

Psalms of rage: Ellen Davis's provocative interpretations

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

"She must be wrong about saying you can get angry at God. That goes against everything I've been taught about God. That would suggest that God has done something wrong." A layperson was responding to Ellen Davis's provocative new book *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*. I had chosen the book as a focus for a seminar that draws clergy and laity together several times a year to read and discuss matters of faith and life.

Davis does a superb job of writing, as she puts it, "about getting, and staying, involved with God—what it takes, what it costs, what it looks and feels like, why anyone would want to do it anyway." We get involved with God because, as the Old Testament communicates over and over again, "God is involved with us, deeply and irrevocably so."

Davis shows how human involvement with God in the Old Testament is expressed through voices and moods that range from grief to joy, from complaint to thanksgiving, from "uncontained rage to dumbfounded gratitude." It was this last pairing that troubled the layperson, who found the notion of speaking to God in "uncontained rage" to be deeply problematic.

I asked whether his objection was to Davis's analysis or to the psalmist's expression of rage (as in Psalm 137—"Happy shall they be who take your little ones / and dash them against the rock!"). He acknowledged that although the "cursing psalms," as Davis describes them, are part of scripture, he didn't know what to do with them. He was uncomfortable with the suggestion that "these psalms are available and even appropriate for Christian prayer, and sometimes they are necessary."

Davis adds that these psalms "must be used responsibly, or they become dangerous to ourselves and to others." But my colleague was not convinced that they could be used responsibly.

He joins Christians through the centuries who have been troubled by the “cursing psalms” and have struggled to discern their compatibility with the character of the God whom we worship. Regardless of how we spin it, these prayers seem to endorse hatred and rage.

As we discussed the layperson’s objections and concern, we were able to make two crucial distinctions. First, we all agreed that the language of lamenting to God—expressing great sorrow, anguish and complaint—is appropriate, and can be a life-giving way of being involved with God.

Second, we agreed that blaming God by holding God morally culpable is inappropriate. God is not at fault in how God deals with the world. Assigning blame to God, which sometimes includes the notion of a psychologically satisfying but theologically problematic act of “forgiving God,” is inappropriate. It leads to distorted conceptions of God’s character and engagement with the world and our lives.

We referred to the injunction in Ephesians to “be angry but do not sin” (4:26), exploring how anger might be a sign of life and a powerful protest against injustice and wickedness. Some acknowledged that some of the difficulty was due to lingering memories of parents who had enjoined them with specific instructions about appropriate piety—especially in prayer. These participants wondered if they needed to find prayerful ways of giving voice to the anger they experienced and didn’t know what to do about.

Even so, we could not imagine how delight in bashing babies against the rocks could be anything but sinful. So we examined Davis’s analysis more carefully. She notes that our attempts to ignore these psalms lead us to repress our own feelings of rage and bitterness in the face of betrayal, intense suffering or inexplicable injustice. “By refusing to listen to that anger and even take it on our lips, we lose an opportunity to bring our own anger into the context of our relationship with God. The cursing psalms are . . . indispensable if we are to come before God with rigorous honesty. They are necessary not only for our individual spiritual health but also for maintaining or restoring the health of the church.”

Davis adds two notes. First, she emphasizes that in demanding that our enemies be driven into God’s judgment, we also open them up—alas!—to God’s mercy. Perhaps we have to acknowledge the temptation of Jonah to become embittered at God’s

character as gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. Are we ready to drive our enemies into God's hands?

Second, Davis suggests that we interpret a psalm by turning it 180 degrees. Is there anyone who might want to say this to God about me—or maybe, about us? Might we discover not only a rigorously honest engagement with our own passions of righteous indignation but also the legitimacy of others' complaints against us?

At the end of our discussion, some participants were still not persuaded by Davis's analysis or my interpretations. But in the process we had probed the character of God and the range of our own emotions. We had become involved with God and with one another in a new way.