THE JUSTIFICATIONS OF THE USE OF
THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT
AND THEIR APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY’S CHURCH

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SYNOPSIS

The imprecatory psalms occur in many places in the Book of Psalms. They are the psalmists’ plea for divine judgment on Israel’s real, flesh and blood enemies. However, in the NT, Jesus commands His followers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors. Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented: “No section of the Psalter causes us greater difficulty today than the so-called imprecatory psalms. With shocking frequency their thoughts penetrate the entire Psalter. Every attempt to pray these psalms seems doomed to failure.” For this reason, many questions are raised about the imprecatory psalms, such as: Why does the psalmist wish, even pray for such terrible things to happen to his enemies? Why would God side with the psalmist and do such terrible things? From an ethical point of view, is it wrong for today’s Christians to pray as the psalmists did with the imprecatory psalms?

This essay attempts to reconcile these questions arguing that it is appropriate for today’s Christians to pray the imprecation psalms, either in public or in private, but with a different application from that of the psalmists. This essay firstly provides a quick review of different solutions to the imprecatory psalms so as to identify the problems and challenges. Then, a careful exegesis on four imprecatory psalms (Pss 35, 69, 83 and 109) is provided. Analysis of the OT context provides a good background to understand the tension between the imprecations upon flesh-and-blood enemies and the love shown towards them. The psalmists pray the imprecatory psalms within the framework of OT covenant, the context of the Holy War and OT moral judgment. Because of their zeal for God, they cry out for God’s vengeance. They desire the situation of the righteous and the wicked to be reversed. They long for God’s name to be honoured and glorified amongst all nations. Therefore, the use of the imprecatory psalms in the OT can be justified.

Furthermore, the tension between enemy love and enemy imprecations is reconciled in Christ. The OT ethic is not inferior to that of the NT. The differences are seen due to the progressive revelation from the OT to the NT. The NT use of the imprecatory Psalms not only proves the canonicity of these psalms but also demonstrates the distinctive uses of these psalms for
today’s Christians. While the reason and purpose of using the imprecatory psalm remains the same, the content of the imprecations has to be different in the light of the Gospel. In the spiritual battle, today’s Christians must pray for the conversion of their flesh-and-blood enemies and ultimately for God’s final judgement upon His spiritual and human enemies. Finally, an evaluation of both Laney’s and Day’s approaches further illustrates the proper use of these psalms in today’s church.
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THE JUSTIFICATIONS OF THE USE OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THEIR APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY’S CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

An imprecation is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or a curse upon one’s enemies or the enemies of God. Imprecations can be found throughout the whole Bible, and some of the most powerful imprecations occur in the psalms. The imprecatory psalms are the psalmists’ reply to those of Israel’s enemies - the real, flesh and blood people, through prayers to God for divine judgment and just punishment. The psalmist cries out to God: “Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.” But Jesus says: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, …” How can these verses from the same Bible be harmonized?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented: “No section of the Psalter causes us greater difficulty today than the so-called imprecatory psalms. With shocking frequency their thoughts penetrate the entire Psalter. Every attempt to pray these psalms seems doomed to failure.” Perhaps, for this

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5 Cf. Matt. 5:44.
reason, John Wesley forbade his followers to sing the imprecatory passages in the psalms. Some modern version of the psalms, intended for use in Christian worship, often omit these passages.\(^7\)

Many questions are raised about the imprecatory psalms, such as: Why does the psalmist wish, even pray for such terrible things to happen to his enemies? Why would God side with the psalmist and do such terrible things? From an ethical point of view, is it wrong for today’s Christians to pray as the psalmists did with the imprecatory psalms?

This essay is an attempt to reconcile these questions and to argue that it is appropriate for today’s Christians to pray the imprecation psalms, either in public or in private, but applying them differently than the psalmists. This essay firstly provides a quick review of different solutions to the imprecatory psalms so as to identify the problems and challenges; then based on careful exegesis on four imprecatory psalms (Pss 35, 69, 83 & 109) and an analysis of the OT context of these psalms, several theological features of the imprecatory psalms are identified; lastly, within the framework of the covenant theology, an approach to the imprecatory psalms is discussed. The evaluation of both Laney’s and Day’s approaches further illustrates the proper use of these psalms in today’s church.

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PART I: THE PROBLEMATIC SOLUTIONS

Many attempts have been made to resolve the problem but they are problematic. They tend to fall into two categories: 1) The imprecations of the Psalms are not to be used against any particular flesh-and-blood enemies, either individuals or groups. 2) The psalmists are expressing their own feelings towards their enemies - their words are not inspired by God.

Firstly, there are four kinds of approaches that argue the imprecations of the Psalms not be used against any particular flesh-and-blood enemies.

Some have argued that the poetic nature of the imprecatory psalms implies that they overrate the situation. Since poetry tends to use hyperbole; by engaging in strong images it makes the point sharp and succinct - therefore, the imprecations in the psalms are only spiritual or figurative. Erich Zenger argues that the imprecations achieve a psychological function. Because of the poetic nature of the psalms, the expressions of the psalmists’ desire for vengeance on enemies shall be treated as rhetoric. Instead of pronouncing curses, they present passionate lament, petition, and desires before YHWH. Similarly, Fee and Stuart argue that the imprecatory psalms harness the psalmists’ anger and help them to express to God with poetic exaggeration. By using the imprecatory psalms correctly, the psalmists channel and control their potentially sinful anger.

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Although it is true that the imprecations can achieve a psychological function, imposing a psychological framework upon these psalms is foreign to their stated or implied purposes.

Some interpret the imprecations of the psalms as predictions of future judgments – prophecies about what will happen to the ungodly, rather than personal prayers. The quotations in the NT are used to prove that all the imprecations are prophetic.

There are several problems with this approach. Firstly, most imprecations are expressed in jussive statements (“may”, or “let”) and some involve imperatives, it is not a natural reading of the text to construe formulations as future predictions - therefore, they are not declarations of what will happen but wishes or prayers that they may happen now. Secondly, this approach ignores the personal nature of these prayers in the historical context and the basic intention of the original writers. This approach lifts the imprecations above their historical and personal circumstances and makes them speak in typical rather than specific terms.

Another approach suggests that the targets of imprecatory psalms are spiritual antagonists rather than human personages. This approach makes these imprecations less objectionable by

11 Albert Barnes, Notes, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical on the Book of Psalms, Vol 1. (London: Blackie & Son, 1868) xxv - xxvi. Augustine, Calvin and Spurgeon also held this view.


13 Alex Luc, “Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms” in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 42:3 (1999) 396. E.g. Psalms 12:3; 69: 23-25, 28; 83:17; 109:9-15; 137:8-9; 140: 9-11. Similarly, Michael K Wilson, Royalty and Reality: Recommended Responses: Psalms, Vol. 1. Introduction to The Literature and Theology of the Psalms (Burwood, NSW: The Author, 2001) 99. People who take the predictive approach argue that since Hebrew imperfect and jussive are often identical in form therefore statements which have typically been translated as jussives should be translated as future indicatives. Adam Clarke is an example. He argues, “The executions here [Ps. 69:22] and in the following verses should be read in the future tense, because they are predictive; and not in the imperative mood, as if they were the offspring of the psalmist’s resentment.” [Job to Song of Solomon, vol. 3 of Clarke’s Commentary: The Old Testament (New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1840), 439] However, the imperative verbs in the imprecations cannot be taken as future indicatives in this context. In addition, the LXX translates Ps 69:22-25 with aorist passive imperatives, and the NT quotation follows that translation (Rom. 9:11).

14 Bullock, Encountering the Book of Psalms, 230. For instance, in Ps 137 the imprecation expresses personal feeling rather than utters divine prophecy. Vv.8-9 is an expression of the personal satisfaction the psalmist will feel when judgment overtakes the wrongdoers.[Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms”, 40]

spiritualising the enemies of the psalmist. The problem with this approach is how to determine what elements of a psalm are literal and which are to be taken spiritually.

The fourth approach under this category is to argue that the Psalmists pray against sin rather than sinners. The problem is that it is difficult to separate one’s hatred for sin from hatred of the sinner. When the psalmists pray for the destruction of wickedness they do not distinguish in their mind between the ungodly and his ungodliness. All that belonged to the wicked man is involved with him in his wickedness.

Secondly, some approaches are given at the cost of the considerations that the psalmists have expressed their personal feelings toward their enemies and God has nothing to do with inspiring their words.

There are also four variations under this category. The first sees the imprecatory psalms originating from mean-spirited persons whose only thoughts are conquest and revenge. C.S. Lewis denounces the imprecatory psalms as “devilish” and “diabolical”.  

The second view sees these psalms as reflections of the human failure of the psalmist in the midst of difficulty and pressure. This view suggests that it is understandable why the psalmist

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16 Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Old Testament as Word of God*, trans. Reidar B. Bjornard (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959) 127. Sigmund Mowinckel proposed that the enemies of the imprecatory psalms were the modern equivalents of the “evil spirits” (eg. Eph. 6). Evil spiritual influences are personified as evil men.

17 Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms”, 39. For example, in Psalm 109, if the psalmist’s enemies are evil principles and forces of darkness, then why should their families be mentioned?


20 Lewis, *Reflections*, 22. He says, “We must not either try to explain them away or yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must be good and pious. We must face both facts squarely. The hatred is there – festering, gloating, undisguised – and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves.”
felt and prayed this way when he was treated falsely, betrayed and lied about.\textsuperscript{21} Craigie even suggests, “these Psalms are not the oracles of God.”\textsuperscript{22}

The third approach suggests that these psalms reflect a lower standard of OT ethical behaviour. The Old Testament ethic has two ends: the higher end is the love of God (Deut 6:4) and the love of one’s neighbour (Lev. 19:18) which is taken by Jesus as the NT ethical standard (Mt. 22:36-40), and the lower end is the application of the law of retaliation in equal kind.\textsuperscript{23} The psalmists' prayers are based upon the rule of retaliation not of the Gospel. Although the prayers do not meet the NT standard, the psalmists are living up to all the light they had in their time.\textsuperscript{24}

Lastly, Mowinckel believes that the imprecatory psalms are examples of an “effective” magic by which the psalmist curses his enemies and expects those evils to befall them.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, Ringgren argues that the imprecatory psalms “reveal traces of ancient ideas of sympathetic magic”.\textsuperscript{26} According to Ringgren, these imprecations come with a semi-primitive nature, belonging to a pre-Gospel age.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Hempel argues that the hate of the psalmist “springs from all his anxieties and needs” because he has “neglected” the “faith that YHWH is acting in calamities.”[M. Wilson, \textit{Royalty and Reality}, 100.] Weiser claims that the psalmist “is… neither able nor ready to give himself up wholly to God, trusting [God] absolutely, and accept his suffering from [God’s] hand, enduring it patiently. Human self-will and [human] low instincts of vindictiveness and gloating retain their power over his thoughts and affect also his idea of God and his relationship to [God].” [Artur Weiser, \textit{The Psalms: A Commentary} (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1962) 416-417.]
\item James E. Adams, \textit{War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms} (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991) 10. Adams cites Craigie’s view from his \textit{Psalms 1-50: Word Biblical Commentary}. Craigie argues, “The psalmist may hate his oppressor; God hates the oppression. Thus the words of the psalmist are often natural and spontaneous, not always pure and good.” He also states, “these Psalms are not the oracles of God.”
\item Bullock, \textit{Encountering the Book of Psalms}, 229.
\item Similarly, Lewis, \textit{Reflections}, 26.
\item M. Wilson, \textit{Royalty and Reality}, 100.
\end{thebibliography}
These four variations express a common problem. They tend to reject or minimize the truth that the Psalms are God’s inspired words. However, such imprecations are not unique to the Psalms. In Acts 4:25, it is confirmed that David composed the psalms while he was under the personal and direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In addition, these views ignore David’s personal character.

Further, it is not valid to say that one should not expect to find a NT faith in the OT. The Law explicitly forbids personal vengeance, bearing grudges or hating one’s neighbour, and commands love for all men. There is an unbroken continuity of ethical requirements that progresses from the OT to the NT.

Concluding from the above solutions of these two categories, there are really two major theological challenges: Firstly, why should these imprecations remain a part of the Biblical canon? How do they fit into the OT theological framework? What are the reasons and purpose of the imprecations of the psalms? What kinds of request do the imprecators desire from God? Secondly, is the OT inferior to the NT? Are the ethics of the imprecatory Psalms compatible with the command from Jesus in Matt. 5:44?

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28 See footnote #2.

29 The events in 1 Sam. 24:1-7 and 26:5 consistently attest that David is a man who does not indulge in personal revenge. David himself testifies that he gives himself in prayer and fasting for the enemies while he is under their attack (Ps. 35:13; 109:4-5).

30 For example: Lev. 19:17-18. Also, Deuteronomy 32:35 states “Vengeance is mine,” which is quoted by Paul in Romans 12:19.

31 also cf. 1 Peter 3:9.
PART II: EXEGESIS OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS: PSALMS 35, 69, 83 AND 109

Before getting into the details of these issues, it is necessary to see what exactly has been said in the imprecatory psalms. The second Part of this thesis will be the exegesis of Pss. 35, 69, 83 and 109.

Psalm 35

Psalm 35 is commonly described as an individual lament psalm because of the singular voice of the psalm, however it can be broadened to include the worshipping community (v.18 and 27). G. Wilson categorizes it as “prayers of deliverance”.32 Psalm 35 has a strong imprecatory element.33 This psalm contains extensive descriptions of the attacks of the enemies, along with personal pleas for deliverance and personal anticipations of praise. It is considered a companion to Psalm 34 because it echoes the language of the last one.34 The difference is that Psalm 34 celebrates a rescue, which in this psalm has not yet happened. However, the psalmist never doubts that his day will come.35

This psalm bears the heading “Of David” (ESV יִרְאוּ). In terms of its date and authorship, there is no good reason why this psalm should not belong to David’s time. The historical title of Psalm 34 provides strong support for this view. In addition, much of the psalm might reflect those historical events of David and Saul.36

32 Gerald H. Wilson, Psalms Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 578.
33 Tremper Longman III, in his book How to Read the Psalms (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), gives seven elements under the genre of Lament. There are invocation, plea to God for help, complaints, confession of sin or an assertion of innocence, imprecation, confidence in God’s response, and blessing.
34 “the angel of the Lord”, 34:7; 35:5,6, found nowhere else in the Psalter.
35 Psalm 35 is commonly divided into three sections: vv. 1-10, 11-18, and 19-28. Each sections end by expressing in hope (vv. 9 -10, 18, 27-28).
The psalm starts with an exhortation to YHWH (יהוה) to take violent action on the psalmist’s behalf (vv. 1-3). V. 1 is a neat parallel bicolon. The key words from each colon are “contend” ( 똱 I) and “fight” ( לוחל), in their imperative forms. They are repeated with a related noun and participle to suggest justice from YHWH as well as to urge Him to fight.37 “Salvation” ( יישוב) in v.3b parallels “help” ( בוא) in v.2b. The imagery of vv. 1-3 could be seen as a king who is involved in military conflict, it could also be seen as someone whose life is in danger as a result of personal attack and who asks YHWH to fight on his behalf in warrior-like fashion against the enemies. It is an aspect of exodus faith that YHWH is a warrior (Exod. 15)38

Vv.4-6 give four lines of imprecation. The focus is shifted from the psalmist’s need and YHWH’s capacity for action to the attackers’ fate.39 Kidner suggests that “shame” ( בהל) in v. 4a is of the essence of damnation (cf. Daniel 12:2).40 The Hebrew verb has the connotation of public disgrace. The enemies are to be put in open shame.41 Vv. 5 & 6 are both introduced by the jussive of ימי to describe the attackers’ fate. YHWH here acts like an aggressive protector and deliverer. The phrase ‘like chaff before the wind’ ( כני ⚗חריה ) suggests the idea of complete worthlessness (cf. Ps. 1:4). The idea of the angel of YHWH pursuing the enemies in v. 6 probably comes from the role, which the angel played in the defeat of the

38 Goldingay, Psalms, 491. “‘Contend’ ( تصني ) can be legal language (cf. v.23) or military language (e.g., Ps. 18:43 [44] “strife”); it is thus a useful root here in light of the psalm’s immediate use of military imagery and its subsequent use of legal imagery.”
39 Goldingay, Psalms, 491. Goldingay observes that the opening imperative lines in vv.1-3 have the short second cola characteristic of a lament and in vv.4-6 each is longer than the last, reversing the movement in vv.1-3. He argues that while the vv. 1-3 progressively underline the urgency of the psalmist’s plea vv.4-6 hint another way of increasing intensity.
Egyptians (Exod. 14:19ff). The angel is the one who brings destruction on the enemies. The enemies have been pursuing the psalmist, now positions are reversed (cf. v.3).

Craigie suggests that the wishes introduced by “Let” (ESV, vv 5, 6, 8) sound like adaptations of the kind of treaty curses that would have been written into the treaty agreement between the king and the foreign power. Therefore, these lines reflect the psalmist’s desire for vindication in the case against him. Goldingay suggests that the threats are from either military conflict or personal attack within the community and if the psalm reflects conflict within the community “shame” (כזה) will be the effect to the psalmist’s own vindication. However, Harman argues that imprecations such as these are not to be regarded as expressions of personal vindictiveness. They should be taken as expressions of a covenant servant desiring that God deal with his enemies. Wilson argues that David’s desire is not to simply strike out and hurt the enemy but to make known the righteous characteristic of YHWH in public. Wilcock holds a similar view to Harman and Wilson. Though Psalm 35 is largely a personal psalm, the psalmist identifies himself with YHWH and with no other god (cf. v.10). So the conflict is really between the one who accepts YHWH’s authority and others who reject it. Though the historical context of this psalm might be about David and Saul, the curses are not for individual’s own vengeance. The theological point of the psalm is that YHWH curses the disobedient and vindicates the obedient.

In vv. 7-8, David proclaims his innocence. His enemies have acted against him without just cause. He feels trapped by their plots, but prays that these plots will turn upon themselves and

42 Harman, Psalms, 155.
44 Goldingay, Psalms, 491-492.
45 Harman, Psalms, 155.
46 Wilson, Psalms, 580.
47 Wilcock, The Message of Psalms 1-72, 121-122.
that his enemies will be caught by their own craftiness. The purpose of the imprecation is to reverse what the enemies have done to David.

After further describing a situation of confrontation in a legal setting in vv. 11-18, David directly appeals to YHWH for deliverance (vv. 19-21), vindication (vv. 22-25) and retribution (vv. 26-27) directed toward those who rejoice (דִּבְרַיָּהוּ in vv. 19, 24, 26) over David’s distress. The imperative - “vindicate me!” (יִרְכַּבֵּנִי v. 24) is a plea for YHWH to render judgment, declaring the appropriate course of action in the present circumstances. It is not for personal vengeance, but for personal vindication through the meting out of appropriate retribution on the enemies. In a series of jussives, David desires that justice be served by allowing the false witnesses to experience the public discrediting and disgrace they had planned for him. David is confident that his vindication will eventually come. He will have the “peace” (ESV “welfare”; בַּשָּׂרָה, in v.27) under the covenant of YHWH, live to speak and sing continually of the justice and glory of YHWH (v.28).

Many themes and expressions from Psalm 35 reappear in Jeremiah (e.g. 18:20, 22; 20:7, 11; 23:12). Goldingay suggests that how YHWH spoke to Jeremiah affirmed the spirituality and theology in Psalm 35. Jesus explicitly utilizes this psalm. The broader theological implications of the psalm are brought out clearly by the quotation of v. 19 (cf. v.7) in the NT.

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48 Harman, Psalms, 155. Similarly, G. H. Wilson, 580. “Those who hid a net to entrap him (v.7) will be entangled themselves (v.8). Those who dug a pit for him (35:7) will fall into it instead (v.8).”

49 Wilson, Psalms, 584.

50 Wilson, Psalms, 585.

51 Harman, Psalms, 155. Harman suggests that the covenant theme is continued here with reference to the welfare of the servant of YHWH.

52 Samuel Terrien, The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 311. Both speak of “my pursuers” (Ps 35:3; Jer 15:15; 17:18; 20:11); both wish confusion and shame for these (Ps 35:4; Jer 17:18; 20:11), and that their way may be dark and slippery (Ps 35:6; Jer 23:12); both complain of pits and of nets (Ps 35:7; Jer 18:22), of the reversal of good and evil (Ps 35:12; Jer 18:20; cf. 15:11), and of enduring their mockeries (Ps 35:16; Jer 20:7); both appeal to the judge who knows equity (Ps 35:22, 24; Jer 11:20; cf. 12:3).

53 Goldingay, Psalms, 503.
What Jesus highlights is that all the animosity directed against him fulfils Scripture. The world’s hatred against Jesus and His followers is to be expected. The world hated Him first. The opposition that Christians endure aligns them with Jesus. However, all of this opposition is under the control of the sovereignty of God.


Psalm 69 is an individual lament that reveals a vulnerable man who is shaken by his circumstances and turns to God for help. The Psalm starts with an invocation – an initial plea to God for help, and then three complaints (vv. 2-4, 7-12, & 19-21) graphically present a poetic progression of being overwhelmed with troubles. Vv. 5-6 is the psalmist’s confession of sins. In vv. 13-18 the psalmist further pleads to God for help. Verses 22-28 are imprecatory. The psalm ends with praise to YHWH – an expression of confidence in His deliverance.

Vv. 22-28 is the psalmist’s appeal for God’s direct intervention in the situation and for His judgment to be visited on His enemies. After having repeatedly prayed for personal deliverance in vv 2-21, the psalmist begins to pray for the punishment of the enemies in v.22 - let the foes’ peace offerings or their sacrificial feasts become the very snare of their failure. In the NIV version v.22b reads “may it become retribution and a trap”. The Hebrew word שָׁלוֹם should be read as - ‘peace offering’. This provides a good parallel with “table” (אֶשֶּׁר שָׁלוֹם) in v. 22a. The psalmist’s enemies hold luxurious sacrificial banquets in the Temple area and claim not only that they have God on their side but also that they are doing what God demands. However, sacrifice without obedience is a blasphemy that God cannot accept. The “snare” and “trap” are self-springing devices used to trap unsuspecting birds and are used metaphorically

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54 Craigie, Psalms 1-50, 288.


56 Harman, Psalms, 246. Also, Tate (p190): The plural of שָׁלוֹם appears elsewhere only in Jer 13:19, and with suffix in Ps 55:21, and as such the meaning would be “those at peace / secure.” The Greek texts has the meaning of “vengeance / retribution”. Dahood repoints it to qal passive participle pl. “to make a covenant / be in a covenant”, which he interprets as the table companions.
for sudden entrapment of humans by their own deeds. The trap of divine judgment will close on them.\textsuperscript{57} V.23 refers to physical damages as a result of God’s punishment.

In vv. 24-25 the psalmist continues to appeal for the reversal of all the good things of life. Instead of mercy the request is for wrath.\textsuperscript{58} God’s wrath as an expression of the righteous God judges the wicked and rescues those whom were oppressed. YHWH, as a warrior, is to turn their “camp” (יַרְדֶּנֶּשׁ) into a “desolation” (נֹמֶשׁ); that is to destroy their hostile arsenals and hiding places and so make them incapable of fighting.\textsuperscript{59}

In v. 26, the psalmist sees a connection between his suffering and his zeal for God.\textsuperscript{60} The enemies ridicule the psalmist’s acts of grief and contrition in response to the chastisement of God. It is clearly a form of mockery described in v.12. He calls upon God to put an end to it, asking that they be given what they deserve – punishment corresponding to their sins, and exclusion from God’s saving activity (v. 27).\textsuperscript{61} The imprecations increase the intensity. V.27 calls upon God to take account of the guilt of the enemies so that it will be utterly impossible for them to be saved.

\textsuperscript{57} Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, & Erich Zenger, Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 182. “this conviction is recorded in the expressive metaphor in [v.22]: that touching the pieces of meat that the enemies, during their sacrificial feasts, have delectably set before themselves on mats (“table”) releases the mechanism of the folding net and captures them like birds being hunted. This mechanism can be clarified, following Ernst Vogt and Othmar Keel, with the aid of two sketches: the folding-net trap consists of two parts, the net that is spread on bent rods and the base that holds the rods and causes the trap to spring when the bait laid on it is touched. This form of trap explains the formulation of the imprecation in [v.22], which compares the “table” of the participants in the sacrificial feast, consisting of spread mats, with an open trap, and the bread and meat lying on these mats with the bait placed on the base of the trap.”

\textsuperscript{58} Harman, Psalms, 246.

\textsuperscript{59} Hossfeld, Psalms 2, 183. Similarly, Tate (190): “The word (יַרְדֶּנֶּשׁ) apparently designated a row of stones used to mark off encampments. However, in its developed usage its pl. form probably means “settlements”.”

\textsuperscript{60} Hossfeld, Psalms 2, 183.

\textsuperscript{61} Harman, Psalms, 247. Similarly, G. Wilson appoints out that the Hebrew phrase יִשְׁפֹּר לְפַעַם is better rendered “give evil for their evil” (NIV: “charge them with crime upon crime”). This renders the idea of “reap what you sow” (Gal. 6:7) in the New Testament. When God allows someone to receive the due of their evil actions, this is just punishment in His view and not divinely fomented “evil”. Both Old and New Testaments assume that such retributive processes are at work in response to human evil. (cf. Job 4:8; Prov. 22:8; Hos 8:7; 2 Cor 9:6 & Gal 6:7)
This conflict is ultimately about God’s righteousness. This is seen by the imprecations in v. 28. The common view of the “book of life” (מַשֵׁר תַּחְתָּם) comes from Exodus 32:32, where Moses prays that if God does not forgive his people, then let his name be blotted out of God’s book. Some suggest whether the background here is the idea of a “register of citizens.” Dahood suggests that the context of the psalm is fully eschatological so the book of life refers to everlasting afterlife. In any case, the point is that the psalmist prays that the wicked would perish and their names should not be written alongside those of the righteous. The Exodus reference is primarily to ordinary earthly human existence, but an eschatological dimension should not be excluded entirely.

Psalm 69 is one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament and so is interpreted in a Messianic sense as referring to Christ. The psalm deals with sin and its consequences. This psalm has many curses in it and Jesus takes part of it on his lips. In several contexts the New Testament refers and alludes to this psalm. Emphasis on the suffering of a devoted servant for God’s sake makes the psalm especially adaptable to Christ’s ministry and passion.

V.9a is quoted in John 2:17 in reference to Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. The disciples were reminded about what was said in the psalm when they saw Jesus’ action. It is crucial that the complaints from the psalm serve as context if one is to understand the function of this passage

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63 Hossfeld, Psalms 2, 183. Cf. Ps 87:6; Is. 4:3; Jer 22:30.

64 Tate, Psalms 51-100, 200. Also see Mitchell Dahood, Psalms II, 51-100: Introduction, translation and notes (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1983) 164.


66 Artur Weiser, The Psalms: A Commentary (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1962) 493. Cf. v.4 (John 15:25); v.9 (John 2:17); v.21 (Matt. 27:34,48); vv. 22-23 (Rom. 11:9-10); v.24 (Rev. 16:1); v.25 (Acts 1:20) & v. 28 (Phil 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15 & 21:27).

67 I agree with Weiser’s view on the Messianic psalms - [493]: “Though originally the individual statements in the psalm were not meant to be understood as prophecies pointing to Jesus, this deeply moving testimony to human suffering nevertheless exhibits features which are so characteristic of suffering in general that their relation to him who has borne the suffering of the whole world automatically forces itself upon any serious consideration of the psalm.”

68 Terrien, The Psalms, 505. “To be noted is the future tense of the verb instead of the perfect tense (cf. LXX).”
in John’s Gospel. Through the words of the psalm, Jesus is seen as someone alienated and suffering for God’s sake. The Temple action becomes an indication that Jesus’ zeal will lead to His future death.  

There are dramatic changes in Jesus’ use of the psalm. In v. 21, the psalmist describes the evil way the enemies treat him when they put gall in his food and vinegar in his drink. While this was a figurative expression in the psalm, it literally happened to Jesus. In Psalm 69, following the metaphor, there are the imprecations (vv. 22-28) for divine judgment. However, Christ’s reaction is dramatically different. Through the death on the cross God’s judgment is brought to the world, but forgiveness and salvation are also brought to the world, even to those who crucified him.

In Acts 1:20, Peter quotes the words of v. 25 in reference to the reward which Judas Iscariot received for his wickedness. Peter illustrates the same antagonism that has been displayed by the psalmist’s enemies. Judas came under a similar judgment. Therefore, v. 25 is warrant for the appointment of a successor to Judas. The significance of this use is the implication of the imprecations to an individual in the time of the early church.

In Romans 11, Paul also quotes Psalm 69:22-23. It is natural for Paul to apply to the enemies of Jesus what the psalmist says about his own enemies. Paul suggests that God has brought David’s imprecations upon those Jews who have resisted the gospel, though Paul probably does not intend to apply the details in the quotation to the Jews of his own day.

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69 Hossfeld, *Psalms 2*, 185.

70 In Mt. 27:34 and 48, when He was crucified, the Roman soldiers offered Him drinks with gall and later vinegar.


Psalm 83

Psalm 83 is composed in the style of a community lament. In the psalm, Israel is surrounded by an unholy alliance committed to her destruction. In vv. 7-9, a number of nations were banded together in a geographical pattern from east to west, encircling the nation. The closest historical event from the Old Testament that matches the psalm and the list of enemies can be found in 2 Chronicles 20. But the enemies listed in this psalm are not all in 2 Chronicles 20. The psalm may not just be concerned with a single threat or a particular alliance, rather it is concerned with the continuing aggression of the world against God and His people.

The psalm has two parts: 2-9 and 10-19, hinged by the Selah at the end of v.9. The first part is a lament and protest addressed to God who is silent and still. The second part is the imprecations against the enemies. At the end of the psalm, the confrontation between YHWH and the enemy nations leads to the acknowledgement of YHWH by the nations and so to bring an end to Israel’s suffering.

The first part has three sections: v.2 calls to God not to be silent and still, vv. 3-5 and vv.6-9 are introduced by a consequent “for” ( Heb). Vv. 3-5 lament the enemies’ attack against Israel as the people of God. Personalized metaphors and quotations from the lips of the enemies are used to vividly describe the enemies’ actions. Vv.6-9 intensify the drama by emphasizing that this action is directly against YHWH. The nations listed here are not just hostile towards Israel, but YHWH Himself.

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75 Derek Kidner, Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary on Books III, IV and V of the Psalms. (London: IVP, 1975) 299. In 2 Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat of Judah was threatened by a group which included Edom and was headed by Moab and Ammon (cf. v.8; “the sons of Lot” in v.9).

76 Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 300. Cf. Terrien, (594) Terrien considers these verses as the history of the enmity against Israel. He argues that these verses provide a history of warfare from the time of the conquest to the agony of Judah. Similarly, M. Wilson, (37) “a number of totality indicating that these particular nations represent all nations in their defiance of God and his people.”

77 Hossfeld, Psalms 2, 339.

78 Hossfeld, Psalms 2, 339.
Three sections are also clearly marked structurally in the second part: vv. 10-13 is a chain of imperatives (יִשְׂרָאֵל in v.10a, מֵעָרֵי in v.12a), closing with quotation of the enemies in v.13. This quotation structurally corresponds to the ones in v.5; vv.14-16 is a new address to God (יִהוּדָּה) with comparative structure, “as … so” (וְ… וְ); Vv. 17-19 is another address beginning with an emphatic imperative and having a new thematic perspective.79

The purpose of the psalm can be found at the beginning and the end. The psalm begins with a vigorous cry for help from God who is silent and still.80 It ends with the sacred purpose of all the prayers of justice - the sovereignty of YHWH will be known by the enemies.79

There are different understandings of the closing prayer in v. 19. Adams argues that the idea of former enemies seeking God’s name probably bears the sense of becoming his people. Conversion is the goal of this prayer.81 Zenger argues that v.19 alludes to the final verse of the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:31) and it is to be read as an express continuation of the conclusion of Judges 5.82 Therefore, the purpose of the psalm is not to hope for the end of the enemies of God, but rather for an end to enmity toward God.83 Goulder argues that v.19 means that “Greater Israel will become coterminous with the inhabited world, and everyone will live

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79 Hossfeld, Psalms 2, 339.

80 Cf. Zenger, A God of Vengeance? 41. “As a silent God, the divine being is called Elohim or El in v.1. and is in some sense a distant God, a divinity without name or face; this God, has disappeared into the crowd of gods acknowledged by the nations. Still worse, these nations are already busy at the task of eliminating, even destroying, God. Therefore, Israel appeals urgently to God in this psalm, using extreme images of its dread and recollections of its constitutive history with God, to beg that God will finally desist from being distant and weary, and will stand forth, self-revealed in “your name,” YHWH, which simultaneously describes God’s particular and universal divinity (v.19).”


82 Zenger, A God of Vengeance? 45. The context of Judges 5, as Zenger argues, is that the revelation of the God of Sinai is aimed at the salvation of Israel as the people of God but at the same time and still more at the transformation of the enemy nations. Similarly, Weise, 564.

happily for ever after”.\(^{84}\) Dahood has a different approach. He argues that the reading “that they may seek thy name” of v.17 is problematic when read in its immediate context. He suggests that v.17 should be read as “may the Lord himself take vengeance”, and the stress of v.19 is the superiority of YHWH over the gods of the hostile nations.\(^{85}\)

Calling for a revelation of God to the nations does not necessarily involve the salvation of the nations, rather, it involves their judgment (cf. Ex. 14:4, 18). The judgment causes the enemies to see the name of YHWH (v.16) and to confess the greatness of His name. In this context, both arguments from Adams and Zenger are difficult to be justified. Therefore, the psalmist’s essential purpose is not to call for the conversion of the enemies but for the name of YHWH to be known by all the nations.\(^{86}\) The imprecations are calls for God’s vengeance, yet the end purpose is to glorify the divine name.

Vv.3 and 5 give the psalmist the reasons for his plea of imprecations. Based on his basic justice structure, it is right for the psalmist to pray for their humiliation (vv. 17-18) since the nations arrogantly defy YHWH and His people; it is also proper to pray for their destruction (vv. 10-16) as the enemies seek to destroy Israel (v.5).\(^{87}\)

In vv. 10-13, the enemies whom YHWH has previously judged are named. A precise historical context is indicated as the psalmist recalls two battles from the time of the Judges: the victory over the Canaanites (Judges 4-5) and the defeat of the Midianites (Judges 7-8) by Gideon. The psalmist draws attention to the fact that God is the deliverer by not mentioning the names

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\(^{84}\) Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch: Studies in the Psalter. III* (Sheffield: England, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 173. The reason of Goulder’s argument is that “defeat in ancient war entailed the bringing of tribute in subsequent years to the festival of the victor’s gods; and serious defeat entailed the attendance of the worsted king at those occasions”. So in v.19, the defeated enemy will recognize that is YHWH alone to whom this title belongs and will be attending his feat each year in Bethel.


\(^{87}\) Wilson, *Psalms, Vol. 3.* 37.
of the Judges (only the enemy kings are named). The psalmist here calls for God to do the same to the present enemies as He did to those in history. Just as the names of other nations judged by YHWH, the rebellious nations will go down in history even though they possess seemingly formidable power.

The direct speech in v.13 corresponds to the one in v.4. The quotation speaks about the reality of the relationship between Israel and the nations. The nations are God’s enemies and are driven by a desire to oppose God, so they will seek the destruction of God’s people. The psalmist is aware that only the sovereign God can protect His people from being destroyed. Also because this is the intention of the enemies, the psalmist calls upon YHWH in vv 14-16 to destroy them. The imagery of wind, fire and storm from vv. 14 – 15 are theophanic phenomena associated especially with Sinai. Presumably, the psalmist prays that the God of Sinai would judge and terrify the enemies.

The nations listed in the psalm can be understood as the representatives of all the enemies of God throughout all ages. The enemies whom the Church battles with should be seen in a much broader sense. On the level of the new covenant, the names of the enemies listed in the psalm might become symbols for all the powers opposed to God, among and behind which sin, death, and Satan are at work (cf. Rev. 13 and 20:7-10). For Christians, the ultimate and highest desire must be that all people “seek God’s name.”

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Psalm 109: 6-20

Psalm 109 is a particularly clear instance of an imprecatory psalm. It functions as an individual lament concerning enemies. The author is King David himself as per the title.

The accusation in the psalm is in highly forensic language. The psalmist appeals to YHWH to appoint an accuser to stand at the right hand of the psalmist’s enemies (v.6) with YHWH Himself as the defender (v.21). The psalmist trusts that YHWH, as the legal defender, will grant him justice against those who accuse him. The enemies’ attacks in vv. 2-5 are verbal rather than physical. The psalmist is hurt and angry because not only is the accusation groundless (v. 3) but also it is in return for his love (v.4). The psalmist’s response is crucial. He turns to prayer rather than plotting against the enemies. In this context the purpose of the imprecations in vv. 6-20 is the implementation of justice through legal demands.

Because of the sudden change from plural to singular in v.6, it has been suggested that the imprecations in vv.6 - 19 are not the utterance of David against his enemies, but are the fierce cursing of David’s enemies against David himself. David is quoting the attacks that are directed against him. Kidner points out that the motivation of this suggestion is to rid the psalm’s chief affront to the sensibilities of the reader. There are several reasons to prove that this suggestion is unlikely. Firstly, the rationale for these curses provided by verse 16 does not

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92 The structure of the psalm is: a general call to judgement (vv. 1-5), the spelling out of specific judgments in the form of curses (vv.6-20), a cry for deliverance (vv. 21-25), a cry for vindication (vv. 26-29), and a vow to worship (vv. 30-31) [Williams, Psalms 73-150, 291.]

93 Donald M. Williams, Psalms 73-150: The Communicator’s Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1989) 291. M. Wilson also suggests that the appeal to God’s steadfast love in verse 26 is an appeal to YHWH’s commitment to the Davidic covenant. Therefore, the author is none other than David himself.

94 Wilson, Psalms, Vol. 3. 84.

95 Williams, Psalms 73-150, 292.


97 Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 389.
support the attempt. The one who is cursed is ranked among the wicked ones who exploit the poor and needy and the broken-hearted. It is extremely unlikely that David would represent himself as having been described in this way by his enemies. 98 Secondly, v. 20 is a summary of the imprecations of vv. 6-19, which it calls upon God to repay the accusers who have spoken evil of the psalmist. 99 Thirdly, the suggestion makes Peter’s reference to Judas very forced. 100 The early church understanding from the New Testament is that vv. 6-19 concern a close friend who betrays the righteous subject of the psalm. Therefore, vv. 6-19 should be taken as David’s own.

There are two possibilities for the sudden change from plural to singular: the singular form refers to a mouthpiece for all the foes speaking at the session of the tribunal, 101 or to the leader of a band of accusers being singled out for special attention. 102

In v.6, the psalmist asks for a “wicked man” (כָּרוּם) to oppose his accuser(s) as judge. Since his accuser is wicked (v.2), he deserves the same. Also an “accuser” is to be at the right hand of the judge so his sentence is guaranteed to be guilty. 103 Most take the word “accuser” (אָבָד) to merely describe such a human accuser. 104 Dahood proposes that a full-blown view of Satan is applied to the accuser. 105

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98 Wilson, Psalms, Vol. 3. 86. Also, Allen, 72.
99 Wilson, Psalms, Vol. 3. 86.
100 Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 389. Peter said that it was a prophecy ‘which the Holy Spirit spoke … by the mouth of David, concerning Judas’ (Acts 1:16).
101 Terrien, The Psalms, 746.
102 Harman, Psalms, 358.
103 Williams, Psalms 73-150, 294.
104 Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 389. “In those verses [vv. 20 & 29] he is the enemy’s man; so this prayer wishes the enemy a taste of his own medicine.”
The psalmist seeks the judicial death penalty for his enemy (vv. 7-10) and death to the whole family (vv. 11-15). Firstly, the protest of innocence to God from the accused will be exposed for what it is. His prayers must go unanswered because he has missed the mark of God’s will (v.7). Then it comes with public disgrace (v.8). And finally with his death, his wife and children will also suffer.\textsuperscript{106} The principle stated in the 2nd Commandment is expressed here whereby God punishes the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him (Exod. 20:5).\textsuperscript{107}

Even the survivors of the family will also be deprived of any wealth, which might otherwise be available for them (vv 11-13). The psalmist asks YHWH not to show pity to orphan children. Having names blotted out means the extinction of the family line. Having no descendants in ancient Israel was regarded as the ultimate disaster. The disastrous judgment is even upon the enemy’s predecessors (v.14). The deceased are still accessible to God’s judgement in eternity.\textsuperscript{108} The whole family of the enemy is involved in his sins and therefore they are to share in his punishment (vv. 14-15)\textsuperscript{109}

“Cut off” (כִּפְרָה), appears twice in vv. 13 and 15, echoing language of the covenant (cf. Gen. 17:14). It suggests that God’s curse is due upon the enemy who has to be seen as a covenant rebel.\textsuperscript{110} David’s imprecations seek to exclude them from covenantal relations with God; even the memory of them shall be ‘cut off’ from the earth.

The ground of such severe judgment in given in v.16. His enemy did not remember to “do a kindness” (יִשְׂחַק לְאָרֶץ), “covenant love”, instead he, “pursued the poor and needy and the brokenhearted.” In place of kindness the enemy substituted evil desires. Vv. 17-19 express a

\textsuperscript{106} Williams, Psalms 73-150, 294.

\textsuperscript{107} Harman, Psalms, 359.

\textsuperscript{108} Williams, Psalms 73-150, 295.

\textsuperscript{109} Harman, Psalms, 359.

\textsuperscript{110} Harman, Psalms, 359. Cf. Lev. 26:9; Deut. 6:2, 18, 24; 7:12-15. “With covenant disobedience the promises of long and prosperous life in the land of promise are reversed.”
cursing procedure, of which the basic thought is an “eye for an eye”. It is as if David is saying, “My enemy loved curses, so I am giving them to him. Since he curses me, I am returning the favour.”111 “Soaking” (נִשָּׁב) is probably metaphorical for being completely under the curse’s power.112 The metaphors of “garment” and “belt” also suggest that the curse surrounds the enemy. V.20 is to read as a statement concerning God’s judgement upon the enemies to conclude the cursing procedure.113 With the return of the plural, David concludes by addressing the whole group instead of just the leader/representative.

Written by David, God’s anointed King, the psalm depicts the enmity in much more serious overtones. David’s enemies are traitors and rebels who threaten the kingdom of God itself. From such an imperial perspective it makes sense why it is necessary not only to remove the enemy but also completely dishonour his name in the community and disintegrate his entire family. Further, it is important to see that David evidently does not see it as his role to use his power to bring about the ends expressed in the imprecation. Rather, he leaves it to divine justice to secure these ends.114

Psalm 109 has been often abused because v.8 is quoted by Peter in Acts 1:20. Many in church history, like Athanasius and Augustine, have mistakenly assumed that the whole psalm is essentially predictive prophecy and refers to Judas.115 Also, this psalm was used to justify anti-Semitism since Judas was considered as the prototype of the Jews.116 The imprecations have been misapplied as a “prayer for death” of supposed or real enemies in the Christian communities and have continued into the 19th century.117

111 Williams, Psalms 73-150, 295.
112 Allen, Psalms 101-150, 74. Similarly, Harman (Psalms, 360), he suggests that water and oil were poured over the body to demonstrate the way in which the curse was supposed to enter right to the bones.
113 Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 390.
114 Wilson, Psalms, Vol. 3, 86.
PART III: THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Context of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Old Testament

It is important to have a clear understanding of the theological context of the imprecatory psalms in the OT setting. This will be done before addressing the challenges raised from the various problematic solutions.

i) The OT Covenant Curses

Evidently, there is a pattern of divine judgment through curses upon those who violate God’s Law in the OT. The Abrahamic covenant establishes the principle of God’s dealing with His covenant people. God promises Abraham and his descendants unconditionally that He will curse those who curse them. The concept of covenantal cursing comes to a full expression in the dual sanctions in the Sinai covenant. Blessings and curses are embedded in the Decalogue. It is spelled out more fully in Exod. 23:20-33 and in Lev. 26. The more detailed expression of curses is found in Deuteronomy 27. Within this covenant in the OT, those who sinned against God would be put under divine cursing and judgment.

The concept of covenant ties together many strands of the theology of the Psalms. The covenant curses have set the context in which the psalmists plead for God to fulfil His word in executing judgment upon the wicked ones. In the imprecatory psalms, a personal and intimate relationship between God and His people is fully expressed. God is referred to by His

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118 Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:17); Cain (Gen. 4:11); Noah curses Canaan (Gen 9:25); Joshua curses the rebuilders of Jericho (Jos. 6:26) and the Gibeonites (Jos. 9:23); the angel of the Lord curses Meroz (Jud. 5:23).


120 Cf. Exod. 20:5, 6, 7, 11, 12.

121 The specific violations are idolatry (v.15); dishonouring parents (v. 16); moving property boundaries (v. 17); mistreating the handicapped (v.18); injustice to aliens, orphans, or widows (v.19); various sexual sins (vv.20-23); secret or bribed murder (vv.24-25); and not keeping the law (v.26).

122 Longman, How to Read the Psalms, 57.
covenant name. The psalmists are identified as YHWH’s servants (יְהֹאֵל) (Ps. 69:17; 109:28), while the community as a whole claim to be “your people” (בְּנֵךְ) (Ps. 79:13). This covenantal relationship is reflected in a judicial setting in the imprecatory psalms. The psalmists acknowledge YHWH as their vindicator so they call upon God to declare the evildoers guilty.

The enemies in the imprecatory psalms are not just the personal enemies of the psalmists but actually enemies of YHWH. In Psalm 69, the scorn that the psalmist endured is for the sake of YHWH (v.7) and the insults he receives are really insults aimed at YHWH Himself (v.9).

Blessings and curses flow from the laws of the covenant. If one disobeyed the laws, he would be cursed. On the other hand, if one was obedient, then blessings would come upon him. In the whole Book of Psalms, from the opening psalm onwards there is a sharp contrast drawn between those who live under God’s mercy expressed in and through the covenant and those who do not. In the covenant relationship there were dual sanctions of blessings and curses. Ps 109 explicitly spells out such dual sanctions (vv. 17-19, 28), with a clear allusion to Gen. 12:3 in v.28.

Therefore, the imprecatory psalms speak out of the context of the covenant curses. The psalmists plead to YHWH for the sake of YHWH on the basis of being in a covenant relationship with Him.

123 “YHWH” (יְהֹוָה), “the Lord God of hosts” (יְהֹוָה הָאֹרֶן הָיְשָׁרֵי), “God of Israel” (יְהֹוָה יִשְׂרָאֵל) (Ps. 69:6).
ii) YHWH is the divine warrior of Israel

While the relationship between YHWH and the psalmists is understood in the context of the covenant, the relationship of YHWH to His people also needs to be understood.

One important and pervasive metaphor of the role of YHWH to His people is the picture of God as a warrior. Longman and Reid describe the role of YHWH as a warrior in a five-stage development throughout the Bible. The setting of the imprecatory psalms is within the context of the first or second stage of this holy war - God is a warrior in the battle with His people to win the victory for His faithful people or as a judge against Israel. In the beginning of Psalm 35, YHWH is asked to fight in warrior-like fashion against the enemies on behalf of someone whose life is in danger as a result of personal attack. In Psalm 69:25, YHWH disarms the enemies’ arsenals and makes them incapable of fighting. In Psalm 77, God is remembered as a warrior who saves His people at the Exodus. In Psalm 83, the psalmist calls for God to do the same to the present enemies as He did to those in the past. Though these psalms are not historically specific, they all clearly portray YHWH as Israel’s warrior against Israel’s flesh-and-blood enemies.

The role of YHWH as a warrior is not yet fully developed during the time of the psalmists. The psalmists do not know God’s final solution to the problem of evil. They might have envisioned a Messiah who will effect the final solution. Knowing YHWH as their warrior against the flesh-and-blood enemies, perhaps all the psalmists can do is to call on God to avenge evil and to see this in brutal terms. It shows they still have not lost hope that God will bring judgment in the end. The role of YHWH as a warrior will be revealed fully in the NT through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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127 Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, God is a Warrior (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 17. stage one, YHWH fights on behalf of His people Israel against their flesh-and-blood enemies; stage two, overlapping with the first, YHWH fights in judgment against Israel; stage three, Israel’s prophets look to the future and proclaim the advent of a powerful divine warrior; stage 4, Jesus Christ fights the principalities and powers - His earthly ministry as the work of a conqueror; and the final stage, anticipated by the church, the divine warrior will return and judge the spiritual and human enemies of God

128 Longman & Reid, God is a Warrior, 80.
iii) Judgment in an OT Moral World

During the time of the OT, law and religion were tied very closely. All law came from the covenant with YHWH. The law was of divine origin. YHWH was the one who exercised retribution in the present moral order in the world. Therefore, behind the imprecations of the psalms is “a recognition of a divine moral governance in the world, a belief that right and wrong are meaningful for God, and that therefore judgment must operate in the moral world order as well as grace.”

While the psalmists were aware of the tensions between right and wrong, between the people of God and the enemies of God, they had no conception of judgment in an eschatological sense. The psalmists were set in an historical period in which little was known of a future life and when human systems of justice frequently failed. Thomson rightly observes that the psalmists were not aware of any doctrine of a future state in which the ungodly would be punished and the godly rewarded. Therefore the vindication of the people of God can only be seen in a present sense, the wicked ones must be punished now.

Furthermore, Wilson suggests that there is little or no concept of the possibility of a person or people moving between the categories of righteous and wicked in the imprecatory psalms. Since this is the pre-gospel age, the notion of conversion is restricted to those righteous persons who stumble and fall into sin. There is no concept of a message of salvation being preached to the wicked which will cause their conversion. Therefore, in the world of the

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129 Thomson, NBD, 984.


131 Thomson, NBD, 984.


133 Though James Adams argues that Ps. 83:19 needs to be understood as the conversion of the enemies, the psalmist’s purpose should be best understood as a call for the name of YHWH to be known by all nations.
psalmists, the realistic hope of judgment can only be found in the destruction of the wicked in a present sense.134

Theological Features of the Imprecatory Psalms

Having the understandings of curses in the context of OT covenant, the role of YHWH as a divine warrior against Israel’s flesh-and-blood enemies, and the concept of moral judgment in the time of the OT, several theological features can be summarised from the exegesis of Part II.

i) The reason and purpose of the imprecations

From Psalm 35 and 109, David gives the reason of his desire to curse the enemies. He claims that the enemies have paid back to him with evil even though he treated them with kindness.135 Psalm 83:3-5 gives another legitimate reason that the nation of Israel is facing the threat of destruction from the enemies. Thus, the imprecations are expressions of the psalmists who are suffering from oppression and longing for justice to be done by God.

The imprecations are not spoken out of personal revenge, but out of zeal for God.136 It is crucial to recognize that the psalmists are appealing to YHWH who they regard as personal and just. They are not calling for personal vengeance, because they recognize that the conflict is between the one who accepts YHWH’s authority and others who reject it. So they express their deepest feelings of hatred and aggression and then leave everything in God’s hands.137 Also, in Ps 139:23-24, the psalmist asks God to examine his thoughts and to remove any evil desires (if there are any) in him.

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Therefore, as the members of the covenant community, the psalmists pray the imprecatory psalms to demonstrate God’s sovereignty and His faithfulness to His covenant promises, so to glorify God in the destruction of the wicked (Ps. 79:9). When the psalmist is delivered, YHWH may be praised,\textsuperscript{138} and His name will also be known by all the nations.\textsuperscript{139} Thus, the motivation behind the imprecations is to call for God’s vengeance, with the ultimate purpose being to glorify YHWH’s divine name.

ii) the content of the imprecations

As a means of voicing their suffering, the psalmists express their desire to see God’s justice vindicated. The imprecatory psalms request YHWH to show justice against the wicked in order to see the righteous rewarded. A concern for righteousness and the righteous is foundational to the imprecations. Judgement against evildoers is to establish the righteous.\textsuperscript{140}

The imprecatory psalms ask YHWH to curse the disobedient and vindicate the obedient, therefore reversing what the enemies have done to the psalmists and the people of YHWH.\textsuperscript{141} Judgement can be achieved through the implementation of justice through legal demands.\textsuperscript{142}

The outcomes of the imprecations are: 1) that both the righteous and the wicked will know that God is concerned with justice and that He executes judgment on the earth;\textsuperscript{143} 2) the wicked is prevented from enjoying the same blessings as the righteous and excluded from “the book of life”.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{138} Cf. Ps. 7:17; Ps. 35:18,28; Ps. 69: 30, 34.

\textsuperscript{139} Cf. Ps. 83:18.


\textsuperscript{141} Cf. Ps. 35:7-8; 83:10ff.

\textsuperscript{142} Cf. Ps. 109:6-20.

\textsuperscript{143} Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms”, 41.

\textsuperscript{144} Cf. Ps. 69:28.
iii) the role of the imprecator

One of the challenges from the imprecatory psalms is: if a person is guilty and deserving of God’s wrath, how can he call down God’s vengeance upon his enemies? Will not this vengeance much more strike him?

If David is not innocent, how could he pray these psalms? David cannot pray against his enemies on his own behalf or merely to preserve his own life. In fact, David meekly endures all the personal abuse hurled at him. However, it is important to see that David is the anointed king - the theocratic official - of YHWH’s people in the Old Testament. For this reason David must not perish at the hand of his enemy. David is the representative of YHWH, so David’s enemies are the enemies of God. David has a responsibility before YHWH to build a kingdom of righteousness. He also has the responsibility to shepherd and protect his people. David serves as YHWH’s spokesperson to accuse the enemies of YHWH. He utters imprecations to express his total commitment and dependence upon YHWH, to be against whoever undermines the sovereignty God. James Adams even suggests that Christ was in David - the forerunner of Christ - so David’s enemies are the enemies of Jesus and the innocent Christ was praying these psalms with David. It is God Himself here accusing the wicked of their guilt in the imprecatory psalms.

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145 According to the titles, except Psalm 83, David is the author of Psalm 35, 69 and 109. Also Psalm 12, 52, 70, and 140 as being imprecatory psalms are ascribed to David. Many other Psalms (5, 17, 28, 40, 55, 59), where imprecations occur, are David’s as well.

PART IV: IMPRECATIONS AND CHRISTIANS TODAY

*Can the Imprecatory Psalms be used as our prayers today? If so, how?*

The grounding expression of today’s Christian ethics in Matt. 5:44 – “Love your enemies”, seems to contradict the OT. But the contradiction is more apparent than real. There are certain instances that the OT unquestionably commands kindness toward enemies.147 King David himself shows kindness to his enemies yet received abuse.148 The imprecations are illustrations of the cry of vengeance under this condition. The ethics of the imprecatory Psalms are compatible with the command from Jesus in Matt. 5:44. In a broader sense, enemy love and enemy imprecation complement each other. This is how Jesus brings the OT moral commands to their fullest expression. Jesus broadens the concept of neighbour, which includes one’s enemies, and He commands His people to love and pray for their persecutor. Jesus Himself shows indiscriminate kindness to His enemies, yet He also utters excoriating woes149 and pronouncing imprecations against hardened unbelief.150

The OT ethics are not inferior to those of the NT. Indeed there is a progressive revelation from the OT to the NT, but this progress is not from error to truth. It is a progression from incomplete revelation to a more full and complete revelation or divine disclosure.151

The reason and purpose of the imprecations in the OT are applicable to today too. Zeal for God’s name and His sovereignty, concern for the lost, desire for righteousness to be established, and demand for God’s judgment upon the wicked are all principles that are to be reflected in a NT believer’s life. With these theological points above in mind, it is clear that

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148 Pss. 35:12-17; 109:4-5.
there is complete harmony between the Old and New Testaments on this topic. It is appropriate for all of God’s people to cry out for divine vengeance. Since divine vengeance is essential to divine justice and the glorification of God, the imprecatory psalms continue to be relevant for the people of God in the present evil age.

Clear examples show that the NT regards the imprecatory psalms as legitimate. Ps. 69:25 and Ps. 109:8 are both prayers for God’s judgment upon the wicked. In Acts 1:20, Peter believes that God has answered the cries for vengeance with respect to Judas Iscariot. Jesus Himself utters the curse upon Judas by picking up the language of Ps. 41:8-10. Jesus also utters woes, that is curses, upon the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. Galatians 3:13 implies that any unbelievers are subject to the curse of the law. In Galatians 1:8-9, Paul claims the curse (ἀνάθεμα) is on anyone who preaches a false gospel. Further, in 1 Cor. 16:22, Paul utters a general imprecation - “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed (ἀνάθεμα).” These imprecations are the curses of eternal condemnation, and will be carried out only if there is continued sin. It is also important to notice that all these imprecations in the NT are not for personal vengeance.

The imprecations in the NT confirm the continuity with the Old. However it is also important to notice that the NT provides a different theological context to the applications of the imprecatory psalms for today’s use.

Firstly, there is the Cross standing between the psalmists and today’s Christians. The message of salvation is preached to the ungodly in the NT resulting in conversion. While the gospel pronounces that imminent judgment will inevitably come, it also provides a way for all

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154 Cf. Matt. 23.
through repentance. In Acts 8:18ff, when Simon the Sorcerer wants to purchase from Peter the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter curses him, “May your silver perish with you,” (v. 20), then Peter voices a plea for repentance along with the offer of release in v. 22.

Secondly, the relationship between the people of God and those outside His covenant has radically changed. In the OT, it is rare if not impossible for God’s people to associate with non-covenantal people. Israel is holy and separate from the wicked nations. In the NT, there is a clear distinction between those who are the pawns of Satan and Satan himself against whom we really fight. Christians are not to fight against unbelievers but to pick up the sword “against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”. Like the psalmists, a Christian is not to cry for vengeance as his own. He may translate the imprecations into affirmations of God’s judgement, and into denunciations of Satan who is the real enemy. As for the men of flesh-and-blood who live as enemies of the cross of Christ, Christians are called to be ministers of reconciliation, to pray not against them but for them, to turn them from the power of Satan to God, to repay their evil with good, and to choose none of their ways. In fact, prayers for conversion of unbelievers are the most dramatic way Christians can pray against Satan. Unbelievers are slaves of Satan. When such a slave becomes a Christian, the old one dies and a new person is raised with Christ. Therefore, evangelism is the primary form of Christian Holy War against the power of darkness.

156 Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 29. Kidner helpfully observes at this point: “[Jesus] has come with salvation, yet its very approach brings judgment all the closer. … This paradox has its bearing on the psalms of imprecation. The psalmists in their eagerness for judgment call on God to hasten it; the gospel by contrast shows God’s eagerness to save, but reveals new depths and immensities of judgment which are its corollary. ‘Now they have no excuse for their sin.’”

157 In Acts 8:22, it says, “Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.”

158 Cf. Eph. 6:12.

159 Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 32.


161 Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 139.
The spiritual warfare is more serious than ever before, however, today’s churches have lost their military vision. The battle cries from the Psalms are hardly heard from the pulpit. But the reality is that God’s kingdom is at war. The kingdom of Satan has been overcome by the kingdom of Jesus Christ and will face its final judgement at His second coming. While the churches are anticipating the final Day, they play a vital part in this warfare. Paul instructs the churches to be equipped with the full armour of God, including “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God”, and to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests”. The churches should pray for the utter destruction of the enemies of God as the psalmist did, as Christ did, and as the Apostles did. It is right to pray for God’s righteous judgment, and church leaders should teach God’s people to pray in Christ for the vindication of Christ and His church, being cautious against all personal vengeance and anger. By praying the imprecatory psalms, people put justice in the hands of the righteous Judge of all the earth. The churches, therefore, can remove anger and revenge from themselves to God’s wise charge.

It is also the duty of the church to forgive and love by seeking repentance and conversion of evildoers. The churches must always pray for the enemies - that God would have mercy on whom He will have mercy. God is delighted when His church loves her enemies with the gentle and peaceful spirit that He has given, and He will act in His own time to consume them with His wrath.

Thirdly, the concept of judgment in the NT is to be understood in an eschatological perspective. The doctrine of a future state in which the ungodly is punished and the godly rewarded is clearly taught in the NT. There is an assured belief concerning the future based on Christ’s resurrection. Unlike the psalmists, Christians do not pray for vindication in its present

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162 Cf. Eph. 6:17.


165 Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, 81-82.
time but for final vindication. Christ’s death on the cross is the fulfilment of the OT curses; through his death comes the divine forgiveness.\textsuperscript{166} His resurrection is the victory over death guaranteeing deliverance of the righteous and judgment upon the wicked. When Christians pray for Christ to come again, they are praying for the final destruction of Satan and his followers, both human and spiritual.\textsuperscript{167}

\textit{An Evaluation of both Laney’s and Day’s Approaches to the Contemporary Use of the Imprecatory Psalms}

A covenantal based approach to interpret the imprecatory psalms is grounded in the understanding of the whole concept of curse in the OT. A clear concept of the continuity and discontinuity of the covenant curses will help today’s Christians apply these psalms. Harman mentions that Laney has made some advance with his reference to the covenantal basis for a curse on Israel’s enemies.\textsuperscript{168} Laney argues that because of the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic covenant its promises and provisions remain in force throughout Israel’s existence as a nation. In the OT other nations (e.g. Balaam, or the Midianites) who cursed Israel were cursed by God.\textsuperscript{169} The psalmists merely appeal for God to fulfil His unconditional covenant promise to the nation Israel.\textsuperscript{170} Therefore, it would be inappropriate for a “church-age believer” to call down God’s judgment on the wicked.\textsuperscript{171} Also, the imprecatory psalms are to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{166} Ps. 69:21; Matt. 27:34-38.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Longman, \textit{How to Read the Psalms}, 140.
\item \textsuperscript{168} Harman, “The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter,” 65. Laney suggests that “the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3) promised blessing on those who blessed Abraham’s posterity, and cursing (‘בָּרָךְ) on those who would curse (‘לֶנֶק). Because of the unconditional nature of the covenant, its promises and provisions remain in force through Israel’s existence as a nation.”
\item \textsuperscript{169} Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms”, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms”, 43. Laney argues that the imprecations are grounded in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3), in which God promised to curse those who cursed Abraham’s descendants.
\item \textsuperscript{171} Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms”, 44.
\end{itemize}
be treated like the OT ceremonial laws, so they are not to be applied to “church-age believers”.  

Two mistakes are detected in Laney’s argument. Firstly, there is really only one covenant throughout the whole Bible, - “under various dispensations” yet the same in substance. The new covenant fulfils and supersedes the old one. There is not a different covenant for “church-age believers” while the nation of Israel continues to enjoy the Abrahamic Covenant today. Secondly, the imprecatory psalms cannot be treated in the same way as the ceremonial laws have been treated in the NT era. The psalmists call for a moral judgment. When Jesus and the Apostles quote these psalms, they demonstrate that the moral judgment under the New Covenant is consistent with that of the Old.

John N. Day helpfully presents a discussion of a complementary view of enemy love and enemy imprecation. However, unfortunately his conclusion seems to be at the other end of the spectrum.

The problem with Day’s approach is that under the New Covenant Christians pray in exactly the same way as the psalmists. However, because Jesus’ death on the cross is the ultimate curse and the fulfilment of the OT laws, forgiveness is found in His grace. He is the divine warrior who fights the principalities and powers. Through his death and resurrection, he has conquered all the wicked. The churches anticipate His return and His judgement over the


175 Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics”, 185. Day argues that “this article has sought to demonstrate that at times it is legitimate for God’s people to utter prayers of imprecation or pleas for divine vengeance – like those in the Psalms – against the recalcitrant enemies of God and of His people. This is based on the psalms’ theology of imprecation in the Torah, and on the presence of this theology carried essentially unchanged to the end of the canon.”
spiritual and human enemies of God in the Day of Judgment. Thus, unlike the psalmists, Christians should pray for conversion as well as final judgment.

CONCLUSION

The tension in the Psalms between the imprecations upon flesh-and-blood enemies and the love towards them must be understood in the context of the OT covenant, the Holy War, and the concept of OT moral judgment. The psalmists pray the imprecatory psalms within this framework and context. Because of their zeal for God, they cry out for God’s vengeance. They desire the situation of the righteous and the wicked to be reversed. They long for God’s name to be honoured and glorified amongst all nations. The imprecatory psalms fit into the OT framework perfectly. Furthermore, in Christ, the tension between enemy love and enemy imprecations is reconciled. The OT ethic is not inferior to that of the NT. The differences are seen due to the progressive revelation from the OT to the NT. The NT use of the imprecatory Psalms not only proves the canonicity of these psalms but also demonstrate the distinctive uses of these psalms for today’s Christians. While the reason and purpose of using the imprecatory psalm remains the same, the content of the imprecations has to be different in the light of the Gospel. In the spiritual battle, today’s Christians must pray for the conversion of their flesh-and-blood enemies and ultimately for God’s final judgement upon His spiritual and human enemies.
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