

The God of Every Day Wrath – Psalm 7

Decompressing from Brueggemann and Zahnd

As I write this piece, I am still decompressing as I return from the depths of the 2015 Word of Life 'Faith & Culture Conference.' I've experienced the heady privilege of interrogating Walter Brueggemann and Brian Zahnd for days on end. Many would regard Dr. Brueggemann as the most significant Old Testament scholar of our era. He would also probably be America's best preacher if Bishop (my designation) Zahnd didn't already clearly fill that role. I say this not to flatter, but to urge others who could not attend to participate through their books or the [conference recordings](#).



One of my most significant takeaways came through an anonymous Q & A query at the tail end of the final session. Brian Zahnd had waxed prophetic with a call away from the 'Monster god' of retribution to the Christlike God of the Gospels. In that context, the astute question raised was,

“What do we do with verses like Psalm 7:11-12: ‘God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day? Does not the God of love as revealed in Christ become angry with injustice?’”

A marvelous question! It somehow flipped a switch of blazing illumination in my dear friend. And Psalm 7 could not have been a better biblical source for a revelation of the precise nature of God's wrath – and a microcosm of how that notion evolves across the biblical witness. In what follows, I will extend and expand on Brian's brief but bright response.

Backstory of Psalm 7

Superscriptions, those smaller font preludes to many of our Psalms, are often both important and frustratingly obscure. I believe we should regard them as part of inspired Scripture in its final form. They are the words of composers who gathered the Psalms and very much part of the ‘word of the Lord’ one might hear through the Bible. The superscription of Psalm 7 says,

A Psalm of David, which he sang to the Lord concerning the words of Cush, the son of Benjamin.

For such a specific description, we have no corresponding event recorded in the the Old Testament. We don’t really know for sure if the context is a veiled reference to Shimei’s accusations in 2 Sam. 16; or to some aspect of Absalom’s revolt (2 Kgs. 14-18); or to Saul’s slanderers against David.



But in his *Treasury of David*, Spurgeon’s guessing does end up helping us focus on what we do know:

It appears probable that Cush the Benjamite had accused David to Saul of treasonable conspiracy against his royal authority. This the king would be ready enough to credit, both from his jealousy of David, and from the relation which most probably existed between himself, the son of Kish, and this Cush, or Kish, the Benjamite. He who is near the throne can do more injury to a subject than an ordinary slanderer. This may be called the SONG OF THE SLANDERED SAINT. Even this sorest of evils may furnish occasion for a Psalm.¹

And so we know at least this: Psalm 7 is one of those imprecatory songs where the Psalmist invokes the wrath of a not-angry-enough God against his enemies. As the Psalm progresses, a theology and practice of wrath emerges which rivals and perhaps shapes the maturity and clarity of Paul’s definition in Romans 1 (wrath as ‘giving over’)—a piece of pure genius that you could hum! Proceeding through the text with some commentary may help us catch the rhythm and evolution of wrath in biblical context.

Verses 1-2: Opening Plea for Help

*LORD my God, I take refuge in you;
Save and deliver me from all who pursue me,
Or they will tear me apart like a lion*

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Psalm 7,” *The Treasury of David*.
<<http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps007.htm>>.

And rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me.

Verses 3–5: Plea of Innocence and Oath

*LORD my God, if I had done this and there is guilt on my hands—
If I have repaid my ally with evil or without cause have robbed by foe—
Then let my enemy pursue and overtake me;
Let him trample my life to the ground
And make me sleep in the dust.
Selah.*

Verses 6–9: Plea for the Sleeping Judge’s Vindication

*Arise, LORD, in your anger;
Rise up against the rage of my enemies.
Awake, my God; decree justice.
Let the assembled peoples gather around you,
While you sit enthroned over them on high.
Let the LORD judge the peoples.
Vindicate me, LORD, according to my righteousness,
According to my integrity, O Most High.
Bring to an end the violence of the wicked
And make the righteous secure—
You, the righteous God who probes hearts and minds.*

Allow me to interrupt with some observations that will become pertinent later.

- Note first the originary wrath of the enemy. The first sign of violence is imagined in the pursuer who has inspired fear. *IF* my pursuer catches me, he’s sure to rip me to shreds with his massive feline fangs. Whether the perceived threat is real or imaginary, the process of wrath begins with fear of the other—and as such, becomes grounds for one’s own need and legal right to arm one self and respond in kind. Whether one sees a lion’s mane, a black teen’s hoody or misidentified religious headgear, the wrath is birthed in the imagination of the pursued, projected onto the enemy / pursuer ... an early biblical foray into the world of “stand your ground” laws.
- Note also the perceived innocence of the pursued, even under a self-imposed sworn oath. Precisely because *I* am innocent—because *I* have *not* repaid evil with evil, *I* the pursued can invoke and expect the vindication of the Righteous Judge. He hopes that personally renouncing personal vengeance will make space for divine protection and the just Judge’s favorable verdict. “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,” is still an argument for vengeance, but one deferred to a higher and legal authority: the divine Judge.

- Note too the obvious anthropomorphism (defined here as a human trait applied metaphorically to God) where the divine Judge is imagined as ‘awakening’! Of course, God does not *literally* sleep ... *ever*. Nor is he to be imagined in terms of a *literal* human judge who must either arise or awaken from slumber and inactivity. Yet while not literal, metaphors are not empty. They point to an existential reality in the life of the pursued. Up until now, the Psalmist has not experienced God’s deliverance. The just Judge has failed to intervene, seemingly heedless to this injustice. The pursued offers his own defense and bangs on His Honour’s chambers door, demanding action ... metaphorically speaking.

Verses 10–13: Plea of faith for both Judge and Executioner

*My shield is God Most High,
Who saves the upright in heart.
God is a righteous [just] judge,
A God who displays his wrath every day.
If he [the enemy] does not repent,
He [God] will sharpen his sword;
He [God] will bend and string his bow.
He has prepared his deadly weapons;
He makes ready his flaming arrows.*

Now we find the locus of wrath shifting from pursuer to Judge. If the enemy will not relent and repent of his *wicked* wrath, he will surely experience the *righteous* wrath of the divine Warrior Judge. The slumbering Judge awakens into the slaughtering warrior. The bullies (or rebels) are met with God’s sword and flaming arrows—his imminent wrath and every-day anger. Vindication, vengeance and violence await these terrorists (if it’s Absalom) or special forces (if it’s Saul).

Or is there? There is some awkward interpretive work across the translations. I’ve been citing the NIV. The KJV is not altogether different when it says (in vs. 11), “God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry *with the wicked* every day. If he turn not, he will whet his sword.”

However, ‘with the wicked’ is supplied, meaning the translators infer it. That’s a rather drastic inclusion given that the text appears to *actually* say, “God judgeth the righteous, and is angry every day.” Or in the NASB, “God is a righteous judge, And a God who has indignation every day.”

The referent of ‘if he turn not’ might just as well be the righteous one! It is not only the wicked other, but the inclusive ‘*a man*’ (NASB) who must repent. While the NIV helpfully keeps the crosshairs on the enemy, but a more neutral read, as in the NASB (“if *a man* does not repent”), shines the spotlight on all of the actors in this drama.

We can at least imagine how the Psalmist might begin to wonder if this pursuit may *not* signify a sleeping Judge who fails to judge the enemy, but is in fact quite awake and, if so, judging the pursued through this experience.

All that said, the OSB (Orthodox Study Bible) translation of the LXX introduces a completely different interpretation. It reverses the characters so that instead of the pursuer or pursued needing to turn to avert God's wrath, the Psalmist says it is God who needs to (re)turn to avert the pursuer's wrath:

*If You [God] do not return, he [the enemy] will polish his sword;
He [the enemy] stretched out and readied it,
And he [the enemy] readied his instruments of death
And prepared his arrows to kindle a fire.*

Suddenly the shoe is on the other foot. The arrows and sword are in the enemy's hand and the Psalmist pleads for God's help.

We can see how the translations reflect a rich but annoying variety of possible interpretations. But don't worry—it gets much worse! Something far *less* subtle happens when we consult translations of the Septuagint (LXX – the early Greek translation of the OT and official text of the Orthodox Church). Watch this in verse 11:

KJV – God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry *with the wicked* [supplied] every day.

NIV – God is a righteous [just] judge, a God who displays his wrath every day.

OSB [based on LXX] – God is a righteous [just], strong, and patient judge, **NOT** bringing down wrath every single day.

Either the ancient Jewish translators saw the word '*not*' in the manuscripts OR they themselves supplied it. In any case, that is what we have in the original Septuagint text²:

Why would they see it that way? The short answer is that in context, if the pursued is still on the run, then the saving 'wrath' of God is clearly *not* every day. If God is a righteous Judge who 'wraths' the enemies of the upright, clearly he is *not* doing so every day, so long as the unrighteous continue unchecked. OR if God is a righteous Judge who 'judges' the righteous, so far he has not allowed the enemy to overtake and overcome him. In either case, why not? Again, the OSB includes a word from the LXX that is missing from the manuscripts upon which the KJV or NIV are based. God does *not* display wrath every day because, apparently, he is *patient* (an argument

²ὁ θεὸς κριτῆς δίκαιος καὶ ἰσχυρὸς καὶ μακρόθυμος μὴ ὀργὴν ἐπάγων καθ' ἐκάστην ἡμέραν.

Peter will use centuries later in his epistles to justify God's delayed wrath – 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 3:9).

Anyway. David refuses to personally engage is in the wrath and defers judgment to the vengeance of God. Whether God displays his wrath daily or does NOT display it daily, at last we are given to see what 'the wrath of God' looks like in practice—literally, actually, practically.

Verse 14–16: The Verdict of Wrath Enacted

Whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment.

Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made.

The trouble they cause recoils on them;

Their violence comes down on their own heads.

At last we see the literal meaning of the word 'wrath,' the actual outworking of God's justice, and the practical form of God's 'vengeance.' The Psalmist both knows and says what he expects and imagines: that the plots of the wicked would simply backfire. It is not that God monitors the wicked, stores up wrath in his divine capacitor and then activates his anger in outbursts of direct, violent intervention. That's not how it works. If it did, the problem would be God's apparent reluctance to do so on the ground. As I've said [elsewhere](#),³ if God is a 'mighty smiter,' he's not very good at it and he should do it far more. The OSB translation notes this: considering the injustice in the world, how might we explain his NOT-every-day wrath? Or if he does enact every-day-wrath, show us what it looks like!

The Psalmist does so. 'Wrath' in Psalm 7 is just as Paul will describe it in Romans 1: the wrath of God is 'revealed' (1:18) as a metaphor for God 'giving over' (1:24, 26, 28) the wicked to the self-inflicted judgment intrinsic to their own sins.

Ignorant of Hindu theology, popular lingo often calls this 'karma' (failing to understand that Hinduism normally refers to payback in the *next* life). But biblical payback is neither Hindu karma nor literalistic wrath. Rather, Jesus and the prophets who point to him describe wrath in terms of a natural and supernatural law of sowing and reaping by which the wages (payback) of sin is its own negative outcomes. Sadly, sin also inflicts all kinds of friendly fire on others in the process. But happily, there's another law in town called grace, which 'travels outside of karma.' It's the wages (payback, karma) of sin that is death, but the free (pardon, forgiveness) gift of God is eternal life (Rom. 6:23).

The wrath the Psalmist describes seems slow to be enacted because of this very grace. This is good, not least because it is not at all clear whether the karmic debt is being applied to the pursued or his pursuer. What is clear is that sowing

³ Brad Jersak, "Wrath and Love as Divine Consent," *Clarion Journal* (July 23, 2012).

righteousness will lead to life and sowing violence will lead to death. The Psalmist is hopeful that he's lived the former and can put his hope in God to finally vindicate him. Thus, in spite of his trials, he is confident in God for a happy end:

Verse 17 – Thanksgiving for Divine Justice

*I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness [justice];
I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High.*

The Psalmist closes in praise because he can bank on God's justice—a justice that includes divine patience, which explains why God has neither allowed his enemies to catch him (yet) nor failed to eradicate his enemies (yet). For the Psalmist, wrath is ultimately not about violent direct intervention but about natural self-destructive consequences, a situation that seems to be to his benefit so long as his conscience is clean.

Zinger: St. John of Damascus on the Limitations of Language

For those concerned with taking the Bible seriously—that is, letting it say *what* it says (the actual words) and *how* it says it (attending carefully to literary genres and rhetorical devices)—Psalm 7 is an potent test case for the right use of anthropomorphisms in poetic theology. The poem illustrates an unabashed attribution of 'wrath' and 'anger' to God, while also doing us the rare favor of stripping down these metaphors to their non-metaphorical meaning. Said another way, the limits of anthropomorphism in God-talk are acknowledged and made explicit right within the song.

Today's tendency to sloppy biblicism would overlook how the Psalmist portrays the impossible notions of God as a sleeping judge or a sword-sharpening warrior ... while insisting that he is literally angry or wrathful. It was not always so. The most precise theologians of antiquity were very clear that literalizing wrath was more than mistaken—it was virtually blasphemous, for it reduced God to an idol sculpted by our own retributive temperaments. Two examples suffice.

First, from St. John Cassian (360-435 AD), the great desert father and monastic theologian:

And so as without horrible profanity these things cannot be understood literally of Him who is declared by the authority of Holy Scripture to be invisible, ineffable, incomprehensible, inestimable, simple, and uncompounded, so neither can the passion of anger and wrath be attributed to that unchangeable nature without fearful blasphemy.⁴

⁴ John Cassian, *Institutes* 8.4. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 11. Ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Trans. by C.S. Gibson. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Pub. Co., 1894. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350708.htm>>.

Second, I think of St. John of Damascus (676-749), whose [*Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*](#) is the quintessence of precision with language for God (and its limits). He's less dramatic than Cassian, but speaks directly to the metaphors of Psalm 7:

Many of the things relating to God ... that are dimly understood *cannot* be put into fitting terms, but on things above us we cannot do else than express ourselves according to our *limited capacity*; as, for instance, when we speak of God we use the terms *sleep*, and *wrath*, and *regardlessness* [being heedless], *hands*, too, and *feet*, and such like expressions.⁵



The Damascene has compiled an eclectic list with poignant purpose, odd bits assembled into one surprising category. God does not literally 'forget' or 'ignore' (i.e. *regardlessness*) any more than he has actual hands or feet. So too, just as in Psalm 7, God is no more constrained to wrath or anger than he is able to actually fall asleep! It is we, not David or the Damascene, who commit the category errors. Knowing that 'wrath' was not describing God *per se*, they were *not* saying it means nothing. They were enabled to see that 'wrath' was indeed describing something extremely important—an existential encounter with the judgment intrinsic to our own defiance.

Anthropomorphism vis-à-vis Incarnation

Anthropomorphisms cannot be literalized without diminishing the God who is both ineffable spirit and infinite love. But this begs the question: what happens when God assumes a human nature in Jesus Christ. Becoming human meant that God the Son inhabited all the limitations of human existence. In Jesus Christ, God assumes hands and feet that would bear the wounds of his Passion. The God-man would share in our experience of real sleep and even the capacity to forget or ignore. Could he also become 'angry'? Indignant? Outraged? Wrathful? The Gospels show us that he could. Hebrews 2 and 4 confirm this. The Incarnate Word bore the fullness of human

⁵ St. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 9. Ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Trans. by E.W. Watson and L. Pullan. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Pub. Co., 1899. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/33041.htm>>.

nature (without sin) in order to heal human nature fully. "What was not assumed," said the church fathers, "was not healed,"⁶ and so he assumed it all!

In assuming the human capacity for wrath, Christ did not indulge it through retaliation or even imprecations for the Father's vengeance, but overcame it and healed it through nonviolence and forgiveness. He went like a sheep to his own slaughter with the silence of a lamb (cf. Isa. 53:7). His cry for perfect justice was released on the Cross as breaths of forgiveness.

Whereas anthropomorphisms project broken human nature onto the divine, in the Incarnation, the divine nature is projected into broken human nature and so transforms it into something divine. The fulness of that divinity is neither wrath nor anger, but their solution: everlasting love and enduring mercy.

Summary

Thus ends my observations of wrath in Psalm 7. In that Psalm we hear the poet identify the wrath of his enemies, then project his own desire for vengeance onto the justice of God as wrath. But in so doing, he also clarifies that such wrath is, first, slow to come because of the patience of God, and second, really a metaphor for the self-inflicted and natural blowback of human conniving and violence. With Paul, he observes and rejoices in the ways of divine justice, even while puzzling over an inconvenient grace. At last, that grace appears, not in the anthropomorphic vengeance of a mighty smiter, but in the mighty love of the Incarnate God-man.

⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Critique of Apollinarius and Apollinarianism," *Epistle 101*. <http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/gregoryofnaz_critique_of_apollinarianism.htm>.