

Article

Intercultural Worship and Decolonialization: Insights from the Book of Psalms

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Abstract: This essay unpacks the relationship between an intercultural approach to worship and the vision of decolonization. It argues that for justice and liberation to be front and center in intercultural practices, there is a need to analyze the power dynamics that are present in the midst of a diverse worshipping community. Equally important is that the vision of decolonization needs the intercultural approach because of its ability to build bridges between people who are different, so that the faith community can overcome fragmentation by experiencing truth telling, healing, and transformation. The essay goes on to suggest that the book of Psalms offers rich resources for envisioning an intercultural worship that seeks to embody alternatives to oppressive, exclusionary, and alienating politics of assimilation and segregation. The book of Psalms, which was, for the most part, composed or redacted in the shadow of different empires, proclaimed God's reign as a faith posture in the face of oppressive empires. This central motif of God's reign, which appears in psalms of lament and psalms of praise, restores the agency of the oppressed by giving them a voice and holds those who abuse their power accountable. Practices such as lament and praise allow a diverse worshipping community to pay attention to how people experience power differently, and it calls them to be authentic and truthful so that these diverse people may work together towards transformation, justice, and healing.

Keywords: worship; intercultural; decolonization; psalms; lament; praise; God's reign



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1. Introduction

The vision of forming intercultural worshipping communities focuses on the identity of faith communities in light of the increasing awareness of the injustice caused by politics of assimilation and the limitations that exist within the model of multiculturalism. In the former approach—that is, assimilation—a dominant culture is assumed, difference is perceived as a threat, and those who are different are welcomed as long as they repress their cultural identity and become absorbed by the dominant culture. Minoritized communities experienced injustice because they were expected to abandon their traditions and praxis that have sustained them throughout different periods of their history in which they experienced various forms of oppression and marginalization. In the latter approach, multiculturalism, difference is recognized and accepted, but people of different cultural backgrounds coexist on islands, with little interaction or attempts to know one another in deep and transformative ways. Tokenism, such as singing a song from a different culture, or praying a prayer in a different language, scratches the surface of encountering the other, without digging deeper or making visible the spiritualities, the struggles, the triumphs, and the stories of the communities that stand behind these songs and prayers. Intercultural approaches to worship that are concerned about the identity of a faith community seek to create mechanisms for these transformative encounters to take place by way of helping the members of a diverse community to become more competent in navigating theological and cultural sameness and difference. That is, communities that are serious about becoming interculturally competent need to continue to wrestle with the questions of how to find a common ground that does not turn unity into a hegemony of the dominant culture,

and how to celebrate, integrate, and adapt to difference so that all who are involved are mutually transformed by encountering one another, and together they may imagine new possibilities.¹ The work of interculturalism and decolonization is an ongoing journey of transformation that seeks to embody an alternative to the politics of assimilation and segregation in a polarized world.

2. Interculturalism and Decolonialism: Conversation Partners

A crucial concern that relates to this intercultural approach about the life, worship, and witness of the church suggests that the “intercultural language” does not go far enough in naming and resisting racism and other forms of oppression, and that the “intercultural” model may end up reproducing the dominant culture; it might turn minoritized communities, the ethnic other, and their traditions into a commodity consumed by people with power, or it might force minoritized communities to lose the space in which they preserve the peculiarities of their cultural identities. The validity of these concerns resides in the acknowledgment that whenever diverse people form a worshipping community, there are power dynamics at play that shape their relationships and practices. Therefore, while it is important to reiterate the point that being intercultural does not mean a loss of one’s identity and traditions, there is, still, a necessity for a complementary approach to the intercultural one that analyzes power dynamics, that seeks to repair the damage of the past, and that centers the work of justice and liberation at the heart of intercultural encounters. Equally important, the work of analyzing power dynamics, striving towards reparation and healing, and envisioning processes of liberation and justice needs the intercultural approach that allows for diverse embodied experiences to converse and to build bridges of understanding for the sake of transformation and overcoming fragmentation in the society or the church. This way, an intercultural church lives up to Hyung Jin Kim Sun’s assessment that “intercultural engagement and practice in a white dominant society and churches is at the same time an inherently anti-racist engagement and practice. This means that becoming an intercultural church is becoming an anti-racist church as well” (Sun 2022, p. 146). For an intercultural worshipping community to become anti-racist, it must engage insights from the work of postcolonial and decolonial analyses.

In some of its manifestations, postcolonial criticism that focuses on the cultural aspect of colonialism intersects with interculturalism in that both deal with how the self and the other, the colonizer and the colonized, construct and are constructed as they encounter one another. Postcolonial and decolonial analyses expose how the construction of the self and the other was used by colonizers to legitimate domination and how it was used by the colonized to envision resistance, liberation, and healing from the hegemony of the empire. This avenue of inquiry yielded many subversive means of resistance, such as hybridity, third space, and mimicry. For some critics, even though these are legitimate ways to expose the colonial gaze, and even though these phenomena have unpacked some of the complex relations between the self and the other, they do not address head on the issue of power differential as decolonialization does. Becca Whitla evaluates two common notions of postcolonial criticism, those of “third space” and “mimicry”. Although third space “has the potential to be both resistant and liberating”, in some of its manifestations, it does not deal with the power differential between dominant and marginalized cultures. For mimicry, seeking to undermine the imperial justification for domination, quite often, it reproduces the imperial status quo, “because communities are still excluded and absent.” (Whitla 2020, pp. 171–72). The alternative in her program of liberation and justice lies in a decolonial approach. Decoloniality restores “marginalized agencies” and it reclaims “other (non-European) ways of knowing, being, doing, and feeling. . . . Decolonial approaches strive to affirm the ways in which people’s lived experience represents marginalized voices. Hence, a decolonial perspective would ask how the story would change should those on the underside participate by actually being agents in the story, changing the very nature of the story itself.” (Whitla 2020, p. 172).

Decolonial analyses guide intercultural worship to investigate how power dynamics shape the relationships within the church, while intercultural worship makes it possible for people who have different experiences with power to construct a new identity as a result of encountering God and the other. Intercultural worship is a relational response to God's activity in the world; it also engages the realities of the world as experienced differently by diverse communities. This relational response celebrates the diverse ways in which people encounter God and how this encounter is shaped by their ethnic identity, cultural heritage, and linguistic traditions. Intercultural worship creates a space for the diverse relational responses to enrich one another as they are expressed in songs and prayers uttered in different languages and embodied in cultural and artistic expressions. These concrete means of worshipping interculturally are informed by a theology that celebrates difference as a gift, and that seeks the transformation of the self and other as they relate together to God. But this utopian articulation of what an intercultural worship is quite often clashes with old and new expressions of racism, oppression, colonialism, and imperialism. In addition to economic and political devastations, racism, colonialism, and imperialism have and continue to erode cultures and marginalize identities.² This is where intercultural work and decolonization meet. As they both investigate how the self and the other relate to one another and to God, decolonial and postcolonial approaches ask, how are these relationships shaped by power, sameness, and difference? An intercultural worship that is informed by the work of decolonization is honest about the hurt, the violence, marginalization, and erosion; it also celebrates what resistance, confrontational or subversive, has accomplished; it creates a space for the colonizer to be held accountable and for the colonized to be empowered; and it longs for God's reign to bring healing, justice, and mutuality.³ With this background in mind, now, I turn to the book of Psalms in order to explain how the proclamation of God's reign in the book itself was a form of resisting the empire, which in turn will be fruitful for our considerations on the relationship between decolonization and interculturalism.

3. The Book of Psalms and Intercultural Worship

The book of psalms offers insights that deepen the wisdom of intercultural worshipping communities as they seek to do justice, work for liberation, and build bridges of mutual transformation across their cultural differences. It will become apparent from the discussion below that the dichotomy between political and social matters, on the one hand, and spiritual or theological worldviews, on the other, is nonexistent in the book of Psalms. The worship of God in the book of psalms always engaged the lives of the individuals and the communities that composed these hymns and prayers. Power struggles, oppression, justice, and liberation are essential threads in the fabric of the individual and communal songs and appeals. The identity of the worshipper(s) in relation to God, the enemy, or the other are front and center in words of lament, prayers of help, and shouts of praise. Thus, as contemporary worshipping communities seek to increase their intercultural competence in a decolonial mode, they ought to reflect on the socio-political contexts that have shaped the prayers of lament and the songs of praise in the book of Psalms. These reflections would function as a mirror for these communities to consider who they are and who they are called to be and do. It will become apparent from the discussion below that the languages of lament and praise are deeply connected with people's struggles, their agency, and God's sovereignty.

Intercultural worshipping practices that seek to decolonize the oppressed and to transform the oppressor invite the diverse members of the faith community to ask about how they enter into the words of the psalms. Given the diversity of genres within the psalter and the diversity of voices even within a single psalm, the book contributes to decolonization and to intercultural work by holding various voices, spiritualities, and theologies in tension. These psalms, which have come from the era of different empires, were the words of the oppressed Israelites, and have been appropriated into the worship lives of communities that have different power dynamics and experiences. Therefore, it is

important for contemporary worshipping communities to ask, how do the diverse voices of the different genres that are present within the book of psalms hold those who abuse their power accountable, and how do they give a voice to those who have been marginalized and oppressed? How does this anthology, which sought to decolonize the Israelites, but in doing so has reproduced some of the ideologies it sought to deconstruct, be instructive to contemporary worshipping communities as they seek to be transformed? How can we avoid taking the words of the oppressed to reproduce the status quo and conceal privilege and power? How can we be transformed by the words uttered or sung to God in the presence of a diverse crowd that have had a long history of colonialism and conflict? How have the texts been abused to maintain the status quo and how did they inspire various forms of liberation?

4. God's Reign, Intercultural Worship, and Decolonization

Reflecting on the motif of God's reign in relation to the colonial and imperial realities of the people of Israel creates a productive space to consider the relationship between intercultural worship and decolonization. The book of psalms shows that colonialism and empire are part of how the faith community is shaped, how it speaks about God, and how it constructs its identity in relation to the other. The motif of God's reign is central to the book of Psalms.⁴ As early as Psalm 2, which is part of a programmatic introduction to the whole book, the audience of the psalter are called to respond to the proclamation of the reign of God.⁵ The motif of God's reign is, naturally, a crucial component of the Royal Psalms, Enthronement Psalms, and Zion Psalms.⁶ The motif also appears in psalms of praise, as well as psalms of lament, in which the psalmists put their trust in God's sovereignty to deliver them from their personal or communal distress. Even though the motif may reflect an ideology that centralizes power in the hands of the monarchy that seeks to subjugate its people and other nations, it still reflects the vulnerability of the people of Israel, who were subjugated to the powers of the surrounding empires. In the latter case, the belief in God's reign is a source of resilience and faith in the face of the empires.

In her study of the Zion Tradition, Beate Ego differentiates between two manifestations of the relationship between God, the Israelites, and the nations, or, put differently, between the self and the other, the center (Jerusalem) and the periphery (the nations). The Zion tradition, which appears in the psalms, the prophets, and the lamentation, speaks of "God as a royal ruler, residing in his temple palace on Zion, the holy mountain in Jerusalem. Zion is, therefore, the location of divine indwelling. Because God lives on Zion, divine blessing flows into the world. This blessed power is manifested in the provision of water for the city and the land, in nature's fertility, and in the security of the city's residence from internal and external enemies." (Ego 2016, p. 333).⁷ The socio-political experiences of the people of Israel in relation to other empires shaped how the worshipping community proclaims God's reign and how they see themselves and the other. According to Ego's analyses of the Zion tradition, the first strand emerged during the time of the monarchy and the heightened power of the Assyrian empire. After a study of Psalms 46 and 48, Ego concludes that "center and periphery are related to each other in an antagonistic manner; however, the center can be described as being stronger than the power of the periphery." (Ego 2016, p. 336).⁸ In these two psalms, chaos, whether natural disasters or tumult nations, threatens the well-being of those who dwell in Zion. Yet, the psalmists proclaim an unshaken trust in God's power to tame these chaotic forces. These psalms subvert the Assyrian propaganda of world dominion. According to these psalms, the empire may threaten the dwelling of God, but eventually God puts an end to war and restores order. The nations here are seen as a representation of chaos that needs to be defeated and tamed.

The psalms that come from the exilic or the Persian period reflect a new development in the articulation of the Zion tradition and theology. In this development, "the relationship between center and periphery is best described as complementary and harmonious." (Ego 2016, p. 337).⁹ According to Psalm 102, the nations are not in enmity with YHWH or Zion. Instead, they fear the name of the LORD and all the kings of the Earth revere God's glory.

God's reign is manifest in rebuilding the destroyed Zion and in paying heed to the prayers of the marginalized. God, who is enthroned in Zion, is feared by the nations, "hears the groans of the prisoners", and "sets free those who were doomed to die" (Psalm 102:20).¹⁰ Nations, kingdoms, and peoples gather in Zion to praise this God. In a similar way, in Psalm 68:31–32, the kingdoms of the Earth are called upon to praise YHWH, and even though they march towards Zion, they do not come to attack, but to present their gifts to the God of Israel. That the nations acknowledge the sovereignty of YHWH is possibly a result of monotheism. If YHWH is the only true creator of the world and its nations, then YHWH must relate to these nations in one way or another. This theological development that includes the nations as worshippers of YHWH corresponds to some ideological facets of the Persian empire. Persian iconography shows images of representatives of the vassal states of the Persian empire "voluntarily" bringing gifts from their respective regions to honor their emperor. If this ideology indeed influenced the changes in the Zion tradition, then, suggests Ego, this theological claim may have functioned as "an anti-imperial impetus. Instead of the Persian Emperor, the true ruler of the world is the God of Israel!" (Ego 2016, p. 343).¹¹

In his study of the enthronement psalms, Royce M. Victor situates the book of Psalms as a whole and this genre of psalms in the context of empires. Even though these psalms may have different originating dates, they, along with the whole book, essentially continued to be compiled and edited down to the Second Temple period (Victor 2018, p. 235). The language used in these psalms leaves the reader in a tension: are these words those of resistance or are they words of dominance? On the one hand, these psalms reflect the hopes of the oppressed Israelites—namely, that their God is a sovereign deity who will liberate them from the tyranny of the oppressive empires and will usher a new era of justice, peace, and dignity. Victor writes, "The psalmists' proposal is to replace the present tyrant ruler, who denies freedom and rights, with a new benevolent and just ruler, who has all the authority over the universe." (Victor 2018, p. 236). In this way, these psalms become a voice of resistance to the empires that subjected the people of Judah to their military, economic, and political control. Victor adds, "These psalms thus become a powerful protest against the imposing of imperial power and its allies." (Victor 2018, p. 236). While these psalms functioned as a voice of resistance for those who had been colonized, they tend to reproduce the ideology that they sought to deconstruct. Victor refers to the danger of identifying a particular people or a human ruler with the divine reign. Thus, he notes, "When Israel's God becomes the universal deity through his great enthronement, Israel gets a special privilege to have a mandate from her God to subjugate other peoples and occupy their lands in the name of her God. The conquest and invasion of land becomes justifiable according to this authorization Israel received from her God." (Victor 2018, pp. 236–37).¹² Even though these texts may have, for a brief time in Israel's history, given a justification for the expansion of the so-called Davidic or Solomonic empires, it is crucial to remember, as Victor reminds us, that these texts were written or redacted at times when Israel was under the rule of foreign empires. "As mentioned earlier, the Psalter was compiled in the Second Temple period, when the community was struggling to rebuild with a specific identity as the people of God. The people were still under the shadow of the empire. In fact, it was an ardent hope of a colonized and subjugated people who envisaged having absolute dominance over the universe including their present masters. The genre of enthronement psalms emerged out of the pain, suffering, and anxiety about the future of a subjected people. It envisions the emergence of a new divine ruler who will dethrone the present empire and help his people to have universal dominion." (Victor 2018, p. 237).¹³

The discussion above shows that worship in the book of Psalms always engaged the political realities of the community. Whether in conflict or harmony, domination or resistance, inclusion or exclusion, hope or despair, praise or lament, the proclamation of God's reign addressed the power differential between the colonized and the colonizer. The psalms that emerged for the most part out of the powerlessness of the ancient Israelites as a language of faith in the face of the empire have been used in worship by the colonizers

and by the colonized, in separate worship spaces or in the same worship space. In an intercultural worship setting, in which the colonized and the colonizers worship together, the language of God's reign in the psalter creates fertile soil on which to reflect on power dynamics among a diverse worshipping community. The language of God's reign in the book of Psalms, which is pervasive in psalms of praise, but also appears in psalms of lament, as will see in the following paragraphs, creates a challenge and an opportunity. Worshipping through the psalms that proclaim God's reign challenges intercultural worship to expose the ways that this motif might have been used to justify colonialism and imperialism. Worshipping through the psalms that proclaim God's reign gives a voice to the oppressed to lament and protest against the oppression they have experienced, and it calls onto those who have abused their power to surrender to God's righteous justice. Whether in lament or praise, God's reign liberates, heals, and repairs through a worship that is honest, diverse, and authentic.

5. Responses to the Reign of God

In an intercultural worship setting, in which the colonized and the colonizer sing together, the book of Psalms creates a space for people who have different experiences with power to speak truth to God and to one another. The book of Psalms creates a space for people who are different to be honest and authentic about the history they carry with them into the worship space. Those, or their ancestors, who have experienced oppression can voice their pain, and those, or their ancestors, who have abused their power can repent. An intercultural worship that seeks decolonization ought to create a space for people to reflect on their cultural location with the hope that, through this embodiment, they may find healing and transformation as they encounter one another and as they encounter God. Proclaiming God's reign does not mean repressing voices of protest and lament; instead, it should be viewed as the foundation upon which the faith community has the courage to hope for a new reality in the midst of chaos. Celebrating God's reign in songs of praise does not mean that the faith community is oblivious to the damage that colonization has committed, nor is it complacent regarding how the other is often excluded or marginalized. Celebrating God's reign puts God at the center of a diverse faith community, and in doing so, it animates the hope that when humans fail, God is sovereign to save the oppressed and to judge the oppressors who persist in their wickedness.

6. Psalms of Lament and the Agency of the Oppressed

The book of Psalms is not oblivious to suffering, trauma, and violence. The book preserves a bold tradition of prayers of lament and protest, sometimes directed towards God and in other times directed towards other humans who have violated the well-being of the psalmist.¹⁴ Psalms of lament make visible the wounds, disorientation, trauma, suffering, and hopelessness. They speak of narrow spaces of oppression (Ps. 3:1), emotional distress and physical illnesses (6:5–7), injustices (10:2), sorrow (13:2), enemies (22:12–13), mortality and estrangement (39:1–13), shame and defeat (44:9–16), persecution (55:3), rejection (60:1), being overwhelmed (69:1–4), the destruction of communal identity (74:1–9), loss and loneliness (88:8, 18). They also bring to the fore the longing for belonging, healing, justice, and liberation. They express a sense of trust in God's faithfulness to the covenant and they rely on God's steadfast love as the ultimate assurance that God will listen and deliver. Even though they raise questions about God's justice because of the harm that they have endured at the hands of their enemies, the fact that they still approach God in prayer is a sign of bold trust in God. In many of these psalms, and despite the chaos that the worshipping community experiences, proclaiming God's reign over creation and history is the foundation for their longing for justice. In Psalm 74:12, for example, the psalmist declares, "Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth".¹⁵

Psalms of lament have been marginalized in Christian worship for various reasons.¹⁶ For some, complaint is usually confused with murmuring. Complaint, for them, reflects an ungrateful posture towards God. For others, complaint and lament are signs of a weak

faith and a lack of trust in God. For some, the spirituality of giving thanks and praise in the midst of suffering and chaos is considered a sign of a stronger faith than the spirituality that allows for words of complaint and protest. For others, worship and spirituality are reduced to be only about joy, and they can simply achieve this state if they focus on God and leave behind their suffering. For others, God's sovereignty means that one should not question what God is doing. Some of those who have been deprived of their agency as a result of being subjugated to different forms of oppression find it hard to speak back to God as an authority figure. For some, who have lost all possibilities of help, God is their ultimate resort in the midst of suffering and complaint will not change the reality that they are experiencing. Whether for theological or sociopolitical reasons, prayers of lament have been marginalized in worship practices and spaces.¹⁷

Through prayers of lament, the vulnerable ones restore some of their agency as they raise a voice of protest to God concerning various manifestations of interpersonal or systemic oppression and alienation. This kind of discourse is crucial for individuals or communities that have experienced racism, colonialism, forced migration, or xenophobia. These oppressive systems have tried to deprive them of their dignity and humanity. An intercultural worship that is attentive to the diversity of the experiences that are present in the worship space ought to integrate psalms of lament into its public worship so that these individuals and communities see themselves in a new light, as partners with God in doing justice in the world. This practice reflects a theology of a dynamic and a relational God who responds to prayers and who freely chooses to work through human agents. Thus, prayers of lament are not about venting; the process itself is transformational because humans who have experienced marginalization start to claim a new identity as covenantal partners. Prayers of lament are formational.¹⁸ Lisa Allen explains the formational role of worship in the life of the black church when she writes, "Worship was not just an opportunity to come and shout or cry and then leave, content in whatever station in life one was. It was about knowing that there was a better life, not just somewhere in the sky, but in the here and now, and the Black church stood as a testament to God's faithfulness that we, as a people, could live into the fullness of our humanity." (Allen 2021, p. 12).

One of the contributions of Walter Brueggemann to the theology of the book of Psalms is the recovery of the validity of the language of lament as faithful discourse that is grounded in a covenantal relationship with God. Two losses, argues Brueggemann, occur when the language of lament is marginalized in the theology and practice of faith communities. The first loss focuses on the genuineness of the covenantal relationship, in which the human party is supposedly taken seriously by God. If humans are only allowed the language of praise, and they are not permitted to cry out in the midst of injustice, not only does this create a bad faith that is built on fear, guilt, or false self-righteousness, but it also turns humans into an object, not partners with God. The second loss suggests that the absence of the language of lament stifles the question of theodicy, which essentially has to do with the work of justice in the world. By recovering the language of lament and protest as a language of faith, the oppressed become a partner with God in the work of justice. Hence, Derek Suderman tried to recover the place of the faith community in the process of lament, a topic not addressed by Brueggemann. "In effect", writes Suderman, "raising one's voice in lament not only calls on God to act but also invites social discernment and the response of the social 'other' to the speaker's claim ... More than simply being '*addressed to God against neighbor*' or '*addressed to God against God*', laments are also *addressed to a social audience* and thus function rhetorically as warnings, threats, accusations, and appeals for empathy and support. Thus, in addition to providing an empowering voice and significant social critique, the function of lament requires the attentive, discerning ear of those who hear or hear about the pained cries." (Suderman 2012). Hearing these cries, then, calls onto the audience to respond, by way of doing justice for the oppressed or repenting for violence done to those who have been marginalized.¹⁹

Prayers of lament in an intercultural setting become the voice of the oppressed, and they create a space for not only an acknowledgement of wrongs done, but also a space

for grief, which, as Sunder John Boopalan states, “engenders positive agency” that one hopes would lead to the transformation of identities (Boopalan 2017, p. 115). Boopalan notes, “In calling agents to take cues from the grief of those who suffer wrongs, the internal work of grief invites persons from privileged backgrounds to undertake the task of identity-transforming grief.” (Boopalan 2017, p. 118). Indeed, it has been noted that the psalmists in psalms of lament construct an identity in relation to God and in relation to an other who is hostile.²⁰ “[T]he concept of shaming the enemies means to relate to them openly, in the public sphere. The honest voicing of negative attitudes towards the other is a more real and more genuine way of relating to them than not doing so. There is an authenticity about the voicing of a response to harmful actions of others, which bolsters relationship and paves the way for the impairment in relationship to be addressed restoratively. The voicing of a psalm can have a ritual aspect to it, which speaks of its efficacy in making real change possible. In the case of the psalmist’s relationship to their enemy, a psalm of lament can reorient the perception of the pray-er (and potentially all those who hear it too). It turns the enemy from being a problem, a thing, to being a person to be addressed and brought into the ambit of the psalmist’s relationship with God and with the wider community.” (Stocks 2021, pp. 133–34). An intercultural worship that seeks decolonization, that seeks justice and mutuality, ought to allow for this authentic dialogue with God and the other. An intercultural worship that integrates prayers of lament does not shy away from confronting pain in the name of unity. Intercultural worship that seeks justice will be unsettling. Yet, it is through this courageous and dialogical, truth-telling worship that a diverse faith community may begin to experience healing and transformation.

7. Psalms of Praise and the Relationality of God’s Reign

Songs of praise and adoration are common in intercultural worship practices. Short and simple songs are easier to translate into another language and they are easier to handle across cultural and theological difference. Sometimes, this gives the impression that songs of praise are shallow and are not as sophisticated theologically as other types of hymns or songs. In these manifestations of intercultural worship, it is assumed that praise and adoration are centered and focused on God’s otherness. And this focus does not always connect with daily lives that are distraught with violence, chaos, and oppression. Worship in this sense becomes a vertical relationship between the worshipper and God. Praise is isolated from people’s struggles; God is remote and can only be thought of as a transcendent God. In this kind of intercultural worship, although it sometimes celebrates ethnic and linguistic diversity, its articulation of praise of this awesome God is separated from God’s liberating activity and justice-making on behalf of the powerless. Psalms of praise, however, challenge these reductionist assumptions. Indeed, they are a rich theological resource for intercultural worship that does not confuse diversity with justice, because, when God’s reign puts things in the right, this means liberation for the oppressed, inclusion of the marginalized, and judgment on those who act unjustly.

It has been argued that psalms of praise are witnesses to God’s incommensurability and God’s incomparability. Praise is an invitation to be in awe and wonder. It calls onto the worshipping community to reflect on what it means to be a human being in relation to this wonderful, powerful, mysterious God. Brueggemann discusses an enigmatic tension that is present in the psalms. For him, there is a tension, a mystery, concerning how God’s incommensurability relates to mutuality. He assigns God’s incomparability to psalms of praise and hymns of thanksgiving, and when it comes to mutuality, he turns to psalms of lament in which the psalmist assumes the upper hand or at least a parity with God.²¹ Although Brueggemann acknowledges the relationality of the God worshipped in the book of Psalms, he dissects these two aspects of the theological witness of the psalms and houses each side in one particular genre. These two sides of the theological enigma, however, are present in both of these genres, lament and praise. God’s celebrated power is what makes the psalmist petition to God to interfere and change reality, and the God who is praised is

also a relational God who is connected to the powerless and to the righteous and who holds the wicked accountable for the oppression that they have imposed on the marginalized.

The final psalms of the psalter are psalms of praise that celebrate God's reign, which rescues the oppressed and that judges the oppressor. A psalmist declares, "The LORD will reign forever" (Psalm 146:10), and another one exhorts the children of Zion to "rejoice in their king" (149:2). The singer in Psalm 145 shouts, "I extol you, my God and King". God's everlasting reign is mentioned three times at the heart of the psalm: "the glory of your kingdom; the glorious splendor of your kingdom; your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom" (145:1, 11–13).²² These psalms emphasize God's otherness, to the point of saying that God's greatness is too great for human minds to examine it and human words to capture it (Psalm 145:3). Indeed, the psalmists overwhelm the worshippers with words such as splendor, majesty, wonder, and awesomeness. Yet, this same God is involved in the world by doing *tsedeqah*—"righteousness or justice". God's otherness never separates God from revealing Godself by putting things in the right. God reveals God's righteousness when God upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down (Psalm 145:14) and when God "judges the wicked" (145:20).

In a similar way, Psalm 146 celebrates God's relational reign. God the creator, who brings order out of chaos in the vast non-human world, is also involved in the margins of society. Words of praise speak of a God "who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow" (Psalm 146:7–9).²³ God's reign is an ongoing jubilee year. God's reign liberates, feeds, lifts up, heals, repairs, and restores. At the center of God's activities are those who are not usually seen at the center of the concern of the empire. Yet they are the ones most affected by the hegemony of the empire. God's reign reshuffles the social and political arrangements.²⁴

Worshipping this God is a political statement. Rolf Jacobson notes that "Israel's praise evokes a world in which the Lord alone reigns, biblical praise is always both praise of the true Lord and praise against all false lords—human and non-human—who seek to set themselves up in God's place." (Jacobson 2000, p. 383). Songs of praise that declare God's reign call on the worshipping community to decide if they will put their trust in the power of rulers and empires or if they will put their ultimate trust in this God who defends the oppressed. Such a call was declared early on in the psalter, in Psalm 2, and now here, towards the end of the psalter, the hymns of praise confront their audience with the fragility of human rulers and empires: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish" (Psalm 146:3–4). And in the following psalm, the singer reminds the worshippers that God's "delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner" (Psalm 146:11; see Exodus 15:21).

Psalms of praise that speak of God's relational incomparability, that vindicate the oppressed, expose the fragility of the human oppressor. Indeed, God's righteous reign "lifts up the downtrodden, and brings the wicked to the ground" (Psalm 147:6). The oppressor is often called the wicked, the *resha'im*, in the book of Psalms. The wicked ones are the ones who abuse their power against the marginalized. "In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—let them be caught in the schemes they have devised. For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the LORD" (Psalm 10:2–3).²⁵ In contrast to doing justice on behalf of the righteous, the oppressed ones,²⁶ whom God loves (Psalm 146:8), God destroys the wicked (145:20), brings to ruin the way of the wicked (146:9), and brings the wicked down to the ground (147:6). For the most part, God is the actor of this judgment that comes over the ones who oppress the poor. Yet, Psalm 149 speaks of the role that the *hasidim*, the faithful, will play in bringing about God's judgment over the kings and nobles, who will be removed from their thrones and halls of power and will be put to chains and tamed. With words and swords, they will execute vengeance, rebukes, and justice. That the psalm ends with an emphasis on vengeance,

rebukes, and putting an end to the arrogance of these foreign rulers as a way of restoring the dignity and honor of the oppressed *hasidim* reflects the common motif in which the reign of God is an upside-down reality (e.g., 1 Sam 2:1–10; Luke 1:46–55). In this new order, those who were oppressed are restored to honor and dignity, and those who abused their power are tamed and receive justice.²⁷

This image of the vengeance and justice that are brought over the kings and the nobles of the nations, which dominates Psalm 149, should be contrasted with another image from Psalm 148. These kings and rulers are not violently subjugated. Instead, they are called to participate in the worship of YHWH because YHWH is an exalted God. Obviously, these kings and nations might have their own Gods. So, one wonders if this language is that of inclusion or intrusion. It depends on what one compares it to. If it is compared to a theology that allows other peoples to preserve their religious traditions (e.g., Deuteronomy 32:8–9; Micah 4:5), then this text would seem intrusive. If one compares it to the vengeance of Psalm 149 or other exclusionary views in scriptures in which other nations are excluded from the worship of YHWH (e.g., Deuteronomy 7, 23), then calling onto these foreign kings to participate in this worship chorus is indeed an inclusive language. Interestingly, Psalm 148 calls onto all of God's creation to participate. It even includes the primordial water and the dragons or monsters, the *tanninim*.²⁸ That is, the agents that disturb God's ordered creation, whether mythological creatures or historical figures (the nobles and the kings of Psalm 149), are included in the worship of YHWH, who reigns above Heaven and the Earth. This very language, which includes all nations and peoples, preserves a peculiar place for Israel and its relationship with YHWH. Thus, while the text is inclusive, it does not do this at the expense of peculiarity. Praise, here, then, is intercultural, as it brings people who are ethnically and linguistically different to worship God together, without a loss of those identities and their peculiarities. Praise is also decolonial, as it brings to the center not a particular culture, but God's reign, which liberates the oppressed, judges the wicked who persist in oppression, and restores even the enemies of God's creation, cosmological or historical, to a harmonious relationship with God and with others.

8. Conclusions

This paper suggested that intercultural worship becomes transformative when it becomes intentional about addressing people's experiences with power. In order to reach this goal, intercultural worship ought to engage in a decolonial mindset and practices that empower the marginalized and hold those who abuse their power accountable. This kind of work does not repress the voice of the oppressed in the name of unity, and it does not simply focus on diversity without doing the work of justice. An intercultural worship that seeks decolonization and liberation creates a space for honest and authentic encounters between diverse worshippers, God, and one another. As much as it is important in an intercultural worship to integrate different languages, diverse worship styles, and multiple theologies, it is crucial for the experiences of the members of the worshipping community to be visible and integrated. Through its diverse genres, the book of Psalms offers intercultural worshipping communities a model of speaking truth about their hurt and privilege. God's reign in prayers of lament and in songs of praise addresses these diverse worshipping communities. It gives hope for the oppressed and marginalized, and it holds accountable those who abuse their power. Being formed by this multiplicity of voices within the book of Psalms, which reached its final form in a colonial and imperial context, intercultural worship becomes decolonial when it gives a voice to the downtrodden, and when it celebrates God's reign, which longs for God's restoration of all God's creation, even those cosmological and historical outsiders, monsters, and the human other.

The work of Whitla offers practical wisdom on how to integrate decolonial reflections in forming a diverse and a just worshipping community. A self-reflective worship takes place on the institutional and on the individualistic levels. As much as the worshipping community seeks to live into God's reign, it should reflect on the forces that work against creating God's beloved community. Whitla writes, "At their peril, churches, in their

eagerness to embrace a vision of what humanity is liberated *for*, often neglect this work, the work of liberating *from*.” (Whitla 2020, p. 230). Whitla argues that three things ought to happen in order to live into this reality more concretely: firstly, churches should produce their “autobiographical narrative”. Building up God’s community requires liberation and reconciliation. As churches confront their past, the next step of work “will entail unmasking and confronting coloniality in our liturgies.” (Whitla 2020, p. 231). Public and private acknowledgement, confession, and repentance for the harm that colonialism has and continues to cause is a step forward in confronting its forms of oppression. Repentance calls for actions. Thus, worship contributes to the church’s decolonial work “by creating spaces for the voices of the marginalized and excluded to sing and be heard.” (Whitla 2020, p. 231).

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Notes

- ¹ For discussions on the difference between monocultural, multicultural, and intercultural church and worship, see (Brazel and de Guzman 2015; Marzouk 2019). The work of Mary Eunjoo Kim analyzes the impact of different cross-cultural models on preaching and worship. The four models that she focuses on are the melting pot, the salad bowl, the mosaic, and the kaleidoscope. See (Kim 2017, pp. 111–27).
- ² Kwok Pui-lan explains the power dynamics that lie behind some of the intercultural encounters and realities that have been taking place: “Both in our faith communities and in the wider society, more and more people are living in intercultural realities. As a result of colonialism and slavery in the past and globalization in the present, cultures are not isolated from but are intertwined with one another.” (Pui-lan 2021, pp. 151–52). In order to engage these realities of interculturalism and colonialism, Kwok Pui-lan suggests, with regard to preaching, but being equally applicable to all aspects of worship, “I would portray postcolonial preaching as a locally rooted and globally conscious performance that seeks to create a Third Space so that the faith community can imagine new ways of being in the world and encountering God’s salvific action for the oppressed and marginalized.” (Pui-lan 2021, pp. 152–53).
- ³ Postcolonial liturgical theologies “are ways in which praxis, theories, and theologies of religious groups are engaged in order to challenge those times when the imperial, colonizing power dynamics of domination use religious ideologies/reifications as instruments of an agenda of conquering and dismissal, undermining autonomies and destruction of people’s lives, wisdom, and sovereignties.” (Carvalhaes 2015, p. 2).
- ⁴ James L. Mays has argued that the motif of God’s reign is *the center* of the book of Psalms. Mays summarizes his arguments in the following way: “The declaration *Yhwh malak* involves a vision of reality that is the theological center of the Psalter. The cosmic and worldly action to which it refers is the etiology of the psalmic situation. The psalmic understanding of the people of God, the city of God, the king of God, and the law of God depends on its validity and implications. The psalmic functions of praise, prayer, and instruction are responses to it and articulations of its wonder, hope and guidance.” (Mays 1994b, p. 22).
- ⁵ J. Clinton McCann notes, “As scholars have begun to take seriously the shape of the Psalter, they have realized that Psalms 1 and 2 together form an introduction to the Psalms. While Psalm 1 informs the reader that the whole collection is to be approached and appropriated as instruction, Psalm 2 introduces the essential content of that instruction—the Lord reigns! Nothing about God, the world, humanity, or the life of faith will be properly learned and understood apart from this basic affirmation.” (McCann 1993, p. 41).
- ⁶ Enthronement psalms such as Psalms 93, 96–99 have the common phrase *YHWH Malak*, which can be translated as “the LORD reigns”. These psalms are closely related to another set of psalms known as royal psalms (Psalms 2, 45, 72). While enthronement psalms celebrate YHWH’s kingship, royal psalms speak of YHWH transferring this power to a human king. Despite their distinction, they are both tied in their celebration of kingship either that of God or that of a human representative of God, and the celebration of this sovereignty is reflected in the subjugation of the powers of chaos, whether natural (creation) or historical (the nations), under the power of God or God’s people. Zion psalms (e.g., Psalm 46) celebrate the inviolability of Jerusalem and its temple, because YHWH is in its midst. No enemy, cosmological or historical, would be able to invade it or terrify its people because YHWH reigns from the temple, which is the microcosm of order in the midst of the chaos.
- ⁷ For various perspectives on the origins and implications of the Zion tradition in the Hebrew Bible, in general, and in the book of Psalms, in particular, see (Ollenburger 1987; Roberts 2002, pp. 282–57; Laato 2018).

- ⁸ In a similar vein, Laato notes, “As in Ps. 48:9–15 so also in Ps. 46:9–12 the old mythical tradition has been interpreted as being realized in the mighty actions of Yahweh in history, apparently in the year 701 BCE when the Assyrian Army could not conquer Zion.” (Laato 2018, p. 170).
- ⁹ A necessary clarification is in order here. That the nations would come and worship YHWH can be understood in two different ways. Nations lose their religious identity and submit to the reign of YHWH. This would certainly be a notion that counters the orientation of interculturalism. Indeed, there is a challenge here with regard to the inclusion of the nations in the worship of YHWH. The challenge centers on envisioning an inclusion without complete loss of identity for both the Israelites or the nations. This inclusion of the nations in the worship of YHWH, however, is a step forward towards tolerance and mutuality when we compare it with other psalms in which the nations seek to destroy Israel and the response was that YHWH the sovereign would destroy the nations.
- ¹⁰ Verses 12–22 of Psalm 102 contrast “human impermanence and the permanence of YHWH’s Kingship”. Despite human fragility, the reign of God gives hope to the psalmist for the salvation of the community and the restoration of Zion. “This renewal from God will bring hope to those in despair, and the response of thanksgiving narrating this salvific action will make it possible for the nations to understand and come to worship YHWH as king.” (Brueggemann and Bellinger 2014, p. 437).
- ¹¹ W. Dennis Tucker, Jr. explains how Psalms 107–150 critique the Persian empire when he writes, “Amid the praise of Yahweh as the God of Yehud there is a secondary claim meant to discredit the power associated with other nations and peoples. The psalmists challenge the Persian notion of a worldwide empire governed by an Achaemenid ruler under the watchful eye of Ahuramazda and instead assert that kingship belongs to Yahweh alone (108:4–7) and that his ‘glory is over the whole earth’ (108:6). The political powers that surround those in Yehud cannot match the power of Yahweh and will be shattered utterly by the Divine King as he stands alongside his people (e.g., 109:31; 110:5; 124:6–8). The psalms also discredit any claim that those subjugated to the Persian Empire do so in joyous participation. To the contrary, the psalmists employ vivid imagery that reflects the toll that such subjugation has taken upon the people.” (Tucker 2014, p. 188).
- ¹² Indeed, the connection between divine reign and human kingship is a matter of debate in biblical scholarship. David M. Howard, Jr., for example, draws tight connection between YHWH, King, and Zion, when he writes, “The Zion, royal, and Davidic traditions displayed prominently and placed strategically throughout the Psalter take their place alongside the traditions of YHWH as King to portray the fact that YHWH’s rule extends everywhere: to the nations, the cosmos, nature, and even Israel.” (Howard 1997, p. 207). Ben Ollenburger has shown that “within the Jerusalem cult tradition Zion symbolism was able to function independent of any reference to David. This is evident from the fact . . . that the three Songs of Zion (Ps 46, 48, 76) make no mention of David, or of any earthly king at all.” (Ollenburger 1987, p. 60). Ollenburger continues to describe the conclusion of his study of Zion as a symbol: “We have found in the Zion symbolism of the Jerusalem cult tradition a constant, pervasive concern for justice, a consistent and radical criticism of royal attempts to pervert justice, a theologically motivated attempt to ground this justice in the action and character of God.” (Ollenburger 1987, p. 154). Ollenburger emphasizes an important component of the Zion tradition of the Jerusalem Cult—namely, the divine freedom to possess all power: “Yahweh reserves to himself the exclusive prerogative as the effective agent in providing security and refuge for his people. That is, he reserves power to himself in the exercise of his dominion.” (Ollenburger 1987, p. 84). The divine kingship and the divine power set the limits for the human kingship and power.
- ¹³ A similar tension appears in the work of Jon Berquist, who acknowledges that even if some psalms have emerged from the monarchic period, the assemblage of the book of Psalms is certainly post-exilic and thus it is part of the post-monarchy, colonized province of Yehud that was under the power of the Persian empire (Berquist 2007, pp. 195–202). Berquist writes, “Reading the Psalms needs to be a *postcolonial* reading, so that interpretation would take into account the colonized nature of Yehud. . . . The contradictions of postcolonial life must be considered the proper context for interpreting these psalms and prayers. . . . attention needs to be given to how such images [e.g., monarchy] function in an empire and in a culture that resists empire.” (Berquist 2007, pp. 197–98). As the psalms participate in perpetuating empire and they simultaneously resist empire, readings of the psalms require “a *plural* perspective. Each text is only one view into a postcolonial mindset; scholarship must attend to the variety of ideas and expressions that coexist within the colony. Just as there is no one imperial domination, there is no singular form of resistance to it. A postcolonial world is pluralistic, in that the society includes multiple positions and positionalities that exist next to each other. . . . Thus such readings must also be *partial*. . . . this requires an admission that all ideologies in Yehudite literature are incomplete. . . . No ideology in Yehud explained everything, and thus every ideology is one of many minority positions that coexist in a pluralistic society. . . . these ideologies are also partial in the sense that they are partisan. Each reading of each text creates skewed observations that argue for specific aspects of reality. The images and metaphors are used to support social movements of varying kinds. Texts are partial, not neutral.” (Berquist 2007, p. 198). He adds, “The acts of identity within the Psalms deploy old, previous, or nostalgic identities that have been found useful, reclaimed, and taken over. In this sense, ethnicity has become a consumer good. It is a commodity to be made, exchanged, and acquired. The empire finds ethnicity a way to keep people in their imperial spaces and within their imperial roles. The acts of identity are also resistances to empire: the invention and celebration of national history, the establishment of local autonomy, and insistence on God as controlling empires of the past. God takes the role of the King, both displacing the human king and making sure that the empire does not have to face war against a king who could lead a colony in revolt.” (Berquist 2007, p. 200).

- 14 The psalter contains individual prayers of lament and communal prayers of lament. These prayers usually have all or some of the following literary features: a question (why or how long), a poetic description of the suffering that the psalmist is enduring, a plead for God to act and to deliver, a statement of confidence or trust that God will listen, a reminder that God has acted and delivered in the past, and words of praise or thanksgiving. With the exception of Psalms 39 and 88, most of the psalms of lament end with words of praise or thanksgiving. Not all the psalms report a divine response or a change in the reality of the crises that the psalmist was experiencing. Whether this is a biblical realism, as Ellen Davis calls it, or the psalmists themselves have been transformed and their view of the reality and God's activity has been transformed is left open to interpretation (Davis 2001, pp. 14–22).
- 15 Psalm 10:16, which also begins with a language of lament and protest, declares, "The LORD is king forever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land". See also Psalm 22:28. Berquist underlines the centrality of God's reign for psalms of lament when he writes, "Laments call back to responsibility after abandonment; thus, God saves the people, forming the community of God's saved and thereby granting an identity tied to God, while returning to an older mythic time. The solutions to God's abandonment lie not with the old traditions of Israel's kings but with older notions of God as their King." (Berquist 2007, p. 200).
- 16 In addition to the need to change the theological misconceptions and sociopolitical realities that shape people's posture towards prayers of lament, there is a need for accessible resources that would enable worship planners to integrate prayers of lament in church's liturgy (Carvalhoes 2020).
- 17 John D. Witvliet notes a resurgence of interest in prayers of lament: "Recent years have witnessed a recovery of prayers of lament, generally thought to be a neglected mode of prayer." (Witvliet 2007, p. 31). There are still long ways to go in integrating the theologies and praxis of the prayers of lament in public worship.
- 18 A crucial element of this formational process lies in the recognition of the dialogic nature of psalms of lament. The fact that they contain multiple voices within the same psalm allows for various theological worldviews and sociopolitical experiences to be expressed. See (Mandolfo 2002).
- 19 Brueggemann raises a pivotal question: "What difference does it make to have faith that permits and requires this form of prayer? My answer is that it shifts the calculus and *redresses the redistribution of power* between the two parties, so that the petitionary party is taken seriously and the God who is addressed is newly engaged in the crisis in a way that puts God at risk. As the lesser petitionary party (the psalm speaker) is legitimated, so the unmitigated supremacy of the greater party (God) is questioned, and God is made available to the petitioner. The basis for the conclusion that the petitioner is taken seriously and legitimately granted power in the relation is that the speech of the petitioner is heard, valued, and transmitted as serious speech. Culturally, we may assume that such speech is taken seriously by God. Such a speech pattern and social usage keep all power relations under review and capable of redefinition" (Brueggemann 1986, 1995).
- 20 Amy Cottrill raises a concern about the language of violence in psalms of lament, when she warns that the language of lament may become "dangerous in their desire to enlist God as a personal champion in order to relieve suffering by imposing suffering." (Cottrill 2008, p. 160). A similar concern is mentioned by Joel Lemon, in relation to imprecatory psalms (LeMon 2011, pp. 93–111). See the discussion (de Claissé-Walford 2011, pp. 77–92).
- 21 Incommensurability, for Brueggemann, means "that God is for God's self, concerned for God's own life and honor, whereby Israel is aware of the huge, decisive differential between itself and the God whom it praises." (Brueggemann 2005, pp. 581–602).
- 22 After a detailed literary analysis of Psalm 145, Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford suggests that the theme of God's reign is at the center of this acrostic psalm. "In Psalm 145, the acrostic form leads the reader to the center of the alephbeth and to the central message of the psalm found in the kaph, lamed, mem lines (vv. 11–13), the kingship of God. In addition, it leads the reader from an individual worshiper's praise and blessing of God as king (vv. 1, 2), through the praise and blessing of the covenant partners (v. 10), and finally to the praise and blessing of all flesh (v. 21)." (DeClaissé-Walford 2012, pp. 55–66).
- 23 Brueggemann and Bellinger observe, "In the series of participial statements that explicitly name YHWH, the recurring subject is the socially vulnerable and powerless who stand in need of an advocate: prisoners, the blind, the bowed down, strangers, widows, and orphans. This is indeed 'God's preferential option for the vulnerable and needy, the ones who are outsiders and who are kept outsiders in familiar economic arrangements in order to maintain a certain social power and social possibilities.'" (Brueggemann and Bellinger 2014, p. 607).
- 24 A similar connection between praise and social justice for the oppressed (the widow, the orphan, and the migrant) appears in the book of Deuteronomy 10:12–22. The identity of the worshipping community ought to be shaped by the identity of the God whom they worship. Since God loves the oppressed and the marginalized, the worshipping community that praises this God ought to embody the politics of justice, inclusion, and empowerment.
- 25 Jerome F. F. Creach offers helpful remarks on the wicked and the righteous in the book of Psalms. "The stance of the righteous before God sets them apart from the wicked. While the righteous praise God (33:1) and pray to God when in trouble (37:39–40), the wicked 'flatter themselves', as Ps 36:3 puts it; 'greedy for gain', the wicked 'curse and renounce the LORD' (10:3). This contrast between the righteous and the wicked is ubiquitous in the Psalms and appears in a variety of expressions. Thus, I am proposing that these two radically different ways of life constitute the basis of the theology of the Psalter, that virtually every theological problem or conviction in the book may be traced to the character of the righteous and to their uncertain future in relation to the wicked." (Creach 2011, pp. 50–51).

- ²⁶ Jerome F. F. Creach notes, “The term ṣāddīq (‘righteous’) in the Psalms refers to those who depend on God for protection (34:7), those who plead to God for forgiveness (38:18), and those who worship God in humility (17:15). Such persons are not morally pure; rather, they call on and align themselves with the righteousness of God (5:9). But perhaps most importantly, this word identifies a group of people powerless before an oppressive enemy and therefore seeking God’s mercy and justice (143).” (Creach 2011, p. 50).
- ²⁷ Commentators warn against the abuse of this psalm for the sake of waging a holy war in the name of God. James L. Mays writes, “Used as hymn and Scripture, Psalm 149 also provokes two unreconciled responses. Its call to eschatological war is of course the provocation. The call is heard, and must be heard, with an apprehension, because wars launched in the name of God and attempts to force the coming of the kingdom have brought cruel disaster.” (Mays 1994a). This apprehension, asserts Mays, does not mean that the faithful will not confront the abuse of power. Faithfulness will in many cases mean being in conflict with the “purposes of the nations and their rulers”. Words of truth to power may function as “powerful weapons against those who cause or allow others to suffer injustice.” (Declaissé-Walford et al. 2014, p. 1008). Hossfeld and Zenger go on to note that “not only Israel but also the nations of the earth will be freed from violent and exploitative regimes, and YHWH will exercise his just royal rule on and from Zion.” (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011, p. 652).
- ²⁸ Biblical perspectives on the sea monsters vary. In the creation story in Genesis 1, sea monsters were created by God (Genesis 1:21). In other traditions, such as Psalm 74 and Isaiah 51, these sea creatures represent chaos that threatens God’s created order. Psalm 148 “not only deprives the monsters of chaos and the primeval floods of their menace but, on the contrary, exhorts them, through their praise of YHWH, to make a constructive contribution to the world as YHWH’s creation.” (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011, pp. 637–38).

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