Difficult texts

Grappling with violence in scripture

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Editor's note: Christians who take seriously the words of Jesus about loving enemies (Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36) and Paul's exhortation to live peaceably with all (Rom. 12:14–21) will struggle with passages in the Bible that appear to justify violence. What do we do with difficult scripture passages? We asked biblical scholars to tell us how they come to terms with troublesome texts.

Psalm 109: A Psalm of imprecation

Sheila Klassen-Wiebe

When the Psalms are used in Christian worship services, they are used primarily in the context of praise and thanksgiving, although psalms of penitence and petition are also often read. The psalms of imprecation or "cursing psalms" rarely appear in Christian worship services. A psalm beloved by many is Psalm 139, a beautiful prayer to God who knows us intimately and will never forsake us. Almost always, though, the reading of this Psalm ends with verse 18, omitting the last six verses. This is because verse 19 continues with these jarring words:

> *O that you would kill the wicked, O God,*
> *and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me. . . .*
> *Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?*
> *And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?*

Equally disturbing are the final words of Psalm 137: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

Such expressions of vengeance appear in many psalms, but there are nine where the focus is almost entirely on imprecation (Psalms 7, 35, 58,

59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 140). Of these, Psalm 109 is perhaps the most vehement and vindictive.

The imprecatory psalms could be considered a type of lament psalm, for they are expressions of deep anger and sorrow about suffering experienced by an individual or a community. In these psalms, the speaker rages against those who have harmed him and his people, and he cries out to God for vengeance against the enemy. The psalmist uses harsh and bitter language to characterize his antagonist. In Psalm 109 the foes are said to have "wicked and deceitful mouths," "lying tongues," and "hateful words." Elsewhere the foes are called "bloodthirsty," "violent," "persecutors," "taunters and revilers," and so on. In Psalm 109 the psalmist laments that his enemies have returned his love and good deeds with hatred and evil.

These psalms vividly embody a common human experience—that of anger, even rage, against suffering and injustice.

And so, out of this experience of suffering, trauma, and marginalization, the Psalmist cries out to God for vengeance. He curses his enemies and prays that God will make them suffer like he has suffered. The imagery in Psalm 109:18–19 is striking, as the Psalmist pleads for God's curse to wrap itself around his opponent like a cloak and for it to soak into his body like poisonous oil. Also remarkable is how often the enemy's family is mentioned, as if to amplify the ripple effects of the harm that the psalmist wishes on his foe—for example: "May his children be orphans and his wife a widow. May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit" (vv. 9–10). It is not just the wrongdoer who is supposed to feel the heat of God's judgment but also his entire family.

Followers of Jesus, who take seriously Jesus's words to love their enemies, struggle to make sense of these challenging texts and violent words. The following three insights can be helpful for understanding the imprecatory psalms.[1] First, these psalms vividly embody a common human experience—that of anger, even rage, against suffering and injustice. Many Christians—and certainly many Mennonites—feel discomfort with the raw honesty and intense anger in these psalms. In our history Mennonites have been known as "the quiet in the land," and our commitment to

1 Here I am drawing on the work of James H. Waltner, *Psalms*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Herald, 2006).

peace and nonviolence has resulted in the avoidance of conflict, sometimes to the detriment of right relationships. How dare the psalmist say such things out loud to the holy and loving God! Even if one feels such things, one should surely keep them stuffed inside. The psalms of imprecation, however, model that human beings can bring their whole selves to God, that we can with honesty and candor express our anger and pain and even hatred of others to God. It is a way of releasing those strong emotions and entrusting them to the Creator who can handle them. As James Waltner writes in his commentary on the Psalms, "The prayer out of hatred that says, 'I am fed up,' can be a first step in relinquishing that hatred to God. Pouring out bitterness and hurt can be the beginning of healing."[2]

Second, the strong emotions in the imprecatory psalms are there because the speaker is the victim of injustice. In Psalm 109 the word "needy" or phrase "poor and needy" appears three times. Verse 16 states that the enemy "did not remember to show kindness [Hebrew *chesed*] but pursued the poor and needy and the broken-hearted to their death." The psalmist writes, "For I am poor and needy and my heart is pierced within me" (v. 22). He is not only venting his emotions but calling out to God, who "stands at the right hand of the needy to save them from those who would condemn them to death" (v. 31). The imprecatory psalms are the cries "for justice by oppressed and powerless people."[3] In contrast to the enemy, God does show *chesed*, or steadfast love, by delivering the oppressed and raising up the poor. The language of prayer thus becomes an instrument of liberation for those who suffer from injustice. These psalms are expressions of faith in God and trust that God's righteousness and desire for shalom *must* prevail.

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Third, it is important to note that the imprecatory psalms are not *acts* of vengeance but *desire* for vengeance. To be sure, speech can wound and be violent. But, notes Waltner, "in the psalms, the speech of vengeance is characteristically offered to God, not directly to the enemy."[4] Psalm 109 begins, "Do not be silent, O God of my praise," and verse 21 says, "But

2 Waltner, *Psalms*, 756.

3 Waltner, *Psalms*, 755.

4 Waltner, *Psalms*, 755.

you, O Lord my Lord, act on my behalf for your name's sake." The psalms of imprecation recognize that injustice against God's creatures is an injustice against God and God's moral order, and they call on *God* to do something about it. They are bold acts of faith that relinquish to God the deep pain and rage caused by injustice; they relinquish the right to enact violence against the enemy and leave vengeance where it belongs—in the hands of God (cf. Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19).

Psalm 137: Finding room for human emotion

Sunder John Boopalan

The psalms offer us an image of God that portrays God as one who keeps track of human sorrow and tenderly collects our tears in a bottle (56:8). They invite us to take stock of what it means to have faith in a God who invites human emotion—so much so that liturgical space is made even for the kind of language we find in Psalm 137.

Psalm 137 does not mince its words. The Jewish people find themselves in exile, in the hands of their Babylonian oppressors, who are taunting them to sing a song during a time of extreme suffering. And they do: "Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (vv. 8–9)

Contrary to the notion that the text promotes violence, what it represents is the fact that God allows for the expression of the full range of human emotions—not just positive ones. Positive emotions can, do, and should have a place in individual and congregational life. I wonder, however, if congregations are terrified of the emotion captured in Psalm 137. I further wonder if such unease is part of a larger insufficiently articulated Christian anxiety over negative feelings associated with suffering loss and harm. Let me give an example.

My mother died on August 13, 2024. I was and am still heartbroken. After my return to regular university teaching, a colleague reached out to have a coffee chat and expressed their condolences to me. After a few minutes into the conversation, they asked me a question that, to put it mildly, irritated me: "What brings you *joy* these days?"

Did I, as a good Christian, have to describe my "joy" during my time of mourning? My interlocutor had a point of view that lament had to

somehow be sandwiched between praise. I wondered if God, the creator of the universe, could not handle human sorrow as a legitimate existential state. In this context, Psalm 137 is interesting because the writer of the Psalm does not feel a burden to end the Psalm with a note of praise. There is no notion here that lament had to be somehow sandwiched between praise. The words are raw as are the emotions.

Can pious religious people express *that much* anger and emotion? Yes, and that can be terrifying. As we read psalms like Psalm 137, we encounter intense lament as a legitimate category of creaturely encounter with God.

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In his insightful essay "Singing a Subversive Song," Rodney S. Sadler Jr. shares various instances of how imprecation gives voice to peoples experiencing various forms of harm and injustice. Cuban exile Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz finds in Psalm 137 words to expresses her feelings toward those who forced her exile. From the Nigerian context, David Adamo highlights how, instead of seeing Psalm 137 as representation of violence, it is seen as a "protective Psalm." Samuel Murrell, representing the Rastafarian worldview, argues that Psalm 137 allows for a full description of the horrors of slavery and the desire of those in the African Diaspora to "chant down Babylon." And Brad Braxton, referring to the experience of African Americans, argues that Psalm 137 is helpful to understand "the rage" that experiences of political and economic slavery "produce within us."[5]

"Making sense of loss and pain," writes John J. Ahn, "transcends class distinctions and cultures separated by time and geography."[6] Loss can bring people closer to each other's lives and worlds. Sadler's examples are evidence of such a connection. In a world that is filled with so many instances of extraordinary injustice, I have hope that expressing intense emotion in God's presence might bring me closer to others' sorrows and

5 Rodney S. Sadler Jr., "Singing a Subversive Song: Psalm 137 and 'Colored Pompey,'" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2014), 449–50.

6 John J. Ahn, "Rising from Generation to Generation: Lament, Hope, Consciousness, Home, and Dream," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2014), 464.

wounds. After all, I do believe in a God whose final act involves moving close to people's pain and wiping "every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4).

Weeping alongside Nahum: An empathetic approach to a violent book

Derek Suderman

We often gravitate toward certain biblical passages and have an aversion to others. As Mennonites, we may be especially prone to focus on "peace passages," while sidelining or functionally dismissing biblical passages that seem in tension with Jesus's call to be peacemakers.

Little wonder that Nahum's strident language and unsettling depiction of God don't garner much attention. We may struggle to make it past the first couple of verses:

> *An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.*
> *A jealous and avenging God is the LORD,*
> *the LORD is avenging and wrathful;*
> *the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries*
> *and rages against his enemies.*

While we may be tempted to dismiss such an understanding, we are faced with a dilemma when we hold Nahum alongside another familiar passage:

> *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)*

Where appeals to this passage often appear in abstract debates between theological "conservatives" and "liberals," its implication is more basic—and challenging. If "all scripture is inspired by God" *and* Nahum is part of our scripture, then we are not easily left off the hook. Rather than defending this book, on the one hand, or arguing against it, on the other, we are left with a basic question: How might Nahum be *useful*? How could it enhance our teaching, correct our perspective, and even train us

in discipleship? How might this brief and largely unknown cul-de-sac in Scripture provide a window into the gospel? Can it?[7]

Reading the book of Nahum, I see the indelible marks of trauma. The devasting experience of being victimized by an oppressive and horrifically violent Assyrian empire raised excruciating questions: How can we believe in an Almighty God in the face of such horrific abuse and violence? Will these "evildoers" get away with it? Doesn't God even care?

Tragically, these visceral questions are also faced by untold millions in our own day as well. Contemporary and well-publicized horrors in Gaza and Ukraine join with long-standing conflicts in South Sudan, the Congo, Myanmar, Colombia, and elsewhere that receive scant attention.

While there is no ancient monopoly on suffering, for some of us it feels a world away. I would suggest that Nahum may be useful for us as followers of Jesus precisely because it may help to *puncture this insulation* from suffering. Reading Nahum as trauma literature can push us beyond abstract philosophical arguments, challenging us instead to provide an empathetic ear to those who have suffered under horrific circumstances both in biblical times and in our contemporary world.[8]

During a learning tour to Israel and Palestine several years ago, our group met a Palestinian NGO worker in the West Bank, whose words still ring in my ears: "No one here suffers from PTSD—because there is no *post*." On the same trip, one of our most hopeful encounters was with members of a group made up of Palestinian and Israeli parents of children who had been killed in the ongoing conflict. Connected through the agony of grief, these parents expressed the powerful conviction that violence must end to spare more parents their experience.

While it was difficult to fathom the strength these parents required to share with us such painful and intimate experiences, later I found out that one of the key precipitating factors for the development of trauma lies in

7 It is worth noting that some early Anabaptist material cited Nahum positively, even alongside the Sermon on the Mount. See Derek Suderman, "Tackling Violence in the Prophets as a People of Peace: Anabaptist Hermeneutics Then and Now," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 98 (July 2024): 245–83.

8 For discussion of these issues with respect to the theological function of lament language and contemporary debates regarding God and violence respectively, see Derek Suderman, "The Cost of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6.2 (2012): 201–17; Derek Suderman, "Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God: A Response to Eric Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior*," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 40, no. 2 (2011): 151–62.

the lack of an empathetic witness—and that those who are able to voice their pain and share their experience are better able to move through their struggle and somehow emerge on the other side. While we felt simultaneously moved and helpless before their suffering, providing a listening ear to these parents perhaps made a small contribution.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15)—and so to function as an empathetic witness.

Seeing Nahum as trauma literature does not whitewash or excuse it. We are right to question its apparent misogyny and be profoundly disturbed by its portrayal of God's involvement in the sexual violence perpetrated against the city of Nineveh, depicted as a woman raped by foreign powers (Nahum 3). At the same time, we can forget to ask the questions with which we began: How might Nahum be useful? How may it help to point us toward the good news preached by and embodied in the life of Jesus?

Nahum leads us squarely into a tension that permeates scripture and our own contemporary world: How does God's overwhelming compassion, mercy, and concern for the oppressed and marginalized relate to the oppressors and those who maintain and take advantage of corrupt systems as they are? If God is *for* the widow, orphan, and stranger, doesn't this also mean that in some sense the divine is *against* the latter—epitomized by the Assyrians in Nahum, Pharoah in Exodus, and the social, economic, and religious elites elsewhere in the prophets?

Where we may understandably be offended by such material, looking away from the underlying suffering it reflects may blind us to how *we*—through our countries, militaries, and trade envoys—can expect and even coerce the rest of the world to work to our advantage. Given the contours of global social, economic, and military powers, those of us in North America may well be more aligned with the hated empire that Nahum rails *against* than his oppressed sub-group crying out against it. Our profound discomfort with the book may be heightened by positioning ourselves not with Nahum but with the empire he condemns and calls for God's vengeance to exorcise. In short, perhaps Nahum holds up a mirror that we would rather not look into.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15)—and so to function as an empathetic witness. In this light, I have found it helpful to read Nahum as a traumatized prophet speaking

through tears. From this perspective, the pain, anger, and desire for vengeance he expresses is not simply an invitation to argue against or reject his perspective; doing so would simply echo the mistake epitomized by Job's friends. Rather, Nahum provides us a window into the raw emotion and agonized perspective of traumatized communities—in the ancient world and today—that desperately call out for our attention. Nahum usefully raises for us these questions: Are we indeed willing to weep with those who weep? And are we willing to do so even when they say things we find disturbing and offensive—even potentially about *us*?

Luke 22:35–38: Holy Warrior and Suffering Servant

Mary H. Schertz

Some biblical scholars have said that the most difficult passage in the entire Bible is the "two swords" passage in Luke 22:35–38—not the goriest or most violent but the hardest to understand. Certainly, Mennonite peace theologians have wrung their hands over it for years. Even Jesus seems to recognize the problem that he is creating when he tells the disciples that, whereas earlier he told them to operate without weapons, now they should go buy swords.

In this text and its context in Luke 22, Luke's Jesus is challenged by the tensions between two of the biblical motifs he found in his sacred scripture: the Holy Warrior and the Suffering Servant. Fortunately, Luke gives us a clear reading guide—or at least it would have been clear to a first-century aural audience. It is a chiasm, and it's neither the first nor the only time Luke uses this literary device to guide his hearer. To sketch it briefly, there's Jesus's prediction of Peter's denial in verses 31–34, his conversation with his near and dear about the two swords in verses 35–38, his prayer to the Father at Olivet in verses 39–46, the arrest scene in which a sword plays a part in verses 47–52, and finally Peter's denial in verses 53–62. Thus, the chiasm: denial, swords, prayer, swords, denial. In this case, the chiasm functions to raise the question of what changes after the center element—or Jesus's prayer to the Father in verses 39–46.

Two things change, signaled by that small Greek word *plen*, usually translated as "nevertheless"—as in "nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." The first is Jesus's contemplation of Holy War, or redemptive violence, as a way to finish out God's investment in his life.

What are two swords "enough" for? Not insurrection, certainly, and likely not for self-defense for a group their size, even if that had been a biblical trope or what Jesus had in mind. But it is enough, in the biblical world, for Holy War. After all, to be woefully underarmed is part of the requirement for Holy War, lest anyone think that victory belongs to Israel.

The second thing that changes is how Jesus thinks of suffering—something he has been thinking about since chapter 9. South African biblical scholar H. A. J. Kruger has argued that the language of Holy War and the language of the Suffering Servant are both present in these passages. Swords—but also waiting, watching, and praying that one not be led into temptation—are the resonances of Holy War. And the quotation from Isaiah about being numbered with transgressors brings the Suffering Servant theme front and center.

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The resolution hammered out that night between Jesus and the Father as the disciples slept and—as Mary Oliver puts it—only the stars, the grass, and the cricket kept watch with Jesus was the integration of these two motifs. Jesus yields to the will of God and goes to the cross as a Holy Warrior who is not violent and a Suffering Servant who is not passive. What this means is worked out, first, in the rest of this chiastic passage but then in Jesus's journey to the cross and in Acts with the disciples and particularly Paul.

The second "enough" in this chiastic arrangement, an entirely different Greek idiom from the sufficiency of the two swords, cuts the myth of redemptive violence to the heart. "Enough of this," Jesus says, and then he heals the wound opened by his disciple's sword. But he is also neither silent nor passive in his acceptance of suffering. During the course of his ordeal, he manages at least three ringing indictments of his tormentors: (1) at the arrest scene, (2) his verbal jousting in the first stage of the interrogation before the council, and (3) on the cross when he pleads forgiveness for the ignorant ones.

Luke envisions the followers of Jesus forging into the future of the Kingdom of God as disciples who embody both the Holy Warrior and the Suffering Servant. It is a dynamic and forceful mix. In Acts, the followers of Jesus move boldly into a variety of situations with a fiery spirit and strong words—accepting suffering in the name of Jesus as par for the course. What seems to a modern audience to be an enigmatic and opaque

ancient text is—based on first-century understandings of oral literature—a clear and ringing call to reject redemptive violence as well as passive suffering. It is a call to courage and compassion in the most difficult of times.

Acts 5:1–16: The judgment of Ananias and Sapphira

Alicia J. Batten

The story of Ananias and Sapphira has disturbed readers for centuries. Yes, both figures independently lie about the amount of money that they obtained from the sale of their property. And, yes, they clearly "misappropriated" funds. (Acts 5:2 uses the Greek verb *nosphizomai*, which can also mean "theft" in some contexts.)[9] However, there is no hint that the couple even have a chance to repent of their sin, for after hearing the judgmental words of Peter, they each abruptly fall down and die. As early as the third century, a philosopher (likely Porphyry of Tyre) accuses Peter of putting the pair to death unjustly and questions whether what they had done is really a sin.[10] Subsequent readers have struggled to make sense of the account as well.[11]

It is hard to know where this story came from, as we cannot assume that the book of Acts—the second volume by the author of the Gospel of Luke—reflects historicity, at least not all the time. Some have argued for a literary precedent in the story of Achan, who incites God's anger by stealing property and is eventually killed (Joshua 7), but there are many differences with that tale as well. Whatever the origins of the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we are left with the question of how to make sense of it today, especially in light of a commitment to justice and peacemaking.

As with many biblical stories, this one demands that readers attend to the historical, literary, and theological contexts in which the narrative emerged. The story is *high context*, meaning that it assumes its readers share its literary and cultural worlds and thus does not explain these features. Within the ancient Graeco-Roman environment, for example, it

9 Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts*, ANTC (Abingdon, 2003), 102.

10 For the *Contra Christianos*, attributed to Porphyry, see R. Joseph Hoffman, *Porphyry's "Against the Christians": The Literary Remains* (Prometheus, 1994), 54–55.

11 For discussion of the early Christian reception of this story, see Ronald H. van der Bergh, "Thematic and Chronological Analysis of the Reception of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) in the First Five Centuries," *Journal of Early Christian History* 7 (2017): 1–16.

was common for people to seal almost every business or financial transaction with an oath, and this ritual included a self-curse for perjury. In other words, people vowed that they would die if they lied. This self-curse was so familiar that it would be assumed in a narrative, whether or not it was expressly mentioned.[12]

When we consider Acts 5:1–11 in light of this information, we see that an audience would recognize the account as a typical story of people committing perjury and suffering the consequences. Moreover, Ananias and Sapphira have lied to the Holy Spirit and to God, as Peter makes clear (Acts 5:3–4). Throughout Acts, Luke portrays various heroes, such as Paul, as taking vows (Acts 18:18; 21:20–26).[13] Such practices convey the piety of Paul and other figures, which Luke is keen to uphold in the face of accusations of "atheism." As well, there are warnings that those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Luke 12:10).[14] Therefore, the seemingly shocking deaths of Ananias and Sapphira would not come as a surprise for ancient audiences, for both figures have committed a great act of impiety by breaking their promise, lying not only to other humans but also to the Holy Spirit and God.

In addition, the text indicates that Satan had been at work within Ananias and Sapphira (5:3) just as Satan entered Judas before he betrayed Jesus for money (Luke 22:3), and Luke describes Judas also coming to a grisly end (Acts 1:18–19). For Luke, Satan had to be stopped if the church was going to develop, especially if Satan was trying to operate within the church itself.[15] Notably, Judas's betrayal was connected to financial gain, just as Ananias and Sapphira lied about the proceeds from the sale of their property. Luke's stress on economic matters—whether it is the portrayal of the earliest church in Jerusalem as a utopian community in which the members share their possessions (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37), Jesus's insistence on giving money to the poor (Luke 18:22), or the commendation of Cornelius for his charity and giving alms (Acts 10:4, 31)[16]—therefore form part of the backdrop of these stories.

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12 J. Albert Harrill, "Divine Judgment against Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11): A Stock Scene of Perjury and Death," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011): 354.

13 Although this may be a difficult issue for Anabaptists, Luke does not share the prohibition against oaths that we find in Matt. 5:34 and James 5:12.

14 Harrill, "Divine Judgment," 365.

15 Gaventa, *Acts*, 103.

16 See Steven J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman, Holy Cross

Directly following his account of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, Luke depicts the community in Jerusalem as restored and the people holding the apostles, including Peter, in high honour. Indeed, even more believers join the church (Acts 5:12–14). Although the story of the couple may seem severe and unfair, it has the effect of reinforcing the importance of keeping one's vow and the danger of attempting to deceive the Holy Spirit and, indeed, God. Moreover, through this account Luke stresses economic integrity and, perhaps most important for the author, the need to keep Satan at bay.

Attention to these ancient social, literary, and theological dimensions is requisite if we want to get at the meaning of what to most moderns is an unduly harsh punishment for lying. We might wonder, however, what elements are relevant today, especially for those who do not think that the death penalty is appropriate for any sort of lie or crime. To my mind, although Luke shifts to more of a charity model throughout the book of Acts,[17] what must remain central are the emphases on the common good and the need to take seriously God's interest in the practical questions of how economic resources are both procured and divided. Despite their strangeness, ancient stories such as that of Ananias and Sapphira are reminders that issues of economic integrity are no less theological than any other.

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Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Baker Academic, 2008), 17–36.

17 See Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will?"