

Israel as “gods”, insinuating that because they have abused their positions of authority they have been acting as though they were gods. Or that they are acting as if they were gods but with their injustice being far from godlike.⁵

If *elim* is the correct reading it is in fact much more likely that human judges and leaders are in view and, indeed, as indicated above it is quite proper to render the term as simply “mighty ones” or even “rulers” or “chieftains.”. David is not concerned with the influence of pagan gods or angelic beings upon Israelite society.⁶ We can be confident that the leaders against whom David inveighs represent a corrupt justice system which implicitly victimises and exploits the righteous. For this reason the hope of the righteous is in a time when wicked leaders will be destroyed and justice re-established when God himself exercises judgment.

Notwithstanding the popularity of the *elim* option, a perfectly acceptable meaning results from sticking with the extant text, '*elem*. So the ASV renders the opening question: “Do ye indeed in silence speak righteousness?” This might alternatively be rendered: “Do you indeed speak a mute righteousness” (Tate). Judges are implicitly addressed, who by the very way they pronounce sentences negate the very justice they are supposed to exercise. As Perowne puts it: “They are *dumb* when they ought to speak, as afterwards they are said to be deaf when they ought to *hear*.”⁷

However, it is not necessary to identify the judges of verses 1-2 with those who occupy specialized judicial roles. That misses the point of the psalm. Rather, verses 1-2 apply to all who are in a position to provide protection to the righteous but fail to do so. So, for example, there are parts of the world today in which Christians are terribly persecuted and yet police authorities, perhaps because of their own antipathy toward Christians and their sympathy for their persecutors, fail in their duty to protect Christians and their property. In David’s own time Absalom furnished a good example of what verses 1-2 inveigh against. He had told many he would bring them justice, while he was secretly plotting his father’s demise.

As Harman (217) points out, the transition from “heart” to “hands” in verse 2 is significant. The evil carried out by these unjust judges begins with what they are plotting in their hearts (cf. Mt 15:16-20).

Psalm 58, then, describes a society which is a hostile environment for “the righteous.” According to verse 2, the unjust judges even plan wrongs, indicating their decisions are deliberate. The second colon of verse 2 is ambiguous. The ESV reads: “Your hands deal out violence on earth.” While the verb concerned can indeed be rendered as “deal out” or “mete out” or “weigh out”, it can also mean “look at” or “watch.” So the NEB reads: “and survey the violence that you have done on earth.” But the verb can also be translated as “break through” or “prepare”, especially with respect to a road; cf. 78:50: “he made a path for his anger”; Isa 26:7: “you make level the way of the righteous.” Tate (83) proposes that the thought is that the evil deeds transacted in the hearts of the unjust judges prepare for the violence of their hands. However, given the strength of the ancient image of the scales of justice (e.g. Job 31:6; Prov 16:2; 21:2; 24:12; Dan 5:27; cf. Rev 6:5), there remains good reason to stick with “mete out” or “weigh out.”

2. What is the relationship between the judges (vv1-2) and the wicked (vv3-10)?

It is possible to construe “the wicked” as being one and the same as the unjust judges addressed in verses 1-2. However, while what is said about the wicked in verses 3-10, especially concerning what emanates from the mouth, also applies to the unjust judges, it would seem that the broader sense conveyed is this: it is precisely the failure of unjust judges to deal with and check the wicked that leaves the righteous vulnerable to oppression and injustice.

3. What is the sphere over which judgment is exercised?

From both verses 2 and 11 we learn that *erets* is the sphere over which both the unjust judges and God exercise judgment. This word can be rendered either as “earth” (so NIV) or “land.” If the former then the psalm is concerned with global judgment. If the latter then the concern is with the exercise of judgment in Canaan.

In the second colon of verse 1 “the sons of mankind” are referred to as those being unjustly judged. Presumably, this phrase buys into David’s sarcasm, intensifying the force of David’s indictment of the unjust judges as self-appointed “mighty ones” (Tate, 85). But the phrase might suggest the perspective of the psalm is global. But it is unlikely that David is identifying the wicked with Gentile nations and “the righteous” with Israelites. David’s own experience speaks strongly against this. Further, David had no concept of “the righteous” being people to be found all over the globe. Therefore, *erets* should be rendered as “the land” and “the righteous” are therefore an Israel within Israel, the true Israel, with “the wicked” being all other Israelites.

The Underlying Problem

According to verse 10 “[the] righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance” (ESV; similarly AV, NASB, NIV, Young’s Literal Translation). Tate, however, argues that the rendering “vindication” is to be preferred. Whatever, this implies that the righteous suffer injustice from “the wicked.” Presumably, then, the psalm is concerned with how justice will be delivered to the righteous. The righteous cannot expect human leaders who are have the position and power to deliver justice to actually do this. For, typically, such leaders are themselves wicked. Indeed, such leaders themselves must bear much of the responsibility for creating the context in which the wicked can oppress the righteous with impunity.

The Nature of the Wicked

Summarising what the Psalms have to say about “the wicked”, Tate (86) concludes:

In general, the wicked person was any person who, if carefully examined and tried, would be judged guilty of violations of both the norms of the human society in which he or she lived and of disregard for the will of God. The wicked are always guilty.

Why do the wicked pose such a threat to the righteous?

1. There is a deep-seated and incorrigible deceitfulness in their hearts.
2. There is an innate maliciousness in their hearts.

This deceitfulness and maliciousness finds expression in what comes out of the mouth of the wicked. They ‘speak lies’ (v3); they spit forth deadly venom (v4). The use of the metaphor of a deadly snake is also found at Psalm 140:3 (cited at Romans 3:13). There too David is concerned about the danger posed by those who plan violence against him and who use their poisonous tongues to effect their evil plans against him. It would

seem that David's hateful enemies are slandering him and using their slander to incite others to join them in seeking to bring about David's demise. Similarly, in this psalm there is a nexus between violence and poisonous speech. However, it is because leaders fail to act to restrain wickedness that they themselves 'deal out' violence on earth (v2b), by allowing the wicked to be the very people they have always been from the day they were born (v3). Here David does not see evil as something that is primarily learned but as integral to human nature. It is likely that Genesis 8:21 is presupposed: "every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood."

We might ask whether David would describe the righteous as being innately righteous, since he depicts the wicked as being inherently evil. But it is apparent from Psalm 51:5 that David recognizes that his own propensity to evil is one instilled in him from the time he was born. Nevertheless, this psalm, in tune with the ideology of the Psalter as a whole, regards "the wicked" and "the righteous" as being essentially fixed groupings with little to no indication of any possibility of being able to move from one group to the other.

David sees inbuilt maliciousness to be so profoundly deep that he likens it to a deaf adder or cobra that doesn't hear the soothing sound made by the snake-charmer and which, therefore, cannot be prevented by any means from attempting to sink its fangs into its prey. Included here may be the idea that wicked rulers, in their insensitivity, do not hear the righteous crying out for justice (cf. Harman, 218). David's comparison of the wicked with snakes may also involve an allusion to Genesis 3:15 carrying an implicit identification of these unjust judges with "the seed of the serpent."

In describing the malice of the wicked particular stress is laid upon the poisonous nature of the tongue. Wickedness is integral to sinful human nature, is engrained in the personality of those concerned from birth and is especially expressed in the way they "speak lies" (v3). It is because there has been a long-established practice of speaking such lies that now, as leaders, these men continue to utter unjust judgments. The opening rhetorical question - "Do you indeed speak righteousness, O gods?" - presupposes that as judges these leaders speak in a crooked fashion, handing down judgments which are not true to the facts presented to them for adjudication.

The Destruction of the Wicked

The psalm has already indicated that the threat posed to the righteous is due to the evil speech of unjust judges and of the wicked. So David is seeking poetic justice when he utters the imprecation: "O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord!" Having compared the tongues of the wicked with the fangs of venomous snakes, he now compares them with the fangs of another deadly animal, the lion. But this only serves to intensify his characterization of the wicked and the danger that is posed when they are allowed to speak slander and evil words without restraint. David does not trivialise the power of the wicked nor their power to inflict harm. Since David cannot look to human leaders to intervene, his only recourse is to look to God. Hence the validity of the imprecation.

David uses four graphic images as he elaborates his imprecation:

- "let them vanish like water that flows away" (NIV; standard translation)
- "when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted" (NIV) OR "when he aims his arrows, let them be like headless shafts" (NASB; similar JPS) OR "like

- grass that is trodden let them wither" (Zenger) / "may they wither like trodden grass" (NEB)
- "like a snail that dissolves into slime" (Zenger; usual rendering is akin to this)
OR "like an abortive birth which melts away" (NEB)
 - "like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun" (NIV; a standard rendering)

Many of the metaphors used in verses 7-9 recognise that the only real solution to the problem of the unjust oppression of the righteous is the actual removal of the wicked who viciously persecute them. Hence the prayer that the wicked vanish like water that runs away (a metaphor for death⁸)⁹ or, expressing his contempt for them, that being such slimy snails they might dissolve into slime. Complementing these metaphors is the desire to see the wicked lose their power to cause harm, hence the prayer that arrows fired by the wicked be blunted (ESV; NIV) or have no force (Tate) or be headless shafts (NASB). It is clear that these metaphors are not meant to be construed literally, as indicated by "like the stillborn child who never sees the sun" (or "like an aborted fetus which never saw the sun", Tate, 82). The reality, of course, is that, as verse 3 recognises, these people were well and truly born into the world. The sentiment, therefore, is along these lines: "Oh, that it might be possible to turn the clock back so that they were never born!"

Verse 9 can be regarded as either a continuation of the imprecation proper or as a separate statement which stresses the certainty of the eventual destruction of the wicked. It involves a further image:

"Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns - whether they be green or dry - the wicked will be swept away" (NIV) OR "Before they can put forth thorns like a briar: whether green or ablaze, may they be swept away!" (Zenger) OR "All unawares, may they be rooted up like a thorn-bush, like weeds which a man angrily clears away!" (NEB) OR "Before your pots can feel the thorns, He will sweep it away with a whirlwind, the raw and the burning alike" (JPS).

Kirkpatrick (330) understands the imagery as follows:

The travellers have lighted a fire of dry thorns or brambles under their cooking pots. It blazes up rapidly, but even so, before the pots are heated and the meat in them cooked, a sudden whirlwind sweeps away the fire and undoes their work. The fire represents the malicious will of the evildoers, the pots with the meat the plans which they are devising: but let them work never so rapidly, the whirlwind of divine judgment will annihilate their schemes.¹⁰

All of these images presuppose that the establishment of a just society in which leaders rule and judge righteously requires the removal of the wicked, especially wicked leaders who undermine such a society by the evil and deceitfulness of their unjust judgments.¹¹ The wicked may be like mighty flood waters in the day of their power but David prays for the day when these flood waters will recede and run away. The wicked aim their arrows of unjust judgments at the righteous and David prays that their arrows might lack the pointed end; that they would not cause the destruction intended. The wicked in their deceit are like slimy snails and David prays that they will dissolve in their own slime. The evil of the wicked dates from their birth (v3) and David accordingly views them as those who should never have been born and prays that they will be like the stillborn who will not live to see the light of day in the new society which God will establish.

The Delight of the Righteous in the Destruction of the Wicked

The poetic genre of the psalms must not be forgotten in approaching the graphic images of the righteous rejoicing at the sight of God's vengeance being effected on the wicked and of the righteous bathing their feet in the blood of the wicked (v10).

The notion of the righteous delighting in the destruction of the wicked is not merely an Old Testament concept, as some commentators erroneously think - see, for example, Revelation 19:1-2, 17-21. The preceding analysis makes it abundantly clear that this is not a vindictive pleasure but that this delight results from the knowledge that the death of the wicked now clears the way for the establishment of a just society truly subject to God's own control. As Kirkpatrick expresses it:

God has proclaimed, "Vengeance is mine" (Deut xxxii.35; cp. Nah i.2); in other words the time must come when evil can no longer be tolerated but must be extirpated (2 Thes. i.8); and the righteous cannot be rejoice at the triumph of good over evil and the proof that God is true to His revealed character as a just Judge and sovereign Ruler. It is not for them to usurp God's function and avenge themselves, but they must rejoice when right is vindicated.

Similarly, Calvin explains:

That cruel satisfaction which too many feel when they see their enemies destroyed, is the result of the unholy passions of hatred, anger, or impatience, inducing an inordinate desire of revenge. So far as corruption is suffered to operate in this manner, there can be no right or acceptable exercise. On the other hand, when one is led by a holy zeal to sympathise with the justness of that vengeance which God may have inflicted, his joy will be as pure in beholding the retribution of the wicked, as his desire for their conversion and salvation was strong and unfeigned.

The second image likens the righteous to victorious warriors walking through a blood-soaked battleground. Again the underlying idea is not one of taking sadistic pleasure in the downfall of one's enemies, but rather that of the vindication of the righteous. Nor does this image carry any expectation that God's vengeance will be effected through militant action on the part of the righteous. In a sermon on Psalm 58 Bonhoeffer comments on this image of the righteous bathing their feet in the blood of the wicked:

Brothers and sisters, if we are still evasive there, we have understood nothing of it at all. Nothing less than God and his righteousness is at stake here. The godless must die so that God's justice may be triumphant. Human friendship and human sympathy are no longer at issue here. The only thing that matters is that God wins the victory in the end.¹²

The Reward of the Righteous

This is but another way of speaking of the vindication of the righteous. What is the point of living a righteous life in a society where the wicked flourish and the righteous are victimised? The very commitment to living a life of righteousness demands the belief expressed by David in this psalm that God is in control, whatever might otherwise appear to the case, and will ultimately reverse all wrongs to establish a just society.

¹ *Psalms 51-100*, 84.

² *Psalms*, 202.

³ The AV rendering "congregation" is without foundation. Harman, 217.

⁴ So Clifford (63) thinks in terms of “the demonic forces that were popularly imagined to control human destinies.” This view is often based on a particular, but disputable reading of Deuteronomy 32:8-9 (see Kirkpatrick, 327), with Psalm 82 seen as drawing on the same source. In the MT and Dead Sea Scrolls Deuteronomy 32:8-9 speaks of humanity being divided up “according to the number of the sons of God.” From this has come the view that God has assigned to divine beings or angels the responsibility of ensuring justice is carried out among the people under their care. But this interpretation relies on exploiting the ambiguity of this text and can find no substantial support elsewhere in Scripture.

⁵ So Rogerson, summarized by Tate, 83.

⁶ Contra Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) 36-37. Zenger fails to see the continuity of thought in the depiction of the wicked leaders in this psalm.

⁷ Kirkpatrick, *Psalms XLII-LXXXIX. Books II & III*, 326.

⁸ Harman, 218.

⁹ Calvin thinks this image expresses David’s prayer that the wicked be removed swiftly. John Calvin, *Psalm 58*. <http://sacred-texts.com/chr/calvin/cc09/cc09023.htm> Downloaded 7/3/2010.

¹⁰ Cf. Calvin: “God, in the whirlwind of his anger, would carry away the wicked like flesh not yet boiled, which may be said scarcely to have felt the heat of the fire.”

¹¹Cf. Zenger, 38.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Sermon on a Psalm of Vengeance” in *A Bonhoeffer Sermon* (trans. Donald Bloesch; ed. F. Burton Nelson) 470. <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jan1982/v38-4-article3.htm> Downloaded 7/3/2010.