

# DIVINE ILLOCUTIONS IN PSALM 137

A CRITIQUE OF NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF'S

'SECOND HERMENEUTIC'

Kit Barker

## Summary

*Recent years have witnessed renewed interest in understanding Scripture as divine communication, a move which reconnects the academy with ecclesiological concerns. Those involved in theological hermeneutics have drawn upon advances in a wide range of disciplines in order to develop and defend their methodologies. From the fields of communication theory and pragmatics, speech act theory has been proffered by some as providing insightful analysis of the anatomy of communication and, in particular, authorial intention. Nicholas Wolterstorff's, Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks is representative of such works. Drawing heavily upon speech act theory, Wolterstorff defends a model of interpretation that prioritises authorial intention. Furthermore, Wolterstorff's conviction that Scripture is both human and divine discourse leads him to a two-stage hermeneutic. This paper will offer an explanation and critique of Wolterstorff's move from the first to the second hermeneutic in his interpretation of Psalm 137. It will conclude that while Wolterstorff's method does account for the divine intention in part, it ultimately suffers from both a limited connection to speech act theory and a failure to appreciate the nature of communication at higher (especially generic) levels. In addressing these methodological deficiencies, the paper will present Psalm 137 as an authoritative canonical text by clarifying how it continues to function as divine discourse.*

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline and critique Nicholas Wolterstorff's theological hermeneutic. In particular, his movement from what he labels 'the first' to 'the second' hermeneutic will be examined in light of its application to Psalm 137.

Wolterstorff believes interpretation is a moral activity and that the meaning of a text is determined by actions performed by the author. With respect to Scripture, he believes that the entire canon functions not only as a collection of communicative acts by the various biblical authors but that it also functions in its entirety as God's communicative action. These basic presuppositions are brought together with the aid of speech act theory in the work of Wolterstorff to varying degrees of success. However, not everyone agrees with this assessment. Brevard Childs concludes the following,

Wolterstorff's application of speech-act theory to biblical interpretation is deeply flawed. His book *Divine Discourse* cannot be deemed hermeneutically successful, nor does it point in a fruitful direction for the serious interpretation of sacred scripture.<sup>1</sup>

My criticism of his work, however, will not be that he has pointed us in the wrong direction. I believe that his reconceptualisation of hermeneutics in terms of speech act theory is insightful and his attempt to account for the divine authorship of Scripture is commendable. Both these features of his work point in fruitful directions. However, his proposal is ultimately unsatisfying. While pointing the way forward, the details of Wolterstorff's own hermeneutic and the limited examples of its application do not adequately account for the issues that he raised. The failure of this work to deliver something more substantial is largely due to its neglect to account for how texts communicate at larger generic and (in the case of Scripture) canonical levels. I conclude that while Wolterstorff has pointed us in the right direction in terms of interpretative goals, his own hermeneutic is not sufficient to reach them. Standing on his shoulders, I hope to offer a number of methodological principles that may ameliorate this situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Brevard S. Childs, 'Speech-act Theory and Biblical Interpretation', *SJT* 58, 4 (2005): 391.

## 2. Speech Act Theory

The past century witnessed major changes in philosophy and in linguistics in particular. The ‘linguistic turn’, as this shift in emphasis came to be known, involved both structuralist and then poststructuralist philosophies, both of which diminished the importance of the author. Speech act theory represents one line of resistance to this shift in philosophy as it defends pre-critical understandings of reality and language that prioritise the role of the author in determining linguistic meaning.<sup>2</sup> In the last couple of decades Christian scholars have attempted to draw upon speech act theory as either a tool for exegesis or more systemically as a tool to reconceptualise theological hermeneutics,<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff is representative of this latter group.

Speech act theory is a sub-discipline of the philosophy of language and was founded by J. L. Austin and his student John Searle.<sup>4</sup> Austin’s central idea is that in making a statement one is performing an action. He isolated three types of linguistic actions that can occur when we communicate verbally: the locutionary act—the uttering of the words; the illocutionary act—what we do in uttering the words (understood as the meaning of the sentence); and the perlocutionary act—what we bring about by uttering the words.<sup>5</sup> The following example may be

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that while speech act theory has also been employed by those holding to non-realist philosophies, the originators and developers of the theory were hermeneutic realists.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture’s Diverse Literary Forms’ in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Leicester: IVP, 1986): 53-104; K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); K. J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995); Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, (2nd edn; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). J. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). J. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Their contributions to the theory have been characterised in the following way: ‘If Austin is the Luther of speech act philosophy, John Searle may be considered its Melancthon—Its Systematic Theologian’ (Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 209).

<sup>5</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, chs. 8,9,10. Though these distinctions are sometimes contested, most scholars are willing to speak in terms of these three components: locution, illocution, and perlocution.

helpful. The locution, ‘It’s after 9pm’, can be used to perform a number of actions and, consequently, can take on an equal number of meanings. It may be an assertion (e.g. a public service announcement). It may be a question (e.g. ‘Where are you?’). It may be a request (e.g. ‘I would prefer decaf over regular coffee’). It may be a command to one’s children (e.g. ‘Time for bed’).

The locution, ‘It’s after 9pm’, is used to perform the illocutionary act that gives the sentence meaning. The context or background provides the normative conditions that make this sentence intelligible. The perlocution is the effect of your illocutionary act upon the person to whom you were speaking. You may or may not get the result you wanted, but the meaning of the sentence is based on which illocutionary act you committed according to the normative conditions.

### 3. Wolterstorff’s Hermeneutics

In employing speech act theory Wolterstorff is arguing for authorial discourse interpretation. One of his initial concerns is to defend the morality involved in communication by highlighting the responsibilities of both the speaker and the audience.<sup>6</sup> Wolterstorff suggests that speaking is a public action that is open to being interpreted in conventional terms. By this he means that because of the presence of ‘normative conditions’ a speaker is able to acquire a ‘normative standing’ in the public arena. His example from the courtroom might be helpful.

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<sup>6</sup> This is an improvement on Searle’s position which states that of all the illocutionary acts, declarations are unique in that they bring about a change in ‘the status or condition of the referred to object or objects solely in virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed’. Timothy Ward notes the following, ‘What Wolterstorff has done is effectively to show the failure of Searle’s categories by demonstrating that what Searle describes as unique to “declarations” is in fact true of every speech act. Even by just asserting something to someone, the speaker (*prima facie*) changes the status of both himself and his addressee, for his assertion implies a reference to himself as someone who undertakes to be asserting truly and on good grounds, and to the addressee as someone who is obligated to believe the speaker on those grounds. In short, Wolterstorff’s concept of speech may be regarded as a rigorous development of the implications of human action in general and speaking in particular of Austin’s initial observation that to speak is not to communicate but to act, taking proper account of the fact that speech acts are always performed in a relational and moral environment.’ (Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 98-99.)

It is because normative conditions have been attached to the pronouncing of so innocuous a word as **guilty**, and because the pronouncing of that word has been invested with normative import, that by pronouncing this word we can speak. By the acquisition of normative standings, we take up the material world into our service. But even more important for our subsequent purposes is the fact that to speak is not, as such, to express one's inner self but to take up a normative stance in the public domain.<sup>7</sup>

For Wolterstorff, this account of communication acts as a defence for authorial discourse interpretation, which again locates the meaning of the utterance or text in the intention of the author, and specifically in the illocutionary act they have performed. This, in turn, determines the nature of interpretative goals. To interpret an utterance or text is to understand what illocutionary act(s) a speaker has performed.

Having adopted a speech act description of communicative action, Wolterstorff's convictions concerning the divine authorship of Scripture move him to demonstrate that the locutionary and illocutionary acts of the human authors of Scripture count as the illocutionary acts of God.<sup>8</sup> He suggests that God appropriates the human discourse as his discourse.<sup>9</sup> However, he also rightly determines that this simply cannot be the case in every situation. God cannot be understood to appropriate every human illocution found in Scripture. David's request of, 'Cleanse me', in Psalm 51 is one of many examples which demonstrate how absurd this would be.

Therefore, Wolterstorff's discussion of dual authorship leads him to conclude that two separate but related hermeneutics are required. He labels them the 'first' and 'second' hermeneutic referring to a focus on the human and divine intentions respectively.<sup>10</sup>

Wolterstorff also suggests that there are times when God, in appropriating the human discourse, will not only do with the text what the human author did, but he will also do something different. In

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<sup>7</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> 'In short, contemporary speech-action theory opens up the possibility of a whole new way of thinking about God speaking: perhaps the attribution of speech to God by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, should be understood as the attribution to God of *illocutionary actions*, leaving it open how God performs those actions—maybe by bringing about the sounds or characters of some natural language, maybe not.' (Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 13).

<sup>9</sup> Francis Watson would add that the notion of appropriation should be supplemented with the conviction that the appropriated communication is still initiated by God (private conversation, November 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, chs. 11,12.

speech act terms this we would mean that God performs different illocutions, that God means something the human author may not have meant. Here lies the crux of the problem. If there are times when, in appropriating the text, God does not appropriate all of the illocutions or performs different illocutions, how is God's illocutionary act related to the locutions and illocutions of the human author? In terms of a hermeneutic, how is one able to defend their particular interpretation of the divine discourse when God's communicative act diverges from the human's communicative act?<sup>11</sup>

At this point, it should be noted that Wolterstorff's project bears similarities to *sensus plenior* approaches to hermeneutics and in turn faces similar challenges. The general objection to such approaches is that interpretation becomes subjective, having no clear link to the human author's original meaning (though not all interpreters would object to this subjectivity). Wolterstorff acknowledges this problem and concludes his discussion with the following caution about Scripture becoming a wax nose:

I conclude that there is no way to avoid employing our convictions as to what is true and loving in the process of interpreting for divine discourse—no way to circumvent doing that which evokes the wax-nose anxiety, the anxiety, namely, that the convictions with which we approach the process of interpretation may lead us to miss discerning what God said and to conclude that God said what God did not say. The anxiety is appropriate, eminently appropriate, and will always be appropriate. Only with awe and apprehension, sometimes even fear and trembling, and only after prayer and fasting, is it appropriate to interpret a text so as to discern what God said and is saying thereby. The risks cannot be evaded.<sup>12</sup>

While his ultimate conclusions do not inspire confidence in the hermeneutical endeavour, Wolterstorff does offer five options (or patterns that he has found) for moving from the human to the divine discourse when it seems clear that God is not appropriating the illocutions of the human author.

The first pattern is that it might be necessary to change the 'rhetorico-conceptual structure' to move from the human to divine discourse. He cites the example of Paul declaring, 'God, whom I

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<sup>11</sup> In other words, when God performs a different speech act to the human author (and I would agree with Wolterstorff that God often does), how do we defend our interpretative conclusions?

<sup>12</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 236.

serve...’, and notes that this declaration makes no sense if it is attributed by appropriation to God.

Wolterstorff’s second pattern occurs in cases where he suggests God appropriates the main point but not all the points that the human author was making. Therefore, there are times when we can discard the way the point was made by the human author. He cites Psalm 93 as an example where God could not be affirming what Wolterstorff believes reflects, ‘...geocentric cosmology widely shared among the people of antiquity’.<sup>13</sup>

The third pattern is that God may speak ‘tropically’ (or metaphorically) when the human writer speaks ‘literally’. He cites Psalm 137 as an example of this situation, a claim to which we will return in a moment.

Fourthly, Wolterstorff suggests that some cases can be explained by what he calls ‘transitive discourse’. He defines this as the ‘phenomenon of one act of discourse on the part of a person counting as another act of discourse on the part of that same person’.<sup>14</sup> Parables and allegories are examples of transitive discourse.

Lastly, Wolterstorff makes a distinction between specificity and generality. This distinction is used to explain cases where it might happen that God is speaking specifically to a particular people on a particular subject that does not directly apply to all people in all times and places. Wolterstorff uses the example of Paul requiring women to be silent and suggests this might be a case where God is not performing a general command.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to critique all five patterns of interpretation that Wolterstorff proposes, though much could be said on this. The remainder of this paper will critique Wolterstorff’s interpretation of Psalm 137 in terms of the above patterns and offer some suggestions for how his proposal might be improved.

#### 4. Wolterstorff on Psalm 137

As mentioned earlier, Wolterstorff suggests that God could not be performing the same speech acts as the psalmist in this case. He offers

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<sup>13</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 209.

<sup>14</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 213.

pattern number two which states that while the human author has spoken literally, God must be taken to be speaking tropically. He says,

I find it difficult to believe that the human author of these last two sentences was not using them literally, not saying just what those words mean: out of angry grief speaking a blessing on those who would take Babylonian infants and smash them against rocks. But the church has rarely if ever concluded that, with these words, *God* was speaking that blessing. It has taken God to be expressing opposition to whatever opposes God's reign; and to get to that, it has always construed these words tropically, as a metaphor cluster.<sup>15</sup>

Wolterstorff also considers the possibility that rather than applying the tropical interpretation, the main point vs ancillary point method might be better suited to this passage. However, he concludes that the main point of the psalm is indeed the call for God to wreak vengeance on the Babylonians. Thus, this main point cannot be God's and we must evoke a metaphorical interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

To summarise, Wolterstorff believes that in appropriating this text God is merely using it to state that he opposes those who oppose him. Unfortunately, in making this reductionistic move Wolterstorff cannot fully appreciate the Psalm's communicative activity as divine discourse.

## 5. Critique of Wolterstorff

There are at least three problems with Wolterstorff's proposal that lead him to this reductionism. First, his metaphorical interpretation leads him to the very conclusions he was attempting to avoid (not to mention a level of subjectivity that is ultimately unhelpful). Wolterstorff suggests that God is appropriating the text metaphorically and in doing so merely performs the illocutionary act of expressing opposition to his enemies. Unfortunately, this metaphorical interpretation has simply led to another version of the main point vs ancillary point hermeneutic which has deemed the original main points to be unintelligible for God or incompatible with his character. Having just argued that a metaphorical approach was preferable to a main point approach which ignores the ancillary points, he has substituted an approach that similarly ignores the main point. Surely this is an even less satisfying result.

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<sup>15</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 211-12.

<sup>16</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 216-17.

In addition to this problem, Wolterstorff's interpretation fails to appreciate how communication occurs through genre. Genre provides us with the normative conditions that enable us to adopt a normative stance towards the text. Wolterstorff has not struggled with the genre of the Psalms and what it would mean for God to appropriate this text in this genre. After his second hermeneutic has been applied Wolterstorff is left with something that resembles a creed, and a very short one, rather than a psalm. It is an unsatisfying method that turns Old Testament psalms into short, new covenant creeds. The very purpose of the psalms is lost in this move.

The third problem is one that Wolterstorff himself has highlighted previously in his discussion. He argued that to discern the divine voice in Scripture, one must treat the Scriptures as a single book, thus implying a canonical approach to interpretation. He states,

...to discern what God is saying by way of the Bible, we have to take these sixty-six or so biblical books *together*... We the interpreters have to juggle tentative interpretations of the parts of the text until we arrive at the best interpretation of the total text—at that interpretation which has the highest probability of being the totality of what he intended to say with this total text.<sup>17</sup>

When it comes to interpreting this psalm, the omission of a canonical discussion is a glaring inconsistency. He alludes to the fact that our knowledge of God affects our decision of which speech acts we may attribute to him. But this statement begs for a canonical discussion of God's character.

To summarise, with aid of speech act theory Wolterstorff has provided a cogent defence of authorial discourse interpretation. He has also demonstrated the need to account for Scripture as divine discourse. The use of speech act theory has highlighted the hermeneutical problems associated with a doctrine of dual authorship by exposing the fact that there are times when God must perform illocutionary acts with a text that are divergent from the human author's illocutionary acts. However, for the reasons stated above, Wolterstorff has not provided a clear or satisfying account of how we might move from the first to the second hermeneutic.

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<sup>17</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 205.

## 6. An Ameliorated Hermeneutic

In response to Wolterstorff's interpretation of Psalm 137 I will now attempt to offer an alternative account of how this psalm continues to function as divine discourse. I will suggest that God has performed and continues to perform illocutionary acts by appropriating Psalm 137 as his communicative action.

To interpret Psalm 137 in terms of divine discourse I would suggest that speech act theory be employed at the level of genre and canon in order to investigate the possibilities of supervening divine illocutions.<sup>18</sup>

With respect to genre, it is important to note that the psalms like 137 function not only as individual prayers but also as paradigms for future prayer. It can be concluded that while the original psalmist performed illocutionary acts of petition and praise, the inclusion of the psalm in the Psalter means that certain generic illocutions supervene upon the individual psalm. In the case of Psalms addressed to God, such generic illocutions would include the instruction to 'pray like this in this kind of situation'. In the case of imprecatory psalms more specifically, the generic illocutions would include: 'crying for justice is an appropriate response to extreme violence'.<sup>19</sup> More specifically, the sub-generic illocutions of the imprecatory psalms might include the following: the assertion that vengeance is the Lord's, the call to surrender retribution to him, and the implicit command not to exceed commensurate levels of judgment.

When we understand that the psalms provided patterns of prayer, a fuller range of illocutions is uncovered.<sup>20</sup> The meaning of the Psalm must be understood in terms of its total communicative act.

When we come to address the issue of divine discourse in the psalms, the move to the second hermeneutic as Wolterstorff puts it, is much less complicated. Rather than a truncated understanding of what the psalms might offer us in terms of divine illocution, I would propose that psalms like 137 be understood as divinely sanctioned human

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<sup>18</sup> This is a hermeneutic that Kevin Vanhoozer has been suggesting for a number of years though he himself has not provided a speech act theory based hermeneutic nor any clear examples of how this would affect exegesis.

<sup>19</sup> For similar conclusions see the following: John Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach Us about Mercy and Violence in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005). David Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaints* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> This is what Vanhoozer might speak of as a 'thick' description.

responses. In other words, God is appropriating the generic illocutions rather than the original illocutions of the human author at the time of the prayer. In Psalm 137, God is not appropriating the illocution of self-imprecation requesting that 'his hand might wither', nor is he appropriating a memory of captivity which he did not experience, nor is he appropriating the request that he himself remember the evil actions of the Edomites. Rather, God is appropriating the entire psalm as a proper response to extreme violence. This also means that he appropriates a number of secondary or ancillary illocutions along the way. Wherever the Psalmist affirms something about reality, God would also affirm that same thing, etc. However, the main point that the human author of psalm is making is also the main point that God is making: respond like this when faced with this kind of circumstance.

In terms of generic illocution, this psalm is not anomalous in its content or force. There are many psalms that represent similar responses. Furthermore, all of the imprecatory psalms are consistent with the themes found in Psalm 2, particularly the warning to 'Kiss the Son' or suffer his wrath. As Psalm 2 arguably functions as a type of introduction to the Psalter, the presence of the imprecatory psalms is hardly surprising. When considering the context of the Psalter within the Old Testament canon, similar illocutionary acts can be uncovered. The promises of God to bring judgment upon the Babylonians as recorded in the prophets are an example of a direct parallel.<sup>21</sup>

In the Old Testament context, psalms addressed to God function as divinely sanctioned responses to similar situations. God is appropriating the psalms as his discourse to his people, yet this needs to be understood at the generic level where the primary illocutionary act of sanctioning occurs.

Now this raises some important issues when Psalm 137 is understood as part of the Christian canon. It is commonplace to jettison the prayer of imprecation as a quick scan of many liturgies will reveal. Likewise, most writers will suggest that this desire for the destruction of one's enemies is at odds with a New Testament, new covenant ethic. This sentiment drives Wolterstorff and others to assume that God is not currently sanctioning the attitude or actions of this Psalm (if indeed he ever did). Francis Watson has addressed this very psalm in terms of its continuing illocutionary force.

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<sup>21</sup> E.g. Isa. 13; Jer. 51:56.

The urgent imperative not to forget Jerusalem is followed by a blessing on those who perpetrate frightful acts of violence on the children of Jerusalem's enemies. The implied reader is expected to acquiesce in this judgment, and the text may therefore be said to perform the speech-act of inciting hatred—hatred of a particularly intense and extreme kind.

There are no general ethical or pragmatic criteria which could determine that this speech-act is inappropriate. The writer's hostility towards the children of Babylon is not unmotivated but originates in actual atrocities committed against Jewish children. If, perhaps with this psalm in mind, survivors of Auschwitz expressed the desire that their tormentors' children should suffer the treatment that their fathers inflicted on Jewish children, the proper response might be to keep silence rather than to deliver a lecture on the importance of forgiveness. In an extreme situation such as this, and as part of the holy scripture of the Jewish community, Ps. 137 as a whole might still enact its communicative intention in the most direct manner.

In its context within Christian scripture, however, that could never be the case. Christian victims of oppression could never legitimately appropriate this psalm in its entirety, however extreme their sufferings; and its use in Christian liturgical contexts can in no circumstances be justified. Although the psalm as a whole belongs to Christian scripture, it is not permitted to enact its total communicative intention: for all communicative actions embodied in holy scripture are subject to the criteria established by the speech-act that lies at the centre of Christian scripture, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the enfleshment and the enactment of the divine Word.<sup>22</sup>

Watson's conclusions are echoed by most contemporary interpreters... prayers like this psalm cannot be uttered by Christians. The New Testament calls to forgive, to love one's enemies and to imitate Christ are understood as antithetical to the attitude expressed in this psalm. Thus, the New Testament is given hermeneutical priority and in speech act terms, its illocutions supervene upon earlier antithetical illocutions by creating a community which does not possess the normative conditions to allow those illocutionary forces to remain in play. Watson explains this interpretation by appealing to what he calls the centre of Scriptural communication. This centre, with its accompanying illocutionary forces, shapes the illocutionary force of individual texts. In his estimation this centre is 'the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the enfleshment and the enactment of the divine word' and it is this centre which cannot allow the original illocutionary forces to remain in

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<sup>22</sup> Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997): 119-21.

play for the Christian community. This is an improvement upon Wolterstorff's position in that it provides us with intratextual principles that are open to discussion.

Two brief responses to this interpretation will highlight some important issues. First, the primary illocution of this psalm is not 'inciting hatred'. Rather, it was a call for God to be faithful to his covenant.<sup>23</sup> Through this Psalm, both the human and the divine authors call the community to surrender retribution to the Lord and encourage them to remain faithful. The psalm also provided a paradigm of prayer for future generations by sanctioning a cry for justice in cases of extreme persecution, a cry that was consistent with God's revealed covenant promises to his people.

Secondly, and more importantly in terms of developing hermeneutical principles, any presence of a Scriptural 'centre' would by definition supervene upon the entire text. While any particular formulation of this centre would need to be defended, Watson's proposal of 'the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the enfleshment and the enactment of the divine Word' will be employed for the sake of discussion. Watson has stated that this centre nullifies the illocutionary stance of the earlier Psalm. However, upon closer investigation, it can be argued that this centre does not contradict the illocutionary stance of Psalm 137 but in fact reinforces it. Wolterstorff and Watson have simply stated that God could not be performing this speech act. They have not demonstrated why.

I have suggested that the psalms originally functioned as divinely sanctioned responses to commensurate situations. What needs to be determined is if there has been any change in the normative conditions that would nullify or alter the original divine illocutions. If the presentation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and its application throughout the NT writings is demonstrated to be inconsistent with a context that would sanction imprecation then a decision to reject imprecation would be appropriate. However, I would propose that the nature of the gospel and the illocutionary forces within the New Testament demonstrate a consistency with the imprecation of Psalm 137. The following examples highlight this point.

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<sup>23</sup> The promised destruction of Babylon is a common theme in both Testaments. Note in particular the previous promise of YHWH to 'dash to pieces' 'the infants' of the Babylonians (Isa. 13:16).

The pattern of prayer that Jesus instituted calls first and foremost that God be glorified and that his kingdom come. The coming of the kingdom of God is synonymous with the Day of the Lord and his final rule where all his enemies will bow the knee before being destroyed. The call to repent in light of the immanent kingdom is also indicative of this reality. The force of this prayer is not always fully appreciated.

Secondly, instances of imprecation are found within the NT in Jesus' own acts of cursing and also in Paul's imprecatory cries in Galatians and Corinthians.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the book of Revelation contains not only the cries of the martyrs in chapter 6 but also a call to rejoice in the destruction of Babylon in 18:20 with Babylon being commonly understood to represent the enemies of God and his people.

Finally, the New Testament paints an awful portrait for those who reject the revelation of God's justice and love in the sacrifice of his Son. While this brief list would need to be discussed in some detail, it argues against a hasty rejection of Psalm 137 as non-Christian.

It is true that the New Testament calls us to love our neighbours and even our enemies, but this does not silence those parts of the New Testament that call us to have a passion for God's glory and a corresponding concern for justice to be done. These two summonses should not be divorced.<sup>25</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

God's appropriation of Psalms like 137 should be understood at the generic level. This means that God is sanctioning these psalms as appropriate responses to extreme violence. In speech act terminology God is performing a generic illocution of 'pray like this when faced with similar situations'. The canonical witness consistently supports such an attitude as there are no apparent supervening illocutions that would nullify or significantly alter the original way in which God appropriated this text. In the end, the burden of proof is upon those who suggest the illocutionary stance of the New Testament is incommensurate with the illocutionary stance of the Psalter.

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<sup>24</sup> See John Day, *Crying for Justice*, for an extended discussion.

<sup>25</sup> The scope of this paper has not permitted a discussion of the New Testament illocutionary acts which call Christians to love and forgive their enemies. It is my belief that these illocutions are commensurate with prayers of imprecation, but this discussion deserves far more detail than was possible in this paper.