The Psalms of Vengeance: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theological Interpretation of the Psalms

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Introduction

While the Lutheran Service Book contains several Psalms printed toward the beginning, Psalm 58 is not one of the psalms included. Why exclude Psalm 58 from a Lutheran book of liturgy? Because it is considered a “psalm of vengeance,” and the psalms of vengeance make us uncomfortable to pray and recite. Because of our discomfort, we do not take the psalms of vengeance to be ours – to be part of “our” Scripture. We tend to stay away from the psalms that do not meet our own expectations for what Christianity should look like. We expect forgiveness from God, not a spirit of vengefulness.

However, the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, articulates a position that includes – rather than excludes – the psalms of vengeance in his theological reasoning. Bonhoeffer offers a Christological interpretation of the psalms of vengeance. Bonhoeffer reads the Psalms in terms of how they shape the act of forgiveness in relation to what he identifies as the proper form of prayer. He actively applies this psalm-shaped act of forgiveness to how we should understand ourselves as “the enemy,” as well as how we think of others as the enemy. We see this especially in his interpretations of “the psalms

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1 Luther Service Book, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006). This is the book of liturgy for the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. In response to an earlier draft of this essay, Stanley Hauerwas says: “I hadn’t known that the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church left out Psalm 58. That they leave it out, as you show so clearly, has deep Christological implications. I always try to remember that the one who suffers our sinfulness indicated in the psalms is Christ. If the psalms are not read Christologically, then indeed they are deeply problematic” (Personal Correspondence, September 28, 2013). Hauerwas’ statements provide a good summary of what I hope other readers see as well.

2 Within the Lutheran tradition, the phrase “enemies of God” usually refers to Martin Luther’s reflections on “enemies” in his Commentary on Romans; Luther writes: “In [Romans] chapter 2, St. Paul extends his rebuke to those who appear outwardly pious or who sin secretly. Such were the Jews, and such are all hypocrites still, who live virtuous lives but without eagerness and love; in their heart they are enemies of God’s law and like to judge other people. That is the way with hypocrites: they think that they are pure but are actually full of greed, hate, pride and all sorts of filth (Matthew 23). These are they who despise God’s goodness and, by their hardness of heart, heap wrath upon themselves. Thus Paul explains the law rightly when he lets no one remain without sin but proclaims the wrath of God to all who want to live virtuously by nature or by free will. He makes them out to be no better than public sinners; he says they are hard of heart and unrepentant.” For Luther, we are all enemies of God; when we are justified by grace, through Jesus Christ, we are made righteous in God’s eyes; however, when those justified by grace “judge other people” than the justified act like “enemies of God.” In other words, a Christian is both an enemy of God and righteous in the eyes of God – which remains deeply consistent with Luther’s theology of justification that claims we become “saints” yet remain “sinners.”
of vengeance.”

Within his commentary and sermon on the psalms of vengeance, Bonhoeffer maintains a strategy that prevents self-deception in two different directions: (a) about our status as sinners and, therefore, enemies of God, and (b) concerning what it means when we forgive our enemies. Bonhoeffer reminds Christians that they remain sinners and, thus, enemies of God. He also reminds Christians that, as human beings, we tend to exaggerate our own abilities to “forgive those who sin against us” (Matthew 6.12).

In order to appreciate the work that Bonhoeffer accomplishes in his interpretations of the psalms of vengeance, we need to look to his strict understanding concerning the content and form of prayer. Toward this end, I first outline Bonhoeffer’s understanding of prayer – as found in his most famous book: The Cost of Discipleship. Second, I turn to Bonhoeffer’s introduction to his commentary on the Psalms – which he titles The Prayerbook of the Bible – as a way to gain further clarity on the nature and purpose of prayer. Third, I present his general theological statements on the psalms of vengeance and then focus my attention on his particular interpretation of Psalm 58. Lastly, I suggest that Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the psalms of vengeance is an instance of what I call hermeneutical patience. Hermeneutical patience comes from Bonhoeffer’s own reflections on the significance of Christians reading and studying the Old Testament. My final claim concerns how Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the psalms display the fruitfulness of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR), because they (a) provide a non-supersessionist approach to the psalms of vengeance and (b) confirm that the hermeneutical patience involved in SR is the kind of patience Bonhoeffer wants Christians to cultivate and display. In other words, Bonhoeffer’s theology of prayer combined with his interpretation of the psalms of vengeance mixed with his Old Testament-centered hermeneutic leads to a clarification of the pragmatic and theological value of the practice of SR for Christians.

The Problem of Prayer in The Cost of Discipleship

Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers a theologically strict view of prayer: God remains the sole object of prayer; human desires and volition have no place within prayer. Prayer

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3 Within the Christian tradition, the psalms of vengeance include: Psalm 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21, 23, 28, 31, 35, 36, 40, 41, 44, 52, 55, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, & 137.

4 For the clearest explanation of why Christians should not over-exaggerate their abilities to forgive, see Charles Mathewes, Understanding Religious Ethics, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 118-132 (Mathewes’ chapter on “Forgiveness” sparked my interest in a philosophical investigation into the question of forgiveness). The theology of the Christian understanding of forgiveness is found in the grammatical distinction between “I forgive you” vs. “You are forgiven.” According to Mathewes, the second proposition captures the Christian position – which also depicts why an individual Christian should not over-exaggerate their own ability to forgive.

5 I begin the essay with the particular audience and designation of “Lutheran,” but I draw conclusions for Christians everywhere and of all stripes. My reasoning follows a method of induction, from the particular to the general, that is not encouraged or validated within the practice of Scriptural Reasoning. However, I employ this method of reasoning because I believe that Bonhoeffer’s rationale applies more broadly than the designator of “Lutheran” Christians.
helps us recognize how we are the “enemies” of God and, therefore, how we remain in the position of requiring a mediator between God and humanity. Jesus Christ serves as this mediator. In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer makes the claim that, because of human sinfulness and the conceit, greed, and selfishness it causes, Christians ought to refrain from praying out of their desires, needs, and sense of self-worth. A few sentences from Bonhoeffer’s Discipleship provides a sense of what he means: “True prayer is done in secret”; “True prayer does not depend either on the individual or the whole body of the faithful, but solely upon the knowledge that our Heavenly Father knows our needs” – which makes “God the sole object of our prayer, and frees us from a false confidence in our own prayerful efforts”; finally, God never needs “our prayers, but they are the means by which the disciples become partakers in the heavenly treasure for which they pray.”

Bonhoeffer calls the act of prayer into question – which leaves some to think that we should not pray at all while others recognize that Bonhoeffer wants us to understand that prayer is participatory and not about human desire or reasoning.

Bonhoeffer offers three directives for praying properly. By praying properly, I mean: how to pray without committing idolatry. First, and most important, “Jesus told his disciples not only how to pray, but also what to pray”; Bonhoeffer argues that the Lord’s prayer is not simply a pattern of prayer but “the way Christians must pray.”

Christians must pray these words in order to escape the temptation toward idolatry in prayer. The second directive is that we do not bring our desires and reasons to God but, rather, our guilt: “Thus they bring all their guilt before God and pray...for forgiveness.”

Third, Christians pray only in the form of petition: “Thus the essence of Christian prayer is not general adoration, but definite concrete petition” – which means that the “right way to approach God is to stretch out our hands and ask of One who we know has the heart of a Father.”

At the least, Bonhoeffer leaves us with a healthy skepticism toward prayer: are our prayers about us, or do they uphold God as the object of prayer? At the most, Bonhoeffer forces us to re-think the prayers that we offer before a meal, in our private

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7 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 166-167. I mentioned that Charles Mathewes’ explanation of forgiveness was part of the reason for writing this essay; another motivation for this investigation concerns a set of questions that arose from teaching Bonhoeffer’s Cost of Discipleship at King of Glory Lutheran Church in Williamsburg, Virginia. Some of the congregants puzzled over what Bonhoeffer might mean when he talks about how our prayers are too self-involved, which leads Bonhoeffer to recommend that when we pray we use only the words of Scripture: “what should we pray if we can’t pray what’s on our hearts?” They were put at ease when Rev. Bill Harmon reminded them that there are a lot of Psalms that they can and should say as their prayers! King of Glory is a congregation in the Missouri Synod, yet Rev. Harmon suggested that they pray all of the Psalms.

8 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 165.


10 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 164.
time, and before ecclesial and institutional events. Christians should pray, but Bonhoeffer comes close to concluding that they should use only the content and form of the Lord’s Prayer. If this is right, then the question becomes: what else can Christians offer as prayer?

**Bonhoeffer’s The Prayerbook of the Bible**

In his introduction to the Psalms, Bonhoeffer writes: “‘Lord, teach us to pray!’ So spoke the disciples to Jesus. In doing so, they were acknowledging that they were not able to pray on their own; they had to learn to pray.” Bonhoeffer recognizes that this sounds contradictory to us, because we assume that prayer does not need to be learnt but, rather, overflows from the good intentions of the heart. He argues, “But this is a dangerous error, which is certainly very widespread among Christians today, to imagine that it is natural for the heart to pray. We…confuse wishing, hoping, sighing, lamenting, rejoicing – all of which the heart can certainly do on its own – with praying.”

According to Bonhoeffer, this confuses the nature and purpose of prayer: prayer is not about “pouring out one’s heart” but “finding the way to and speaking with God” no matter if one’s “heart is full or empty.” Bonhoeffer observes that no individual can learn, on their own, how to speak properly to and with God. With this point, Bonhoeffer comes full-circle: the disciples teach us first that we need Jesus Christ to teach us to pray.

Within Bonhoeffer’s theological reasoning, there is no binary supersessionism between Jesus Christ as the Word of God for Christians and the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God for Christians and Jews. Bonhoeffer writes, “God’s speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures.” He continues, “If we want to pray with assurance and joy, then the word of Holy Scripture must be the firm foundation of our prayer.”

Should Christians offer any part of Scripture as a prayer? In answering this question, Bonhoeffer argues: “there is in the Holy Scriptures one book that differs from all other books of the Bible in that it contains only prayers…the Psalms.”

How does praying the Psalms relate to Bonhoeffer’s Christological understanding of prayer, where Christians should pray only the content and form of the Lord’s Prayer? To pray the Psalms, for Bonhoeffer, is to pray “in and with Jesus Christ.”

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11 For an interpretation that defends and extends Bonhoeffer’s theology along these lines, see Jonathan Malesic’s *Secret Faith in the Public Square: An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 121-160.


16 Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 156.

17 Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 156.

Bonhoeffer recommends that we “ask how we can understand the Psalms as God’s Word,” and then (and only then) are we able to “pray them with Jesus Christ.”

For Bonhoeffer’s Christological understanding of prayer, what matters most is that our prayers remain in continuity with God’s intentions as revealed in Jesus Christ. Because of this, Bonhoeffer concludes: “Thus it does not matter whether the Psalms express exactly what we feel in our heart at the moment we pray. Perhaps it is precisely the case that we must pray against our own heart in order to pray rightly [in and with Jesus Christ].”

Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the Psalms, and the significance of the Lord’s Prayer in relation to the Psalms, displays logical and theological consistency between The Cost of Discipleship and The Prayerbook of the Bible. According to Bonhoeffer, the Lord’s Prayer serves as a summary of the complex and multi-faceted prayers of the Psalms. Bonhoeffer also claims that the Lord’s Prayer serves as the summary for all of “the prayers of the Holy Scriptures,” not the prayers of the Psalms alone. The Lord’s Prayer is the summary of every prayer that Scripture offers, but it is especially helpful as a summary of the Psalms. From this emphasis on how the Lord’s Prayer provides a summary of all of the prayers of Scripture, Bonhoeffer concludes: “The Lord’s Prayer thus becomes the touchstone for whether we pray in the name of Jesus Christ or in our own name.”

Bonhoeffer’s approach to the Psalms does not violate any of his warnings about prayer found in The Cost of Discipleship, which provides ground to make the judgment that the Psalms represent the prayers that God wants us to offer – rather than the prayers that we choose to offer to God.

God intends the Psalms as “the word of God’s dear Son.” Bonhoeffer means that Jesus Christ is the living and performative embodiment of the prayerfulness of the Psalms. To pray the Psalms is to confess what God does for us through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He writes, “The Psalms have been given to us precisely so that we can learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ.”

The Psalms teach us to remember the character of Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer on the Psalms of Vengeance

Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the category of “enemies” within the Psalms is the most relevant aspect of The Prayerbook of the Bible for the purposes of this investigation concerning the psalms of vengeance. When approaching and praying the Psalms that

21 There are a total of 150 Psalms.
23 Bonhoeffer, Prayerbook of the Bible, 158.
focus on vengeance toward enemies, Bonhoeffer reminds us that the intentions and motives of the Psalmist do not matter for purposes of prayer; rather, “the content of the prayer” is what matters most.\(^{26}\) When we focus our attention on the content of the Psalms, instead of authorial intention, we find:

The enemies referred to here are enemies of God’s cause, who lay hands on us because of God. Therefore it is nowhere a matter of personal conflict. Nowhere do those who pray these psalms want to take revenge into their own hands; they leave vengeance to God alone…. Therefore they must abandon all personal thoughts of revenge and must be free from their own thirst for revenge; otherwise vengeance is not seriously left to God.\(^{27}\)

Bonhoeffer calls on Christians, who pray the psalms of vengeance, to think about their own dispositions and perspectives. Enemies are not “my enemies” or “our enemies”; the Psalms are more objective than such a personal understanding of enemy allows. The enemies identified and named in the Psalms are the enemies of God.

Furthermore, we are the enemies found within these Psalms. Bonhoeffer writes,

The prayer for the vengeance of God is the prayer for the carrying out of God’s righteousness in the judgment of sin. This judgment must be made known if God stands by God’s Word, and it must be made known to those upon whom it falls; with my sin I myself belong under this judgment. I have no right to want to hinder this judgment. It must be fulfilled for God’s sake.\(^ {28}\)

Bonhoeffer’s argument that we are the enemies, as found within the psalms of vengeance, prevents any element of self-deception and self-righteousness when interpreting the psalms of vengeance. We might be tempted to think that we are righteous and, therefore, make judgment against the enemy on God’s behalf. However, we would be wrong to think this: we are and remain the enemy of God.\(^ {29}\)

Bonhoeffer’s reasoning on “God’s righteousness in the judgment of sin” leads to a robust Christological understanding of the psalms of vengeance. I offer a lengthy quotation in order to lay out, on Bonhoeffer’s terms, his Christological interpretation of these Psalms.\(^ {30}\)

God’s vengeance did not fall on the sinners, but on the only sinless one, the Son of God, who stood in the place of sinners. Jesus Christ bore the vengeance of God, which the psalm asks to be carried out. Christ calmed God’s anger against sin and prayed in the hour of the carrying out of the divine judgment: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing!” No one other than he, who himself bore the wrath of God, could

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29 On this point, Bonhoeffer remains in continuity with Luther’s *Commentary on Romans* where Luther argues that those who are justified by faith, through Jesus Christ, are both the enemies of God and righteous in the eyes of God.

30 Later in this essay, I suggest the importance of having Bonhoeffer’s voice “at the table” within the practice of Scriptural Reasoning; these lengthy quotations are intended as an experiment for what Bonhoeffer might say while reading the psalms of vengeance in a context of scriptural reasoning.
pray like this. That was the end of all false thoughts about the love of a God who does not take sin very seriously. God hates and judges the enemies of God in the only righteous one, the one who prays for forgiveness for God’s enemies. Only in the cross of Jesus Christ is the love of God to be found.

So the psalm of vengeance leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God that forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God by myself, only the crucified Christ can; and I can forgive through him. So the carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all in Jesus Christ.

...I pray the psalm of wrath in the certainty of its wonderful fulfillment; I leave the vengeance in God’s hands and pray for the carrying out of God’s justice to all enemies. I know that God has remained true and has secured justice in wrathful judgment on the cross, and that this wrath has become grace and joy for us. Jesus Christ himself prays for the execution of God’s vengeance on his body, and thus Christ leads me back daily to the gravity and the grace of his cross for me and all the enemies of God.31

He concludes:

...I can believe God’s love and forgive enemies only through the cross of Christ, through the carrying out of God’s vengeance. The cross of Jesus applies to everyone. ...The New Testament...in no way differs...from the Old Testament, about this curse that falls on those who hate Christ; but the New Testament speaks in addition about the joy of the Christian community on the day when God will carry out the final judgment.... In this way the crucified Jesus teaches us to pray truly the psalms of wrath.32

Bonhoeffer’s theological interpretation of the psalms of vengeance involves (a) the recognition that we are the enemies and (b) a Christological pattern of reasoning concerning how Jesus Christ takes God’s vengeance upon himself. As “the enemy,” we deserve God’s vengeance. However, we do not get what we deserve; instead, Jesus Christ takes upon himself what we deserve: God’s vengeance. In this sense, Bonhoeffer finds that the Psalms point us toward Jesus Christ’s redemptive work.

**Bonhoeffer’s Sermon on Psalm 58**

In his sermon on Psalm 58, Bonhoeffer comments that this particular “psalm of vengeance is the prayer of the innocent.”33 Who are the innocent? Following his strict view of prayer, Bonhoeffer answers this question: “we sinners do not pray this psalm of vengeance, innocence alone prays with this psalm.”34 What, or whom, is this “innocence alone”? Bonhoeffer reasons that the “innocence of Christ steps before the world and

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31 Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 175. Note that Bonhoeffer includes himself as an enemy of God in this passage.


accuses it. And when Christ accuses the world of sin, are we not ourselves also among the accused?”

We find answers to these questions in Bonhoeffer’s verse-by-verse commentary of Psalm 58.

Psalm 58:1 – “Are you then dumb, that you will not speak what is right, and judge the children of men with equity?” Bonhoeffer focuses upon the word, “children,” and equates the meaning of children in this verse with “the poor and afflicted.” He does not perform a logic of substitution; he thinks that the verse means children, but it also involves “the poor and afflicted.” He understands the lack of “equity” as forms of injustice, and all forms of injustice lead to (what he calls) “an evil time.” In this “evil time,” the unjust remain silent in the face of their own inequities/injustices. Because the children – the poor and afflicted – are children of God, then God becomes vengeful toward the unjust.

Psalm 58:2 – “No; you devise evil in your hearts, and your hands deal out violence in the land.” Bonhoeffer argues that political authorities tend toward silence concerning injustice while simultaneously continuing acts of violence. While the rest of us blame political authorities for this problem, all of us are at fault because we continue in our sinful human nature. The innocence of Christ means that all of us stand under God’s judgment.

Psalm 58:3 – “The wicked are perverse from the womb; liars go astray from their birth.” Bonhoeffer contrasts “the wicked” from the category of innocence, and he explains how innocence responds to “the wicked.” He claims that only innocence grasps the dark mysteries of the world; only innocence understands how Satan takes hold of human beings in the womb, even before our births; and in “this abyss of understanding,” innocence alone “achieves perfect peace.” Bonhoeffer’s interpretive strategy for this verse involves making his own contrast between the innocent and the wicked and then commenting upon what innocence achieves and accomplishes in relation to the results of the wicked. There are two ways to take Bonhoeffer’s interpretive strategy. First, we might make the judgment that Bonhoeffer misinterprets the verse – that he is not careful exegetically – because he comments upon his forced or invented distinction rather than the content and words of the verse. Alternatively, we might recognize that Bonhoeffer interprets this difficult verse in light of the virtue of hope. The verse, on its own, welcomes despair. Bonhoeffer does not counter the content of the verse; rather, for purposes of a Christian sermon, he displays hopefulness in his act of interpretation.

Psalm 58:4 & 5 – “They are venomous as a serpent, they are like the deaf adder which stops its ears, which does not heed the voice of the charmer, no matter how skillful his charming.” Bonhoeffer’s explanation of these two verses is quite simple: he argues

Bonhoeffer, “On Psalm 58,” 76


Bonhoeffer, “On Psalm 58”: “If the mouths of the rulers of the world are silent about injustice at the same time their hands are dealing out violence, how frightful are the lawless actions of these human hands, causing suffering and bodily pain. …Let [us] fall into the hands of God, but not the hands of men! Christ speaks here if we can still hear it. He underwent the unjust judgment, he fell into the hands of men. It is innocence here that accuses the lawless world. But we sinners encounter only the just wrath of God” (77).

that these verses prove that no human craft or skill can defeat the serpent. The only practice that humans have that works is the act of prayer. Through prayer, we call upon God “to take vengeance against the enemies.”

Psalm 58:6 – “O God, break their teeth in their mouths; pull the fangs of the young lions, O Lord.” According to Bonhoeffer, once we call upon the vengeance of God then we necessarily renounce our own quest for vengeance. How do we know that we seek God’s vengeance and not our own vengeance? Bonhoeffer writes, “the [person] who consigns vengeance to God alone is prepared to suffer and to endure, without a thought of [their] own revenge, without hatred or recrimination.” This person becomes “gentle in spirit, peaceable, loving the enemy.”

Psalm 58:7-9 – “Let them vanish like water that runs off; let the arrows they aim break into two. Let them be like the snail that melts away, like stillborn child that sees the sun. Before they bear fruit, let them be cut down like a brier; like the thorns and thistles let them be swept away.” How do we know that the vengeance is God’s and not ours? Our human strategies and weapons will not work in the ways that we craft and plan. If we do not fight our enemies in the ways that we arrange and desire, then “God’s anger will not allow the plans of his enemies to come to fruition.” The “wicked will be swept away with force,” and the force might be implemented through us, but it will be “God’s punishment.”

Lastly, it will come about “more quickly than we anticipate” with our own military strategies and weapons.

Psalm 58:10 – “The righteous will be glad when they see the vengeance; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.” Interpreting this verse invites immoderate celebration in victory (what we call jus post bellum, standards of justice after war), as well as different forms of self-deception concerning justice and righteousness.

Bonhoeffer’s interpretation attempts to hold off both of these temptations. He writes, “This [verse] concerns God and his righteousness only. The wicked must die so that God’s righteousness may triumph. This does not have to do with human friendship and human compassion. It has to do only with God maintaining the victory.” At this point in his interpretation, Bonhoeffer turns to a robust Christological reading of Psalm 58: “God’s righteous vengeance on the wicked has already been achieved. The blood of the wicked has already flowed. God’s judgment on death upon godless humanity has been spoken. God’s righteousness is fulfilled on the cross of Christ.” He continues, “Jesus Christ died the death of the godless; he was stricken by God’s wrath and vengeance. His blood is the blood which God’s righteousness required for the transgression of his commandments. God’s vengeance has been carried out in the midst of the earth in a manner more fearful than even this psalm knows about. Christ, the innocent, died the death of the wicked, so that we need not die.” Bonhoeffer concludes his interpretation of


this verse with the claim: “Christ bore the whole vengeance of God for all.” For Bonhoeffer, a Christological interpretation of this psalm prevents the self-deception of thinking that we are “the righteous” who “will be glad when they see the vengeance.” All of humanity remain in the category of “the wicked,” and Jesus Christ – “the innocent” – dies for “the wicked.” While humanity ought to be glad, through gratitude toward the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, our gladness does not come from our own righteousness. Instead, it comes from the recognition that even in our wickedness Jesus Christ died for us.  

Psalm 58:11 – “And they will say, ‘Surely, there is a reward for the righteous; surely, there is a God who rules in the earth.’” Bonhoeffer maintains his Christological interpretation of this verse and says that when we find ourselves doubting “God’s righteousness upon [the] earth,” we should “look upon the cross of Christ: [where] there is judgment, there is pardon.” Bonhoeffer returns to the question of how this psalm becomes a prayer that Christians must declare and recite. He writes, “Christ prays this psalm as our representative. He accuses the wicked, he calls down upon them God’s vengeance and his righteousness, and he gives himself for all the wicked in his innocent suffering on the cross.” He continues, “And now we too pray this psalm with him, in humble thanks that we have been granted deliverance from wrath through the cross of Christ; in the fervent plea that God will bring all of our enemies under the cross of Christ and grant them grace; in the burning desire that the day may soon come in which Christ visibly triumphs over his enemies and establishes his kingdom. Thus have we learned to pray this psalm.” If Christians believe in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross, then they should pray this psalm – and the psalms of vengeance in general. Our own insecurities and self-deception prevent us from praying these psalms in our liturgies and our prayer books, because these Psalms bluntly and honestly remind us of “who we are” and who Christ is – and what Christ accomplishes for us.

Hermeneutical Patience and Scriptural Reasoning

In his Letters and Papers from Prison, we find an exemplary passage of Bonhoeffer’s non-supersessionist hermeneutics:

My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like the Old Testament, and no wonder, I have been reading it much more than the New for the last few months. It is only when one knows the ineffability of the Name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ. It is only when one loves life and the world so much that without them everything would be gone, that one can believe in the resurrection and a new world. It is only when one submits to the law that one can speak of grace, and only when one sees he anger and wrath of God hanging like grim realities over the head of one’s enemies that one can know something of what it means to love and forgive them. I don’t think it is


45 This serves as my diagnosis of the absence of the psalms of vengeance in the Lutheran Service Book.
Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly… We live on the next to last word, and believe on the last, don’t we?  

Bonhoeffer recommends Christians read the Christian Scriptures with hermeneutical patience. The reason that it is “not Christian…to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly” is that such a desire, such a tendency, displays impatience in regards to the character and content of the Old Testament. Christianity needs the Old Testament: to not read it, to not study it with attention and care, remains sinful and vicious. By non-supersessionist hermeneutics, I mean that Bonhoeffer provides us with a theological rationale for why the New Testament does not replace the Old Testament – and, therefore, why Christianity does not supersede Israel. While Bonhoeffer articulates a Christian theology of the Jews in another essay, I find this particular passage significant because his non-supersessionism becomes a hermeneutical move that requires the virtue of patience. The practice of Scriptural Reasoning nurtures this relationship between hermeneutical patience and non-supersessionist theology.

Peter Ochs, in *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews*, outlines two different forms of Christian non-supersessionism: first, non-supersessionism based upon a hermeneutics that maintains the primacy of the Old Testament alongside a “high” Christology; second, non-supersessionism based upon the work of the Holy Spirit as the agent who maintains a political and theological relationship between Christians and Jews. Bonhoeffer’s Christological interpretation of the psalms of vengeance, and his call for Christians to read the Old Testament before encountering the New Testament, puts Bonhoeffer closest to the first kind of non-supersessionism. This

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48 Independent of Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutics, for a philosophical development of patience as a “hermeneutical virtue,” see my *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues: Humility, Patience, Prudence*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).


51 See Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 167-221. Ochs identifies these tendencies in British postliberal theologians, David Ford and Daniel Hardy.

52 What we now find in the North American postliberal theologies.
first version of non-supersessionism does not require Christians to dislocate and give up their Christological interpretations of the Old Testament. Instead, it calls for more attentive and careful interpretations of Old Testament narratives along with their Christological insights. Bonhoeffer displays this attentiveness and care in his interpretations of the psalms of vengeance.

My judgment on Bonhoeffer’s non-supersessionism is not intended to close down the discussion; rather, it provides us with a framework to raise the following questions about Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the psalms of vengeance. Does his claim that the psalms of vengeance lead “to the cross of Jesus [Christ]” help us become good readers of the psalms of vengeance, or does it display impatience toward the plain sense meaning of these difficult and uncomfortable psalms? Does his Christological reading of Psalm 58 display patience or impatience in making sense of the content of vengeance found in Psalm 58? When Bonhoeffer claims, “God’s vengeance has been carried out in the midst of the earth in a manner more fearful than even this psalm knows about,” does this display epistemological hubris and hermeneutic impatience toward the logical patterns found within Psalm 58? In other words, how does Bonhoeffer “know” the limits of what the psalms “knows”?

I remain uncertain how to answer this set of questions, but I find that Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the psalms of vengeance bring clarity to the significance of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) and why serious Christians (from a Bonhoefferian perspective) ought to participate in SR. SR nurtures conversations between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The subject matter of these conversations involves passages from the traditionally sacred texts of all three traditions. This requires practicing Jews to engage with unfamiliar passages from the New Testament and Quran. SR invites Muslims to interpret Old and New Testament passages in the presence of Christians and Jews. It allows Christians and Jews to interpret the Quran alongside Muslim participants. It obligates Christians to re-read the Old Testament and make their interpretations clear to the Jewish participants at the table; if a Christian reads an Old Testament passage in a supersessionist way, then that Christian participant should make that interpretation known clearly. However, the Christian participant ought to be ready for — and even welcome! — Jewish perspectives on and reactions to Christian supersessionist interpretations, as well as non-Christological interpretations of the same passage being studied together. The result of this particular side of the conversation is that the Christian interpreter begins to cultivate hermeneutical patience. My hope for Christian participation within SR is that hermeneutical patience will not lead to non-Christological interpretations of Old Testament passages but, rather, that it will guide us toward non-supersessionist Christological interpretations of Old Testament passages.

As a practice, SR includes — rather than excludes — scriptural passages that continue to be difficult for interpreters within the Abrahamic traditions. While this practice has received numerous explanations and justifications, none have put SR in terms of what it means for Christians to read with hermeneutical patience. By hermeneutical patience, I mean that Christians need to attend to those biblical passages that do not “fit in” with their own theological conceptions and expectations. Christians need to display hermeneutical patience, especially, in engaging with difficult texts such as the psalms of vengeance. SR provides a practice where Christians can attend to
difficult texts in a way that does not allow them to “explain away” the difficulty of the texts being studied.

SR serves as a practice that teaches Christians hermeneutical patience. Does SR, with Bonhoeffer as one of the voices around the table, make a difference for understanding Psalm 58 in terms of how to properly interpret the Old Testament Christologically? Does Bonhoeffer’s work on the Psalms contribute to thinking about how Christian interpretation of the Old Testament matters for Jewish-Christian relationships today, post-Shoah? The strength of Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of Psalm 58, in terms of SR, concerns how it provides a new reading of Psalm 58 by changing the reference of the pronoun in Psalm 58 from “them” to “us.”

The pronoun remains ambiguous in Psalm 58, and Bonhoeffer provides clarity to this ambiguity – even if such clarity serves as a statement of judgment on ourselves.

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53 On the logical significance of pronouns, see C. S. Peirce’s “New Elements,” in The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, volume 2 (1893-1913), (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 300-324. Peirce addresses the significance (semiotic meaning) of indefinite pronouns and the process of clarifying ambiguous pronouns. Bonhoeffer displays Peircean reasoning in how he shifts the indefinite pronouns found in Psalm 58 from “them” to “us.”

54 On the difference between remediable vagueness and irremediable vagueness within Scripture, see Peter Ochs’ Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998). According to Ochs, some aspects of Scripture are irremediably vague – that is, they should never be designated with a clear and distinct meaning. To so designate them violates the sacredness of Scripture. However, there are aspects of Scripture that seek clarification – these meanings are vague only for a finite amount of time. Bonhoeffer treats the pronouns in Psalm 58 as remedially vague: they are vague, which means that we should not be so confident that the pronouns clearly and distinctly refer to “them”; upon further (Christological) interpretation, we find that they are intended to be vague only for a finite amount of time – until our realization that their meaning is “us.”

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