REPRISAL PSALMS,” while headlines below ran “BAN ON REPRISAL PSALMS” and “DAVID’S WICKED IDEAS OF VENGEANCE!”²¹ Similar headlines appeared in other newspapers, and from the outset the connection between the imprecatory psalms and the question of reprisals was clearly at the front of people’s minds.²² The *Express* news report began “Psalm 58, which ventures to support the idea of reprisals, has been placed under the ban of the church.”²³ Its editorial declared

17 This and the following quotations from the Lower House debate are reported in “Revision of the Psalter,” *The Guardian: The Church Newspaper*, July 12, 1917.

18 “Revision of the Psalter,” *The Guardian: The Church Newspaper*, July 12, 1917.

19 “Revision of the Psalter,” *The Guardian: The Church Newspaper*, July 12, 1917.

20 “Revision of the Psalter,” *The Guardian: The Church Newspaper*, July 12, 1917.

21 “Ban on Reprisal Psalms: David’s Wicked Ideas of Vengeance! Churchmen’s Action,” *Daily Express*, July 6, 1917.

22 For example, “Ban on Reprisal Psalms: David’s Ideas of Vengeance Reprobated: Convocation’s Action,” *Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 6, 1917; “Purging the Psalms: Convocation Sub-Edits the Psalter,” *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, July 6, 1917; “Echoes of the Day,” *Liverpool Echo*, July 6, 1917.

23 “Ban on Reprisal Psalms,” *Birmingham Daily Mail*.

“David is too strong for the Convocation of Canterbury. The sympathisers with the primate’s anti-reprisal scruples have found it necessary severely to edit the Psalms,” since they provide “a mass of ‘Scriptural warrant’” in favor of retaliatory air raids.²⁴ The focus on Psalm 58 in particular (rather than the better-known Psalm 137) would seem to be because it was the only whole psalm to be omitted.

The situation was exacerbated by another German raid, on the Saturday following Convocation, which killed 37 people and injured 141. This helped to keep the story about the Psalter alive, and to intensify criticism of the proposed reform. Opposition was by no means limited to London or even England. On Monday 9th July the *Aberdeen Journal* ran a leader headed “The Air and the Psalms.” This demanded that “we should adapt ourselves to the realities of Hun warfare” and inveighed against the English Convocation.²⁵ Psalm 58 “supports the idea of reprisals; therefore it is to be omitted from the English Church Psalter [...] The Primate and others may lament the fact that David favoured reprisals, but the written letter remains.”²⁶

A flurry of letters to newspapers gave voice to public outrage. A correspondent to the *Times*, calling himself “A Layman” scorned Convocation: “What a lack of humour, of common sense, of knowledge of the mind of the ordinary Englishman is here revealed. He must not, forsooth, desire to wash his footsteps in the blood of the ungodly; nor should he hear that the Psalmist wished to do so.”²⁷ Those who regularly sang the Psalms were also troubled by the decision. The choir of Holy Trinity, Brompton passed a resolution declaring “the suppression of Psalm 58 and the mutilation of others” as “unpatriotic (by reason of its extreme untimeliness) and likely to bring the Church of England into disrepute.”²⁸ The congregation of St Matthew’s, Toxteth, Liverpool published a refutation of Convocation’s “raid” on the Psalms, demanding that clergy tempted to put it into force should consult their congregations first, and condemning the “cruel tyranny which some of the clergy are allowed to exercise.”²⁹

The *Daily Mail* column, “Letters of an Englishman” attacks the “timid mind of Convocation,” suggesting that the church leadership is trying to hide away from the realities of the war, but that “since that act of self-deception is beyond its power, it

24 “The Boycotting of David,” *Daily Express*, July 6, 1917.

25 “The Air and the Psalms,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, July 9, 1917.

26 “The Air and the Psalms,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, July 9, 1917.

27 “A layman,” “Psalm 58,” *The Times*, July 10, 1917.

28 “We Will Sing All the Psalms: Church Choir Defies the Bishops,” *Daily Express*, July 12, 1917. That other newspaper editors took the story less seriously is clear from the inclusion of the same report in the *West London Press*’s section, “Chelsea Gossip” (*West London Press*, July 12, 1917).

29 “Notes of the Week,” *The Record*, July 26 1917.

revenge itself upon the Psalmist, and would forbid us to read in our churches the minatory poem, which has stirred the blood of many generations of stalwart men.”³⁰ Psalms like 58 had never been more in need than in the present war, since it combines a “message of hope and duty” with a succinct image of both enemy criminality and “the revenge which we pray we may wreak upon them for their misdeeds.”³¹

A leader in the *Sunday Pictorial* of July 15th shows that the issue had not gone away a week later, and sets the question of the Psalms within a broader picture of the bishops’ total failure to understand the needs of wartime Britain: “Their one aim, it seems, has been to preach mildness and magnanimity towards our fierce enemy which he would never understand and which the public here resents.”³² They have emasculated the Psalms, opposed the use of powerful weapons, and failed to allow clergy to fight: “A great opportunity has been lost. The namby-pambyism of the Bishops has widened the breach between church and people, which the war might have bridged.”³³ The *Pictorial*’s litany of complaints against the Church echoes themes regularly expounded in one of the most jingoistic of popular weeklies, Horatio Bottomley’s *John Bull*, and it is no surprise to find alongside it an opinion piece by Bottomley himself. This is titled with the ironically biblical “Peace from ‘above,’” and concludes with a rabble-rousing sentiment to match the fervor of Psalm 58: “Let the skies be thronged with the fleet envoys of the God of battles. Let the heavens be opened that the lightnings of eternal justice may descend.”³⁴

Discontent with Convocation’s decision was not limited to episcopal “namby-pambyism.” Convocation was also subject to accusations of bad theology. A number of theologically conservative leader-writers and correspondents, both evangelical and Anglo-Catholic, fulminated against the low view of biblical inspiration that would allow this wrecking of Scripture.³⁵ If Psalm 58 now, then what next? More interesting, however, are attempts to defend the theology of Psalm 58 and its fellows. More than one letter writer to the national press draws attention to Bishop Butler’s argument that the instinct of pity should be counterbalanced by the instinct of “resentment.”³⁶ One “H.C.” wrote to the *Times* to make this

30 “Letters of an Englishman,” *Daily Mail*, July 14, 1917.

31 “Letters of an Englishman,” *Daily Mail*, July 14, 1917.

32 “The Failure of the Bishops,” *Sunday Pictorial*, July 15, 1917.

33 “The Failure of the Bishops,” *Sunday Pictorial*, July 15, 1917.

34 Horatio Bottomley, “Peace From ‘Above,’” *Sunday Pictorial*, July 15, 1917.

35 The evangelical *Record* published a leader on July 12 with the title “Wrecking the Psalter,” and the Anglo-Catholic *Church Times*’ leader “Convocation and the Bible,” on July 13, saw Convocation’s move as “a definite capture by liberalism on the way to the attack on the creeds.” Both of these weekly newspapers received support from correspondents in their following editions.

36 Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons [1726]* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897).

point, commending “this manly Christian view to some of those molly-coddling ecclesiastics *de nos jours*” and lamenting that “it will be a bad day for England and for democratic civilisation, when ‘the righteous’ shall not ‘rejoice when he seeth the vengeance.’”³⁷ I am reminded by this of McFadyen’s opinion in the April *Expository Times*, where he appears to take a swipe at Ernst Lissauer’s “Hassgesang gegen England,” a repetitive “Hymn of Hate” published in 1914 that quickly became the target of British propaganda.³⁸ For McFadyen, the Psalmist’s “hymns of hate” do not reflect mere national vindictiveness and spite (as he must presume Lissauer’s does), but are an attempt to reinstate the moral order of the world.³⁹

In the pages of the *Times* H. F. Wace, the evangelical Dean of Canterbury, engaged in a lengthy debate with Walter Hobhouse, Archdeacon of Gloucester. For Wace, to accuse Psalm 58 of mere personal vindictiveness, as Hobhouse did, was well off the mark. It was instead a matter of “justice and righteousness,” with consequences for the present: “If people like the Germans make themselves in body and soul the champions of evil we are bound to hate them in that capacity.”⁴⁰ And even the Archdeacon must inevitably adopt the attitude of the Psalm himself:

For whenever he utters even the mealy-mouthed prayers for the victory of our armies, which, like the rest of us, he is obliged to use, he is praying, as a matter of fact, for the efficiency of the British artillery in “breaking the teeth,” and “smiting the jawbones,” and inflicting other terrible injuries on our enemies. All assertion of righteousness by war involves these methods, and the Psalmist looked straight at the facts and realities of the struggle for right against wrong, and told the plain truth about it.⁴¹

The theological debate was not confined to clergy. Percy Brown, stationed with the Navy at Portsmouth, explained his thinking on retribution to the *Birmingham Daily Mail*: He attacks the way Canon Aitken used Jesus’ words during the debate in Convocation, stating:

Christianity is grossly misrepresented in his plea that we should offer up the prayer, “Father, forgive them,” on behalf of the murderers of our children. The Lord’s Prayer tells us that we are forgiven only as we forgive others, and that forgiveness is only extended to us according as we confess our sorrow for the evil done. Shall we, therefore, forgive a murderous enemy who not only remains unrepentant, but who persists exultantly in his criminal courses?⁴²

³⁷ H.C., “Psalm 58,” *The Times*, July 7, 1917.

³⁸ Brian Murdoch, *Fighting Songs and Warring Words: Popular Lyrics of the Two World Wars* (London: Routledge, 1990), 33–5.

³⁹ McFadyen, “The Psalter and the Present Distress,” 248.

⁴⁰ H. F. Wace, “Psalm 58,” *The Times*, July 11, 1917.

⁴¹ H. F. Wace, “Psalm 58,” *The Times*, July 11, 1917.

⁴² Percy Brown, “Vengeance in the Psalms,” *Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 13, 1917.

That feelings were running high on the issue cannot be doubted, and at times we can see the defense of a joy in righteous vengeance spill over into a deeply unpleasant xenophobia and hatred of all things German, which shows just how successful propaganda about German barbarism had been.⁴³ The most extreme example of this is again from the *Aberdeen Journal*, which, on July 16th, published a letter from the ominously named “One Who Knows Them.” He expresses extreme enthusiasm for the imprecatory psalms: “I would suggest that now, if ever, these very Psalms should be sung in every church in the United Kingdom and in every household, nay, even shouted aloud from house-tops! and the sentiments thereof carried into effect without moment’s delay.”⁴⁴ And he goes on, “[t]he Germans are, and always have been, the most overbearing, domineering, and bullying race on earth, and such they will remain to the end of time, unless completely beaten, crushed, and humiliated. When this Halcyon state of bliss has been attained, some hope of their regeneration might be conceived, but until then there can be absolutely none.”⁴⁵ Here we see the biblical authorization of patriotic hatred at its most brutal and unvarnished.

4 “The Evolution of Religion”

While the enthusiasts for Psalm 58 have the most colorful language, Convocation’s proposal also found robust defenders. My impression is that they are less numerous than its detractors, if no less passionate in their cause. The first argument they make is that the general public and the press have missed the point. There is no connection between the revision of the Psalter and the pressing issues of the war. A front-page article in the broad church weekly, the *Guardian* (not to be confused with the daily *Manchester Guardian*) is monumentally patronizing in its tone:

The amateur theologians of the daily newspapers have been making some very wild comments upon the excisions from the “Imprecatory Psalms” that have just been made by the Lower House. It seems to be supposed that these “Cursing Psalms” have been emasculated because their denunciations may be taken to apply to our present enemies. But there is no

⁴³ “One Who Knows Them,” “The Imprecatory Psalms,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, July 16, 1917. Adrian Gregory describes how over the course of 1915 it became increasingly common for the British Press to emphasize the intrinsic “depravity” of the German people. It was clearly well set by 1917: see Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 41–69.

⁴⁴ Anon., “The Imprecatory Psalms,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, July 16, 1917.

⁴⁵ “One Who Knows Them,” “The Imprecatory Psalms,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, July 16, 1917.

connection at all between the war and the revision of the Psalter, which is merely a part of that general revision of the Prayer book which has been going on for many years.⁴⁶

This is an important point, and true. But at the same time, this comment and a number of similar ones seem to betray a complete lack of sympathy for the kind of outrage that was not merely whipped up by jingoistic newspaper editors, but also clearly part of the concern of lay Christians in the country at large.

The most prominent defense of Convocation is the idea that Christianity has moved on beyond the savagery of an Old Testament view of retribution. This view was common in critical biblical scholarship before and during the war, and is by no means limited to clerical writers. The case is put at length by a leader in the *Daily Telegraph* of Saturday 7th July. Entitled “the Evolution of Religion,” it struck a very different tone from that of the more populist *Mail* and *Express*. The imprecatory psalms contained “wild screams of barbaric rage in which reason, morality, respect for humanity and reverence for God seem alike forgotten.”⁴⁷ The leader remarked that: “It may seem strange to some of us that there should be found any Divine authority to defend the inclusion of this ugly Oriental passion in the liturgy of a Christian church.”⁴⁸ The *Telegraph* by no means lacks resolve for the present war, charging that the spirit and language of the imprecatory psalms “may be apt to services in honour of the tribal divinity of the house of Hohenzollern, but they ill become the offices of a Christian church.”⁴⁹ For the *Telegraph*, then, the fact that such a large majority of Convocation voted to do away with these “dubious passages” marks a major advance for Christianity:

A momentous change is made when one of the great churches of Christendom resolves to declare to the world, by an alteration in services sanctioned with the use and authority of centuries, that it is not for Christianity to preach the joy of vengeance, or to pray that men may go down into the pit of destruction and find none to pity them.⁵⁰

Many correspondents asserted the “unchristian” nature of imprecation, drawing a contrast between the “eye for an eye” mentality of the Hebrew Scriptures and the more generous and peaceful demands of the New Testament. A leader in Bristol’s *Western Daily Press* of July 7th describes the sentiment of the offending passages as “interesting as a record of feeling many centuries before Christ,” but “painfully incongruous for use twenty centuries after.”⁵¹ Canon Hay Aitken of

46 “The Week,” *The Guardian: The Church Newspaper*, July 12, 1917.

47 “The Evolution of Religion,” *Daily Telegraph*, July 7, 1917.

48 “The Evolution of Religion,” *Daily Telegraph*, July 7, 1917.

49 “The Evolution of Religion,” *Daily Telegraph*, July 7, 1917.

50 “The Evolution of Religion,” *Daily Telegraph*, July 7, 1917.

51 “Editorial,” *Western Daily Press (Bristol)*, July 7, 1917.

Norwich, following up his words at Convocation in the pages of the evangelical weekly, *The Record*, makes a strong contrast between Old and New dispensations. Christ has superseded the “defective morality” ascribed to Moses, and Christians “must be careful not to fall back upon the lower plane of Old Testament morality, by whatever authority it may appear to be backed.”⁵² The desire for revenge is too prevalent among us today, Canon Aitken argues: “Surely a properly instructed Christian man ought to find no difficulty in discriminating between that righteous indignation against foul wrongs which every good man ought to feel, and that embittered resentment and longing for revenge which no Christian ought to feel under any circumstances whatsoever.”⁵³ Canon Aitken clearly shares the Archbishop’s anxiety that the use of such appalling words in worship can lead to feelings of unreconstructed vengeance, and that any claim to be able to avoid this is disingenuous: “Are we with our lips to invoke the most appalling curses that fierce resentment could invent, while with our hearts we inwardly say, ‘Lord I don’t mean what I’m saying but just the opposite!’ God save us from such a mockery of worship!”⁵⁴

Aitken is not alone in showing concern for the effects that praying these psalms might have on the moral and spiritual imagination of those who pray them. Cyril Emmet, who published a pamphlet on Psalter revision in August 1917, demands:

Let us make up our minds whether the language and objects of our prayer do or do not influence our characters [...] If they do, it cannot be without effect on our spiritual life constantly to invoke God to destroy those whom we hold to be wrong, and to assume that it is His pleasure to rain upon them snares and tempest, fire and brimstone.⁵⁵

Emmet also wisely warns that our judgments about the justice of our cause may not be the last word on a matter. He refers wryly to the Boer War of 1899–1902: “A few years ago people in the heat of what they believed was just indignation applied the words of the enemy psalms to the Boers; we think of our friendship with South Africa today, of General Botha and General Smuts, and we thank God the prayer was not answered.”⁵⁶

A rather surprising ally of Convocation in this debate is the well-known free-thinker J. M. McCabe. In an article in the *Literary Guide and Rationalist Review* of

⁵² W. Hay M. H. Aitken, “The Imprecatory Psalms,” *The Record*, July 19, 1917.

⁵³ W. Hay M. H. Aitken, “The Imprecatory Psalms,” *The Record*, July 19, 1917.

⁵⁴ Aitken, “The Imprecatory Psalms.”

⁵⁵ C. W. Emmet, “A Plea for a Revised Use of the Psalter in Public Worship,” in *The use of the Psalter*, ed. C. W. Emmet and C. F. Burney (Oxford: Humphrey Milford, 1918), 9.

⁵⁶ Emmet, “A Plea for a Revised Use of the Psalter in Public Worship.”, 7.

August 1st, he commends the “sound humanitarian motives” of the bishops. But they have not gone far enough, he maintains; the imprecatory psalms are monstrous and indefensible examples of a vindictiveness that runs through the Bible from beginning to end: “The truth is that no psychologist or educationist could possibly measure the evil which has been done, both in England and Germany, by infusing the sentiments of the Old Testament into the veins of the young.” For McCabe, in fact, the whole affair demonstrates the need for educational reform: only the secularization of education and the complete removal of the Bible from the school curriculum can offer hope for the future.⁵⁷

It is tempting to draw a clear moral contrast between the vengeful and small-minded defenders of Psalm 58 and the more enlightened and rational voices on the other side of the debate, especially when the latter are so much more in tune with the dominant biblical scholarship of the period. But McCabe also displays real vitriol when he claims that “over the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures broods the awful figure of a God who is the very personification of vindictiveness.”⁵⁸ And the denunciation of a theology that is not just antiquated but more specifically Jewish is not far beneath the surface of Christian correspondents’ and critics’ comments about the moral inferiority of the Old Testament or the “peculiarly barbarous form” of the imprecations of Psalm 137.⁵⁹ Such images of “Jewish vengefulness,” admittedly more prominent in wartime German-language reflection on the Old Testament, form part of the thinking that led to such a disastrous trajectory for Jewish-Christian relations in Europe over the next few decades.⁶⁰

5 Concluding Reflections

The German bombing campaign of Spring/Summer 1917 put revenge and retribution high on the agenda of the British Home Front. A public debate about reprisals for air raids provided the context in which the normally arcane matter of lectionary

⁵⁷ Joseph McCabe, “The Bishops and the Psalms,” *The Literary Guide and Rationalist Review*, August 1 1917, 115.

⁵⁸ McCabe, “The Bishops and the Psalms.”, 115.

⁵⁹ Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 780.

⁶⁰ See, e.g. Alfred Bertholet, *Altes Testament und Kriegsfrömmigkeit: Ein Vortrag* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1917), 47–8; Otto Eissfeldt, *Krieg Und Bibel* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1915), 71–2. A rather extraordinary celebration of the tough justice of the Jewish God is found in Isidor Hirsch, *Die Kriegspsalmen und die jüdische Volkseele* (Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1916). Hirsch, a Rabbi and biblical scholar in Prague, concludes his essay with the suggestion that Germany and Austria “must grasp the enemy not with the kid gloves of Christian love for enemies, but with the iron fist of the Jewish ideal of righteousness (24).”

reform could become a topic of national debate and Psalm 58 emblematic of either barbaric vindictiveness or just retribution. The range and duration of the press coverage suggests that newspaper editors felt that the story had relevance and importance for their readers, and this holds not only for the expected church outlets, but also for national dailies and local papers from Bristol to Aberdeen. This audience is, of course, only one relatively privileged section of the population, but the topic clearly caught the imagination of the newspaper-reading public.

The ease with which the themes of Psalm 58 were adapted to the question of reprisals is striking. For those who wished to remove its curses from public worship, it was an example of the base depths to which the human desire for vengeance could sink, and a text that might do untold damage to Christian morality. To its advocates, the Psalmist's enemies were our enemies and his curses our curses. The Old Testament thus becomes a powerful source of the language of propaganda, and we see the ease with which biblical rhetoric can be co-opted or instrumentalized to serve political ends. In the hands of newspaper editors this might seem crass and opportunistic, a charge already made at the time by the *Western Daily Press*, which cannot resist the opportunity to berate "certain London papers, which we had not suspected of authority in the matter of Biblical criticism," which "have suddenly developed veneration for the imprecatory Psalms, and find some connection between their excision and the question of reprisals for German outrages."⁶¹ But again the breadth of discontent, from letter writers to church choirs, suggests that the leader writers may have been following public opinion as much as influencing it.

The unpopularity of the Church leadership with the more militaristic elements of the British press is well known.⁶² Archbishop Davidson and Convocation's refusal to sanctify the popular desire for revenge is striking, especially when they were faced with the highly emotive cases of bombed schoolchildren. It is the newspaper editors and their largely lay correspondents who were raising the religious temperature of their patriotism by promoting the curses of the Psalms. One might argue, as the *Western Daily Press* did, that this all smacks of political opportunism, and that the use of the Bible is scarcely religious. But there is clearly some real interest in theology in the correspondence at least, and somewhere behind the criticism of "namby-pamby" bishops may be a sense that the modern, measured reading of the Bible cannot do justice to the existential struggle that ordinary people face, and fails to take sides in the ongoing battle between good and evil.

William Sanday, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, seems to recognize this impasse as he reflects on the debate about the Psalter in a 1918

⁶¹ "Editorial." *Western Daily Press* (Bristol), July 7 1917.

⁶² Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 183–4.

pamphlet on “vindictiveness.” He is broadly in favor of Convocation’s approach, but takes great care to set his discussion in the context of the present war, which is unique in the degree to which it hangs on “questions of fundamental morals, of direct right and wrong.”⁶³ The nation and its armed forces has a consciousness of being on the side of right that brings them closer to the ancient psalmist than previously, since they have a justified belief that “the nation’s enemies are in certain respects, the enemies of God as well.” And this is able to “bring us into line with the psalmists to a greater extent than we have ever felt in line with them before, and justify us in adopting their language with more deliberate assent and affirmation.” We should trust the moral instincts of the nation, and, regarding Psalm 58, only with great reluctance lose “that victorious conviction which impels the Psalmist to say, ‘Verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth.’”⁶⁴

If the moral instincts of the nation in this case tended towards retribution, it is also the case that its theological instincts show it to be rather suspicious of ecclesiastical power. Adrian Gregory makes the important point that English Christianity had long been marked by a strong independent spirit and deeply-held resistance to authority. Many people at the time of the First World War “thought about God while at the same time absolutely refusing to be told *what* to think about God.”⁶⁵ Thus personal and idiosyncratic readings of Scripture were typical. Convocation meddled with this independent spirit at its peril, and the thought is beautifully expressed by one Edward Impey in a letter to the *Times* on July 16th, 1917, which is worth quoting in full:

Sir, – Let the authorities of the English Church beware of interfering too much with the liberty of the laity. They have shaken our belief in their sense and judgment by refusing to let clergymen free to serve. They may destroy it if they try to interfere with our private views as to the use and interpretation of the Old Testament.⁶⁶

The furore over Psalm 58 may be an anomaly. The pages of wartime newspapers were not so often full of popular interest in biblical interpretation. It is something of an accident that we have such rich access to British views of the imprecatory psalms in 1917. If Convocation’s report had not arrived in the midst of German air raids and a fierce public debate about reprisals, perhaps many of the people who engaged in the arguments with such fervor would not have given the matter

⁶³ William Sanday, “The Language of Vindictiveness in the Prayer Book, in the Bible, and in Modern Life,” in *The Use of the Psalter*, ed. C. W. Emmet and C. F. Burney (Oxford: Humphrey Milford, 1918), 64.

⁶⁴ Sanday, “The Language of Vindictiveness,” 65.

⁶⁵ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 154 (emphasis author’s own).

⁶⁶ Edward Impey, “Psalm 58.” *The Times*, July 16 1917.

much thought. The Church Press suggests that ecclesiastical conservatives would have taken exception, and we might imagine that the church choirs would have wanted to continue singing the psalms too. From the perspective of biblical reception history, though, it might have been possible to assume both that liberal thinking was comfortably in the ascendancy, and that the educated public had little interest in using the Old Testament to think through current events. As it is, however, this accident of timing has enabled us to see just how out of tune establishment biblical interpretation was with the attitudes of many lay Christians. Moreover, the breadth and vitality of response suggests that John McFadyen had some justification for claiming that “we [...] are able to understand these Psalms as they have seldom been understood.”⁶⁷ The unexpectedly explosive combination of Psalm 58 and the air war has therefore provided an important window through which we can discern the continuing vitality of British biblical culture during the First World War.

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⁶⁷ McFadyen, “The Psalter and the Present Distress,” 248.

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