

In Other Words

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I've always been puzzled by statements in Psalms that seem to encourage hatred. Is this compatible with Christian love?

This is a case in which knowing the precise usage and meaning of a biblical word is indispensable in grasping the intent of the biblical writer. A modern equivalent of a Hebrew word may not be enough to contain the full significance of the original term.

The Hebrew verb *śānē'* is not the exact equivalent of the English verb "to hate." The Hebrew term expresses such ideas as disregard, dislike, love less, and malicious hatred. The Old Testament knows about hatred as an inward disposition of antagonism and enmity, and denounces it (Lev. 19:17, 18). The challenge is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18, NKJV), including the alien (Deut. 10:19). The Hebrew term for "hatred" goes beyond our usage of the verb.

1. *Ethical and Religious Dissociation from Others:* In Psalms the verb "to hate" is used by the psalmist to dissociate himself from the wicked and their evil ways. When he states, "I hate the assembly of evildoers," he is confessing his loyalty to the Lord. He is refusing to "sit with the wicked"; that is to say, he will not identify himself with them (Ps. 26:5, NASB). A similar confession of fidelity to the Lord is contained in Psalm 31:6: "I hate those who cling to worthless idols; I trust in the Lord" (NIV). This is indeed a peculiar way of stating that he is not an idolater. Occasionally the psalmist states that he hates the deeds of faithless persons (Ps. 101:3), meaning that he does not support what they do.

2. *Determined by Spiritual Sensitivity:* Our hatred is usually a reaction to a harm done to us, accompanied by our unwillingness to forgive. In Psalms the hatred of the righteous is not indiscriminate, blind, or based on an oversensitive ego. The objects of hatred are those who hate God; that is to say, the enemies of God are also considered by the psalmists to be their own enemies (Ps. 139:21, 22). The opposite of hating them is not loving them; it is not identifying oneself with their deeds and enmity toward God. Therefore, this hatred is not primarily an emotion of the unregenerate heart, but a sincere repudiation of the evil person who openly opposes God.

3. *Determined by Love to God:* Perhaps the most important thing about this kind of hatred in the Psalter is that it is not a natural reaction of the human heart, but it is, rather, motivated by love to God: "Let those who love the Lord hate evil" (Ps. 97:10). This type of hate is demanded, even required, by the Lord. Without love for God it is impossible for the human heart to hate wickedness (see Ps. 45:7). This hatred is developed through a profound knowledge of God's revelation embodied in His Torah. The psalmist says, "I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path" (Ps. 119:104, NIV). Because one loves the law, one is able to hate double-minded persons (Ps. 119:113) and falsehood (verse 163). This kind of hatred is natural only for the righteous person.

4. *Encouraged by Jesus:* What we have described is not significantly different from what we find in the New Testament. When Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy'" (Matt. 5:43, NIV), He was not referring to the Old Testament, because this command is not found there. He was probably quoting a

popular maxim. However, in order to be one of Jesus' followers, an element of hatred may be necessary. One must be willing to "hate" father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even oneself (Luke 14:26).

Jesus is requiring from His followers a radical breaking away from human ties that could otherwise impinge on our dedication to the Lord and His saving mission. This type of repudiation is derived from love, as in the Old Testament, and is an expression of the believer's absolute commitment to the Lord. They have chosen the Lord above anyone or anything else.

We have, then, to agree with those who argue that the hatred mentioned in Psalms is compatible with the law of love. But this presupposes that one is fully committed to it and that it excludes a spirit of open hostility and anger toward the wicked.