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THE "VENGEFUL" PSALMS

Vengeance over his enemies is continually being sought by the psalmist, cf. Pss. xvii ; xxxiv ; li ; lviii ; lxxviii.23-9 ; cviii.6-20 ; cxxxvi, etc. These sentiments seem unchristian and wrong. It is no answer to say that we are today no better than the psalmist because we do not claim divine inspiration for our defective desires. The point is how do we reconcile these sentiments with the divine authorship? There are various considerations which may help to put things in a different light.

God's interests are identified with those of Israel or the psalmist in particular. God had chosen Israel so that true religion might be preserved by identifying his interests with those of the nation. If Israel remained true to him, He on his part promised to protect them from their enemies. This meant defeating and even destroying Israel's enemies at times. This was regarded by Israel as just punishment for their idolatry. "Pour forth thy wrath upon the Gentiles who know thee not", Ps. lxxviii.6. God's enemies are those of Israel and vice versa. There is no real distinction. When the psalmist prays for vengeance on his enemies he is not doing this merely to get rid of those who stand in his way. On the contrary it is a desire to see these people punished for their sins against God. We can see from the historical Books that frequently the nations destroyed by Israel were so destroyed because of the abominations they practised, and not merely because they stood in Israel's way. This identification is to be found not only in the psalms which deal collectively with the problem but also in the individual psalms. The true Israelite regarded himself as the true representative of Yahweh.

Even granting that the psalmist is asking for punishment for sin, the question will still be put, is this a justifiable request? Should he not rather ask mercy for them as Christ did on the cross? The answer is, briefly, that forgiveness of the latter kind was unknown till Christ came to teach it to us. The psalmist was a man of his time. He lived under a law which was itself imperfect—far less perfect than the law of the New Testament. Love of one's enemies was not taught in the Old Testament. This was a New Testament development. Hate was not taught either but, as we shall see, it could easily follow. Further, although we should not normally invoke God's vengeance on sinners as it is invoked in some of the psalms, nevertheless we should not go to the other extreme and assert that it is wrong. It is imperfect

but not wrong. We should further recall the historical circumstances of the event under consideration. It often happens that it throws much light on the sentiments expressed.

This problem of the "imprecatory" psalms (as they are called) is part of the larger problem of the imperfect morality of the Old Testament as a whole. Frequently we do not know the circumstances of the psalm, at least not with any certainty, but we do know the circumstances in which similar sentiments were uttered frequently at other times. The prophetic Books are full of them and there are numerous instances in the historical Books.

What are we to think of God's action in exterminating nations? Sometimes it looks as if the nation is being destroyed for political reasons only, e.g. 1 Kings xv.2, yet *Deuteronomy* points out that they are being destroyed for their sins and because they have led or will lead Israel into sin, if they have any contact with them. We may mention the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrha (Gen. xviii.20). And if it be argued that there were doubtless innocent children in those cities we must recognise that the Author of life can take away life when he wills, just as he sends lesser ills for his greater honour and glory, cf. Book of *Job*.

A further question is perhaps not quite so easy to answer. Granted that God may so act, what are we to think of men exterminating men, women and children in the name of God and apparently at his express command? There are some who say that this is not reconcilable with his goodness, and that perhaps Israel mistakenly thought they were acting as God's instrument in this matter when in fact they were only serving their own interests.

There are very numerous passages in the Old Testament in which explicit commands are given to Israel to destroy her enemies. We cannot believe that such commands were conveyed at the time under any mistaken impression that they came from God when in fact they did not. On the other hand, we must not forget that there was then no clear distinction between the interests of the nation and the interests of God. It was in fact by means of this identification of interests that God hoped, so to speak, to keep Israel faithful. In view of this identification and because of the tenacity of Israelite tradition, some writers have asked whether all the express commands of this kind are to be taken as having been received directly from God at that apparent moment with all the attendant details. In view of what we now know, for example, about the composition of *Deuteronomy* it is asked whether it is not rather a case of particular commands composed by the writer on the basis of and in the general line of the Law and Tradition and derivable from God's original instructions to his people. Whether

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such instances occur in a particular Book would depend of course on the nature of the literary form of that Book.

That God used Israel and did not destroy her was not because of her innocence. Many times he threatened to destroy her for her sins, but there was always a mediator at hand to remind him of his Covenant with Israel and that he owed it to his glory to allow Israel to survive "lest the Gentiles say : Where is their God". So Israel survived, not because better than her enemies but because God is faithful to his promises.

Indeed, God never tires of repeating that he chose Israel not because of their good qualities but rather because they had little to recommend them—in order that his glory might shine forth from his dealings with them.

If we admit God's right to take away life as he thinks fit, it is hard to deny that he could use men as his instruments in this matter. Many times, of course, the instrument appears to have gone beyond any orders he may have received from God, as, for example, Jehu in iv Kings ix and x.

One difficulty in accepting this use of men by God is that it seems to us to be inculcating a spirit of revenge, not to say a thirst for blood. But we have said that it was an age of great imperfection during which certain things had to be tolerated in order to secure the more fundamental principles. Thus God knew that unless Israel kept herself absolutely away from the surrounding nations she would be contaminated and all true belief would once again be lost. But if such isolation were to be achieved it would probably mean that a certain degree of antipathy to other nations would be engendered. This had to be overlooked until Christ came to teach us the full revelation of God. To have told Israel to love her enemies would have meant only that she would have fraternised even more than she did with her neighbours and have gone even more thoroughly "a-whoring after false gods". The fact is that, up to the Exile, God's strict instructions to avoid and exterminate her enemies were consistently ignored or minimised with the expected result which God had foretold, namely gross idolatry in Israel and all kinds of immorality. It was only after the Exile that Israel finally clung to God, just as it was only after the Exile that Israel developed that hatred of the Gentiles with which we are so familiar. The latter had to be overlooked for the sake of the former ; just as other imperfections had to be ignored to avoid greater evils, e.g. polygamy and divorce to avoid wife-murder. As Our Lord said, divorce was allowed by Moses because of the hardness of men's hearts but from the beginning it was not so.

If God did in fact use men as his instruments in destroying other

nations then he had to tolerate the desire for their destruction. It was too early for the distinction between hating the sin and loving the sinner. A command from God to destroy a nation was not accompanied by a command to hate them but clearly it was only a short step to take and the time was not ripe for insisting on loving one's enemies. Again, the desire to see God's enemies punished is not the same as hating them. God could inspire the former desire but not the hate. However, Israel would not have troubled to make the distinction and no doubt God tolerated that attitude.

If, finally, it be objected that many expressions of such desires seem unnecessarily cruel, e.g. Ps. cviii.6-20 or Ps. cxxxvi.9, we may observe that the Psalms are poetry and a good many expressions may well be figurative. The psalmist speaks of vengeance in terms of contemporary conduct, and we know how cruel they could be in those days. Hyperbole is often used to describe God's vengeance on Israel's enemies.

PAROCHUS