CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Facing the Problem

There is hardly an area of biblical theology more troublesome to the Christian conscience than that expressed in the so-called Imprecatory Psalms—those psalms whose characterizing element is the desire for God’s just vengeance to fall upon his and his people’s enemies, including the use of more formal curses or imprecatory formulas. These psalms naturally evoke a reaction of revulsion to Christians schooled in the “law of Christ”; the venom these psalms exude collides abrasively with their sweeter instincts. For are not Christians called to “love your enemies” (Matt 5:44), to “bless and not curse” (Rom 12:14)? How, then, can such calls for the barbaric “dashing of infants against the rocks” (Ps 137:9), the “bathing of feet in the blood of the wicked” (Ps 58:10), the “curse passed down to the offender’s children” (Ps 109:10-15) be justified? Are the Imprecatory Psalms merely a way of venting one’s rage without really meaning it? Has the morality of Scripture evolved? Or is cursing enemies the Old Testament way and loving enemies the New Testament way? And is there any legitimate echo of the substance of these psalms in the New Testament?

1 Partly based upon a negative reaction to the invectives hurled against their enemies by the psalmists, Gunkel asserts: “the opinion that the Old Testament is a safe guide to true religion and morality cannot any longer be maintained.” Hermann Gunkel, What Remains of the Old Testament and Other Essays, trans. A. K. Dallas (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), 16.
There have been a few modern treatments of the Imprecatory Psalms vis-à-vis their relation to biblical theology and the New Testament. However these treatments have been, in large measure, cursory, and the proposed solutions have been, in my view, theologically inadequate. The Imprecatory Psalms have been unsatisfactorily explained chiefly as expressing (1) evil emotions—whether to be suppressed or expressed (e.g., Lewis, Brueggemann), (2) a morality consonant with the Old Covenant but inconsistent with the New (e.g., Zuck, Laney), or (3) words appropriately uttered solely from the lips of Christ, and consequently only by his followers through him and his cross (e.g., Adams, Bonhoeffer).

The reasons for their respective inadequacy will be dealt with below. Chiefly and summarily, a theologically adequate reconciliation of the Imprecatory Psalms with Christian ethics must deal fairly with the entirety of scriptural revelation.


In contrast, I will seek to establish that the sentiment expressed in the Imprecatory Psalms is consistent with the ethics both of the Old and New Testaments, while at the same time recognizing that the New Testament evidences a certain progress in the outworking of that essentially equivalent ethic. This I will do by plausibly demonstrating that the Imprecatory Psalms root their theology of cursing and crying out for God’s vengeance in the Torah—principally the Song of Moses (Deut 32), the lex talionis (e.g., Deut 19), and the covenant of God with his people (e.g., Gen 12)—and that this theology is carried essentially unchanged through the expanse of the canon to the end of the New Testament (e.g., Rev 15:2-4; 18:20). And yet, there is indeed a degree of difference in emphasis between the testaments: in the New Testament there is a lesser stress on imprecation and the enactment of temporal judgments combined with more frequent and explicit calls for kindness in anticipation of the eschatological judgment. This is to be expected, for the new era is the age of “grace upon grace” (John 1:16), inaugurated in the coming of Christ.

But this is a difference in degree, rather than a difference in kind. In the progress of revelation, the New Testament reflects a development, not in morality per se, but in the way this ethic is articulated and enacted.

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9 Therefore, the Imprecatory Psalms—or their like tenor—were at times appropriate on the lips of both Old and New Testament believers.

10 Both of these elements are included as characteristic of an imprecatory psalm (cf., e.g., Pss 58, 79, 109, 137).

11 The New Testament evidences markedly fewer imprecations, and the imagery of those which exist (save, notably, the imprecatory sentiments in the Book of Revelation), are markedly muffled. For example, the horrendously explicit and characteristic calls, such as “smash their teeth in their mouths!” (Ps 58:7), are conspicuously absent from the New Testament.
but in the way the divinely ordained ethic is to be lived out in daily life: it becomes a matter of emphasis, which is a matter of significance. Steadfast endurance under unjust suffering for the sake of Christ and after the pattern of Christ, entrusting both temporal and eschatological judgment to God, becomes a more predominant theme in the New Testament, whereas it is more restrained in the Old. And yet, the New Testament still finds a legitimate place for imprecation, based upon the same elements as serve to justify the imprecations in the Psalms.

**The Breadth of Definition**

As stated in the introductory paragraph, the Imprecatory Psalms as a class refer to those psalms whose characterizing element is the impassioned plea for divine vengeance to fall upon the enemies of God and his people, including the use of what may be considered more formal curses or imprecations proper. By consensus of those works consulted for use in this dissertation, the above represents the breadth of definition involved in the use of the term “imprecation”—particularly in the context of the Imprecatory Psalms, but also in the related passages of both Old and New Testaments. Laney’s definition serves as a

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12 The New Testament epistle of 1 Peter, for example, which addresses Christians in the context of persecution and advocates endurance in the midst of suffering, speaks nothing of imprecating one’s enemies. Rather, it heralds the importance of patiently awaiting the return of Christ the Judge. This is significant, in that it starkly underscores what is to be considered the characteristic Christian approach to persecution and oppression—indeed, the characteristic Christian ethic. For example, 1 Pet 2:18-23 adjures Christian slaves to endure unjust beatings, based upon the example of Christ, entrusting their lives and the realization of justice to the God of justice. It is the life of blessing and endurance which is to characterize the Christian life (cf. 1 Pet 3:9; 4:12-19). To this the epistle speaks. And in principle, this is the dominant mood of the New Testament, and also (albeit in a more subdued tone) of the Old as well. However, the imprecatory passages of both Old and New Testaments supplement this general tenor, articulating the minor—yet complementary—ethic evidenced in instances of extremity.
characteristic example: “An ‘imprecation’ is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one’s enemies, or the enemies of God.” Zuck describes such imprecations simply and broadly as “prayers for the destruction of enemies”; and Brueggemann addresses the issue in terms of a “yearning for vengeance.” Vos recognizes this definitional breadth and tension when he proffers that “these Psalms are indeed imprecatory if this term be understood in its proper sense of invoking a judgment, calamity or curse”—whether done so directly (e.g., Ps 137:7) or indirectly (e.g., Ps 137:8-9). Thus, such an understanding will be presumed in the ensuing discussions. So, for instance, although the


15 Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 57.


17 The gruesome cries of Psalm 137:8-9 are not technically imprecations, as narrowly defined, but are nonetheless universally recognized as the infamous exemplars of imprecations—as such are commonly defined. These verses are a wish addressed to Babylon directly (although indirectly to God, as the context elucidates) and express the desire for calamity to befall her. This breadth of definition, including the element of wish or threat, is likewise reflected in Webster’s explanation of the curse as a “pronouncement of doom to evil fate or vengeance,” or a “prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon one; an imprecation; malediction.” Furthermore, such a curse “implies the desire or threat of evil, declared solemnly or upon oath.” Of the synonymous terms listed in the preceding definition, an imprecation “denotes an invocation of evil or calamity”; and a malediction “is a more general term for bitter reproach or proclamation of evil against some one.” William Allan Nielson et al., eds., Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language, 2d ed., unabridged (Springfield, MA.: G. & C. Merriam Company, Publishers, 1944), 648.
bold and poignant appeal for divine recompense voiced in Psalm 137 differs markedly from the detailed litany of curses rehearsed in Psalm 109, both are universally recognized as imprecations and Imprecatory Psalms—indeed, they are the premier examples.

The Stigma of Vengeance

The central issue of divine vengeance presents an initial stigma partly because the promise of such vengeance forms much of the basis upon which the psalmists voice their cries of cursing and partly because of the concept of vengeance itself. To the modern ear, the word “vengeance” evokes images of malice and revenge; by its very nature

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19 More will be said in this regard under the discussion surrounding Psalm 58.

20 McKeating is one who expresses his offense at the presentation of divine vengeance in the Old Testament. He asks: “Why the stress on the vengeful character of God? Does God require in man a nobility and a charity which He Himself is not prepared to display? There is plenty of evidence for the idea that God is one whose vengeance is quite inescapable, and who pursues vengeance even where a mere man would let the matter rest. . . . When the Israelite refrains from taking vengeance he thinks of himself as deliberately acting unlike God. Man ought to refrain from taking vengeance precisely because God will do so. God, therefore, though it appears that He approves of men forgiving one another, does not do it Himself, or not so readily. . . . The argument of the New Testament, ‘Be merciful, as your Father in heaven,’. . . [has] no place in the Old. . . . It is at this point, the perception that there is an analogy between human and divine behaviour, and that human forgiveness should be an imitation of that of God, that the New Testament forgiveness concept develops away from that of the Old.” Henry McKeating, “Vengeance is Mine: A Study of the Pursuit of Vengeance in the Old Testament,” ExpTim 74 (1963): 243-45. However, his analysis runs counter to the self-testimony of the character of God as found in, e.g., Exodus 34:6-7, ignores the eschatological realization of divine vengeance heralded throughout the New Testament (notably 2 Thess 1; Rev 16-19), and sets up an antithetical and adversarial relationship between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New, who are one and the same.
it bears sinful and negative connotations. Thus, in this mindset, vengeance—whether human or divine—is in no sense to be construed as virtuous. But to the ancient Israelite, and through the pages of Scripture, the concept of vengeance is tied to the requirements of justice. Where justice is trampled, vengeance is required. Specifically, in the presentation of the canon, the enactment of God’s vengeance is coupled with his character as just and holy and his claim as world sovereign. Indeed, the Scriptures do not equivocate in their proclamation of Yahweh not only as Warrior, but also as Judge and King. As Peels assesses, in his justification of Yahweh’s vengeance: “If it is said of this God, who is King, that He avenges himself, this can no longer be considered to be indicative of an evil humour, a tyrannical capriciousness, or an eruption of rancour. God’s vengeance is kingly vengeance. If He takes vengeance, He does so as the highest authority exercising punishing justice. The vengeance of God is the action of God-as-King in the realization of his sovereign rule. This action is directed against those who offend God’s majesty through transgression against his honour, his justice or his people.”

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21 Peels notes that the biblical concept of vengeance “is determined by the notion of legitimate, righteous, even necessary enactment of justice by a legitimate authority.” Peels, The Vengeance of God, 265.

22 So, for instance, note the frequent pairing of מְאֹד, “vengeance,” with מִשְׁלֹמָה or מְשָׁלַם, “recompense”—paying back what is deserved (e.g., Isa 34:8; 35:4).


24 Peels, The Vengeance of God, 278.
Furthermore, the observation of Mendenhall holds true: the significance of divine vengeance derives primarily from the relationship between the recipient of that vengeance and God. “To the rebel it is punishment, but to the God-fearer, it is salvation.”

God’s vengeance is inseparably linked to his lovingkindness; it is the other side of his compassion, the (perhaps inevitably) “dark side” of his mercy. The Scriptures are unequivocal in affirming that God is by no means an indifferent Being, but one who has passionately and decisively taken sides for his people in history. And if he is to save his people from sin, oppression, and injustice, then he must exact vengeance upon his enemies—the enemies of his people.

This understanding of divine vengeance is borne out, for example, by the depictions of Yahweh’s execution of vengeance against Edom in the Book of Isaiah. There one finds that the language of vengeance is the language of violence—of slaughter.

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26 Though “lovingkindness” is an archaic rendering of the Hebrew יְשָׁרֵא, I believe it reflects much of the richness inherent in the term.

27 Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 62.

28 However, the culmination of this dual relationship comes only in the eschaton.

29 Edom is used in Isaiah 34 as typical of the nations (cf. 34:2 with 34:5), the prime exhibit of the enemies of Israel. She is nearer geographically and ethnically than the great Babylon; and her kinship to Israel makes the affront of her enmity the more severe.
and sacrifice, of holy war and jealous rage. And consequently, the imagery of vengeance is the gruesome imagery of gore: “Yahweh’s sword is all bloody, it is gorged with fat” (Isa 34:6). Lest Yahweh become relegated, however, to the company of pagan and bloodthirsty deities, it is imperative to note the stated purpose of this violence against the wicked: “to contend for Zion” (Isa 34:8). This point is reiterated in the following chapter, which speaks of the paradise of the redeemed arising out of the carnage against the wicked: “Behold, your God, he will come with vengeance; with divine recompense he will come, and he will save you” (Isa 35:4; cf. 63:3-4). Yahweh is a God who saves his people; but without God’s vengeance against his enemies, there can be no salvation for his people. The ramifications of this are weighty. As Swartzbach observes: without a clear understanding of the significance of divine vengeance, “there is no way of comprehending the nature of the Christian God, for we can never speak of the ‘love’ and ‘justice’ of God without reflecting upon his ‘wrath’ and ‘vengeance.’” And Kraus likewise echoes:

The “vengeance” for which Israel hopes is God’s judgment in response to the scorn and mockery of the enemy nations. The prayer is that Yahweh will not allow his enemies free rein or let their rage go unanswered. It is expected that Yahweh will

30 Cf. Isa 34:2, 5. In the language of “holy war,” whatever was labeled נכר was dedicated to God almost invariably for the purpose of utter annihilation.

31 Cf. the imagery that culminates in Isa 34:8. From the prophet’s perspective, divine jealousy expressed on behalf of his covenant Bride is a virtue.

32 Raymond H. Swartzbach, “A Biblical Study of the Word ‘Vengeance,’” Interpretation 6 (1952): 457. Smick elaborates: “The Bible balances the fury of God’s vengeance against the sinner with the greatness of his mercy on those whom he redeems from sin. God’s vengeance must never be viewed apart from his purpose to show mercy. He is not only the God of wrath, but must be the God of wrath in order for his mercy to have meaning. Apart from God himself the focus of the OT is not on the objects of his vengeance but on the objects of his mercy.” Elmer B. Smick, “םריךו,” TWOT, 2:599.
manifest his power in the world of the nations. Not alone in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament as well there is a certainty that this will not take place in an invisible, ideal realm of retribution, but in the reality of this world. Therefore there rings out a cry for revenge and for God’s judgment in the face of the unbearable suffering and torment of God’s people, on down to the Revelation of John (6:10). To set up a polarity of love and vengeance would involve a total misunderstanding of biblical truth.  

But the question may yet be asked: How can it be right for an Old or New Testament believer to cry out for divine vengeance and violence, as exampled in the Imprecatory Psalms? Several observations from Scripture cohere to address this question:

(1) The vengeance appealed for by the pious in the Psalms is not personally enacted; rather it is called upon from God. (2) This appeal is based upon the covenant promises of God, most notable of which are: “He who curses you, I will curse” (Gen 12:3), and “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Deut 32:35). And if God has so promised, then it would seemingly not be wrong for his people to petition him (even passionately) for the fulfillment of these promises. (3) Scripture records, through both testaments, examples of God’s people on

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34 As Surburg notes, “The imprecations and maledictions in the Psalter may be understood to ask God to do with the ungodly and wicked exactly what the Bible says that God has done . . . , is doing, and will do.” Raymond F. Surburg, “The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms,” Springfielder 39 (1975): 99.

35 Dabney notes that “righteous retribution is one of the glories of the divine character. If it is right that God should desire to exercise it, then it cannot be wrong for his people to desire him to exercise it.” Robert L. Dabney, “The Christian’s Duty Towards His Enemies,” in Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 1 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 715. Similarly, Beardslee notes that as the soul comes to stand where God stands, as it becomes progressively conformed to the image of its Creator (Col 3:10), it will feel as God feels and speak as God speaks. Thus, not only will there be a deep abhorrence of sin, but there will also be a righteous indignation against the willful and persistent wrongdoer. J. W. Beardslee, “The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms,” Presbyterian and Reformed Review 8 (1897): 504.
earth justly calling down curses or crying for vengeance without any literary or theological intimation of divine disapproval at the expression of such sentiments. Indeed, the implication is that, in its appropriate place, such utterances are commendable (cf. the Imprecatory Psalms, and the Pauline and Petrine curses of Gal 1:8-9 and Acts 8:20, respectively). (4) Scripture further records an instance in which God’s people in heaven, where there is no sin, cry out for divine vengeance and are comforted by the assurance of its near enactment (Rev 6:9-11). And since these martyred saints are presumably perfected, their entreaty would then be presumably “right.”

Thus, whereas “love and blessing” is the dominant tone and characteristic ethic of the believer of both testaments, “cursing and calling for divine vengeance” is the believer’s extreme ethic—legitimately utilized in extreme circumstances, against the hardened deceitful, violent, immoral, unjust. Indeed, when one examines the way of God, of Christ, and of God’s people from a canonical approach, one finds this dual reaction toward enmity exampled: the one reaction characteristic of the divine and Christian life, and the other exhibited in extreme instances. For example, (1) the pattern of God found in Scripture is that of repeated grace; but then comes the point of judgment. The inhabitants of Canaan experienced this extended grace followed by decisive judgment when, after four hundred years, their “iniquity became complete” (cf. Gen 15:16); likewise also, the Israelites of the Exodus, after repeated rebellion and unbelief, were finally barred from the Promised Land (cf. Num 14); and the generation of the Exile found out what life was like

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36 See especially Num 14:22-23, in which the Israelites are said to have tested Yahweh “ten times” and thus treated him with contempt.
when, after two hundred years of his longsuffering, God’s hand of grace was released and justice given her due (cf. Hosea). There is longsuffering to God’s grace, but there is also judgment (cf. the balance between the two in that supreme revelation of the character of God, Exod 34:6-7). (2) The pattern of Christ is also that of repeated grace; but then comes the point of judgment. In the closing chapters of the canon, both God and Christ are revealed as the Divine Avenger (Rev 6:9-17; 18:21–19:2; 19:11-16); and after the bloody winepress of God’s wrath is trampled (Rev 14:19-20), the saints in heaven sing the Song

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37 After enduring two centuries of the worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, as instituted by Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:26–13:2), and of the increasing compromise to pagan ways and the worship of Baal, as instituted by Ahab (1 Kgs 16:30-33), God said, in essence, “No further!” For example, Hosea 8:1 speaks of Israel’s imminent destruction by the image of a “vulture (poised) over the house of Yahweh” (8:1); her “days of punishment/recompense have come” (9:7), in which God will “remember their wickedness” (8:13; 9:7; cf. Jer 14:10; contrast with Jer 31:34, in which God promises to “remember their sin no more”); their sins have reached the point where God has “hated/rejected” them (9:15, 17); because of which they will be subject to the depth of human depravity—“their little ones dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open” (14:1 [Heb.]); they will “return to Egypt” (8:13; 9:3; 11:5)—that shocking reversal of their redemption story (though even here hope is held out, 11:11); they will no longer be shown compassion (1:6), no longer be called “my people” (1:9, and Yahweh will no longer be their “I Am”)—though even here hope is held out (2:1-3; 2:16-25 [Heb.]; chapter 3). For similar expression of the severity of God toward his people for their stubborn sin, cf. Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11. In each of these, Yahweh tells Jeremiah not to pray for them.

38 “Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness, maintaining lovingkindness to thousands, and forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. Yet he by no means leaves the guilty unpunished . . . ."

39 Indeed, if the fullness of the character of Christ is to be known, the prime exhibit in Heb 12:2-3 of enduring the cross and opposition from sinful men must be expanded to include his symbolic curse on the nation who rejected him (Mark 11:12-21)—a curse realized in that generation in the desolation of Jerusalem.

40 This is a judgment in which Christ, the “Son of Man,” participates (Rev 14:14-16).
of Moses and the Song of the Lamb (Rev 15:3-4). The same Christ who said, “Love your enemies,” will return one day in vengeance to destroy those who are recalcitrant. (3) So also, the pattern of God’s people is to be that of repeated grace; but there may also come a point in time when judgment must be called for (i.e., the voicing of imprecations), and the righteous will delight to see it accomplished (cf., e.g., Ps 58:11-12; Rev 18:20).

Although in the New Testament the allowable extent of temporal enmity is lessened and the expected extent of temporal kindness is heightened, the tension between the characteristic ethic and the extreme ethic of the Christian toward evil continues. For although Christians are called to continually seek reconciliation and practice longsuffering, forgiveness, and kindness (after the pattern of God, notably portrayed in Matt 5:44-45 and Luke 6:35-36), there comes a point in time in which justice must be enacted—whether from God directly or through his representatives (in particular the State and its judicial system, cf. Rom 13:1-4).

Narrowing the Field

To address the entirety of the imprecations in the Psalms would require a treatment too voluminous for the constraints of this dissertation. Indeed, the passages in

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41 Notice here how the Song of Moses—the song of divine vengeance—is equated in some measure with the Song of Christ the Lamb.

42 The radical demands of love Jesus places on his followers are patterned after the example of God: “Love your enemies . . . so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:44-45); and “Love your enemies . . . and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and evil. Be compassionate, just as also your Father is compassionate” (Luke 6:35-36).
the Psalms which contain an element of imprecation, or the desire for divine vengeance, are quite numerous, including at least: 5:11; 6:11; 7:7, 10, 16-17; 9:20-21; 10:15; 17:13; 28:4; 31:18-19; 35:1, 46, 8, 19; 24-26; 40:15-16; 52:7; 54:7; 55:10, 16; 56:8; 58:7-11; 59:6, 12-14; 68:2-3, 31; 69:23-26, 28-29; 70:3-4; 71:13; 74:11, 22-23; 79:6, 10, 12; 83:10, 12, 14-19; 94:1-2; 104:35; 109:6-15, 17-20, 29; 129:5-8; 137:7-9; 139:19, 21-22; 140:9-12; 141:10; 143:12. This covers ninety-eight verses in thirty-two psalms. However, those psalms which may be rightly deemed “impresatory” (i.e., whose characterizing element is the imprecations or cries for divine vengeance found in them) are better limited to fourteen: Psalms 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137, 139, and 140. Yet, even to address each of these extensively would be to overextend the limits of this inquiry.

Therefore, I will be addressing the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms and their relation to Christian ethics via primarily three psalms, each representing one of the three spheres of cursing found within the larger corpus of Imprecatory Psalms: (1) Psalm 58—imprecation against a societal enemy, (2) Psalm 137—imprecation against a national or community enemy, and (3) Psalm 109—imprecation against a personal enemy. All the other Imprecatory Psalms find their lodging in the shade of these three and will be dealt with there but secondarily. Furthermore, I have chosen these three psalms specifically because they contain the harshest language or most severe imprecations against the enemies. Thus, if an answer may be given to these, then an answer may be given to all.

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Versification here and throughout the dissertation follows that of the Massoretic Text as reflected in *BHS*.
Psalm 58 contains a series of graphic imprecations against what is deemed a societal enemy—judges who have become blatantly unjust, deceitful, and violent. In it, appeal is made to the true Judge to swiftly and decisively mete out true justice:

58:7 O God, smash their teeth in their mouths;
    Break off the fangs of the young lions, O Yahweh!
8 Let them flow away like water that runs off in all directions;
    let him prepare to shoot his arrows, only to find them headless!
9 Like a miscarriage, let him melt away;
    like a woman’s abortion, let them not see the sun!
10 Before your pots feel the heat of the brambles—
    as lively as wrath—may he sweep them away!
11 The righteous will rejoice when he sees vengeance;
    he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked (58:7-11).

Under this umbrella Psalm 94 may be subsumed, for it involves the cry for divine vengeance from the “Judge of the earth” (94:2) against a corrupt and oppressive judicial throne (94:5-6, 20-21).

94:1 God of vengeance, Yahweh,
    God of vengeance, shine forth!
2 Rise up, Judge of the earth;
    pay back to the proud what they deserve! (94:1-2).

Psalm 137 is a shockingly emotive cry from the bowels of the exiled remnant against those who had, with such carnage and cruelty, devastated Judea:

137:7 Remember, O Yahweh, against the Edomites—
    the day of Jerusalem!
    They cried, “Raze her, raze her—
    down to her foundation!”
8 O Daughter of Babylon, (doomed to be) devastated,
    blessed is he who repays you
    what you deserve for what you did to us!
9 Blessed is he who seizes and shatters
    your little ones against the cliff! (137:7-9).

44 The translations of Scripture throughout this work are the author’s own.
Stationed under Psalm 137, several psalms call for divine vengeance upon a national or community enemy, uttered either by the community itself, or by an individual speaking from the community’s perspective:

68:2 May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may those who hate him flee before him.
3 As smoke is driven away, may you drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God.

31 Rebuke the beast of the reeds, the herd of bulls among the calves of the peoples—trampled down, bringing bars of silver. Scatter the peoples who take pleasure in battle (68:2-3, 31).

74:11 Why do you draw back your hand—even your right hand? (Draw it) from the midst of your bosom; finish (them)!
22 Rise up, O God, and defend your cause; remember how fools mock you all day long!
23 Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of your adversaries, which rises continually (74:11, 22-23).

79:6 Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.
10 Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.
12 Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the abuse they have hurled at you, O Lord! (79:6, 10, 12).

83:10 Do to them as you did to Midian, as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon.
12 Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,
    all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna.

14 O my God, make them like whirling dust,
    like chaff before the wind.
15 As fire consumes the forest
    and as flame sets the hills ablaze,
16 so pursue them with your tempest
    and with your storm-wind terrify them!
17 Fill their faces with shame
    that they may seek your name, O Yahweh.
18 Let them be ashamed and dismayed for ever;
    let them be abashed until they perish.
19 Let them know that you, whose name alone is Yahweh—
    are the Most High over all the earth (83:10, 12, 14-19).

129:5 May all who hate Zion
    be turned back in shame.
6 May they be like grass on the roof,
    which withers before it can grow;
7 with it the reaper cannot fill his hands,
    nor the binder of sheaves his arms.
8 May those who pass by not say,
    “The blessing of Yahweh be upon you;
    we bless you in the name of Yahweh” (129:5-8).

The majority of the Imprecatory Psalms, however, are situated against a
personal enemy, or a collective enemy viewed from the perspective of the individual
(notably, David). Of first place, and most offensive, is Psalm 109:

109:6 Appoint a wicked man against him,
    and let an accuser stand at his right hand!
7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
    and let his plea be considered as sin.
8 May his days be few;
    may another take his office.
9 May his children be fatherless
    and his wife a widow.
10 May his children wander about and beg,
    and may they be driven from their ruined homes.
11 May a creditor seize all that he has,
and may strangers plunder what he has gained from his labor.

12 Let there be no one to extend lovingkindness to him,
    nor to take pity on his fatherless children.

13 May his descendants be cut off,
    may their name be blotted out in the next generation.

14 May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before Yahweh,
    and may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.

15 May they remain before Yahweh continually,
    and may he cut off the memory of his descendants from the earth.

17 He loved cursing—so may it come on him;
    and he found no pleasure in blessing—so may it be far from him.

18 He clothed himself with cursing as his coat;
    so may it enter into his body like water,
    and into his bones like oil.

19 May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
    and like a belt tied forever around him.

20 May this be Yahweh’s payment to my accusers,
    even to those who speak evil against my life.

28 Let them curse, but may you bless;
    may those who rise up against me be put to shame,
    but may your servant rejoice.

29 May my accusers be clothed with disgrace
    and may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a robe (109:6-15, 17-20, 28-29).

Under this plethora of imprecations, the various and remaining personal Imprecatory Psalms may be comprehended:

5:11 Declare them guilty, O God!
    Let them fall by their own intrigues.
    For their many transgressions, cast them out,
    for they have rebelled against you (5:11).

6:11 May all my enemies be ashamed and greatly troubled;
    may they turn back in sudden disgrace (6:11).

7:7 Rise up, O Yahweh, in your anger;
    raise yourself up against the rage of my enemies!
    Rouse yourself on my behalf with the judgment you have decreed.

10 Bring an end to the evil of the wicked!

16 He dug a pit and scooped it out—
so may he fall into the pit he has made.
17 Let the trouble he has caused recoil on his head;
    and let the violence he has wreaked descend on his pate! (7:7, 10, 16-17).

9,20 Rise up, O Yahweh, let not man prevail;
    let the nations be judged in your presence.
21 Strike them with terror, O Yahweh;
    let the nations know they are but men (9:20-21).

10:15 Break the arm of the wicked and evil man;
    may you seek out his wickedness
    that would not be found out (10:15).

17:13 Rise up, O Yahweh, confront them, bring them down;
    rescue my life from the wicked by your sword (17:13).

28:4 Repay them in accordance with their deeds
    and in accordance with their evil work;
    in accordance with what their hands have done, repay them,
    and bring back upon them what they deserve (28:4).

31:18 O Yahweh, let me not be put to shame,
    for I call on you;
    let the wicked be put to shame
    and go silent to the grave.
19 Let their lying lips be silenced,
    which speak arrogantly against the righteous
    with pride and contempt (31:18-19).

35:1 Contend, O Yahweh, with those who contend with me;
    fight against those who fight against me.

4 Let them be put to shame and humiliated
    who seek my life;
    let them be turned back in dismay
    who plot my ruin.
5 Let them be like chaff before the wind,
    with the angel of Yahweh driving them away;
6 let their path be dark and slippery,
    with the angel of Yahweh pursuing them.
8 Let ruin overtake them by surprise;
and let their own net they hid ensnare them,
let them fall into the pit, to their ruin.

19 Let not those rejoice over me
who are wrongfully my enemies;
let not those who hate me without cause
(maliciously) wink the eye.

24 Vindicate me according to your righteousness, O Yahweh my God;
and let them not rejoice over me.

25 Let them not say to themselves, “Aha, just what we wanted!”
Let them not say, “We have swallowed him up.”

26 Let them be put to shame and confusion altogether,
who rejoice at my ruin;
Let them be clothed with shame and disgrace
who exalt themselves over me (35:1, 4-6, 8, 19, 24-26).

40:15 Let them be put to shame and confusion altogether
who seek to take my life;
let them be turned back in disgrace
who desire my ruin.

16 Let them be appalled at their own shame
who say to me, “Aha! Aha!” (40:15-16).

52:7 So, may God tear you eternally down:
may he snatch you up and tear you from your tent;
and may he uproot you from the land of the living! (52:7).

54:7 May he repay with evil those who watch me with ill intent.
In your faithfulness annihilate them! (54:7).

55:10 Swallow them, O Lord, divide their speech,
for I see violence and strife in the city.

16 Let death take them by surprise;
let them go down alive to the grave,
for evils find lodging among them (55:10, 16).

56:8 For (such) wickedness, will they escape (punishment)?
In your anger, O God, bring down the nations (56:8).
And you, O Yahweh God of Hosts, God of Israel,
awake to punish all the nations;
show no mercy to all wicked traitors.

Do not kill them, lest my people forget;
make them tremble by your power, and bring them down,
O Lord, our shield.

For the sins of their mouths,
for the words of their lips,
let them be captured in their pride.
And for the curses and lies they utter,
consume them in wrath,
consume them till they are no more.
Then it will be known to the ends of the earth
that God rules over Jacob (59:6, 12-14).

May their table set before them become a snare;
may it become retribution and a trap.
May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
and their loins tremble forever.
Pour out your wrath upon them;
and let your burning anger overtake them.
May their camp be deserted;
let there be no one to dwell in their tents.

Add iniquity to their iniquity;
and let them not enter into your righteousness.
Let them be blotted out of the book of life,
and let them not be listed with the righteous (69:23-26, 28-29).

Let them be put to shame and confusion
who seek my life;
let them be turned back in disgrace
who desire my ruin.
Let them turn back because of their shame
who say, “Aha! Aha!” (70:3-4).

May they be put to shame and perish
who accuse me;
may they be covered with reproach and disgrace
who seek my ruin (71:13).

May sinners vanish from the earth,
and may the wicked be no more (104:35).
139:19 If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh,
and abhor those who rise up against you?
22 I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies (139:19, 21-22).

140:9 Do not grant, O Yahweh, the desires of the wicked;
do not let their plans succeed,
or they will become proud. Selah
10 The heads of those who surround me—
may he cover them with the trouble of their lips.
11 May (fiery) coals fall upon them;
may He throw them into the fire,
into watery pits—may they never rise!
12 Let men of slander not be established in the land;
men of violence—may evil hunt them down swiftly! (140:9-12).

141:10 Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
while I safely pass by (141:10).

143:12 And in Your lovingkindness annihilate my enemies
and destroy all my foes,
for I am Your servant! (143:12).

The Method of Approach

In this dissertation, I will seek to establish the plausibility that the utterance of
imprecations or appeals for the onslaught of divine vengeance in the face of sustained
injustice, hardened enmity, and gross oppression—as is found in the Imprecatory Psalms—is
consistent with the ethics of the Old Testament and finds corresponding (albeit lessened)
echo in the New.

In the development of this thesis, I will investigate first the principal solutions
proffered with regard to the Imprecatory Psalms and Christian ethics and evaluate their
legitimacy. Secondly, I will seek to settle the Imprecatory Psalms in their ancient Near Eastern context, in which cursing was an every-day facet of life. Following this, in the major focus of the dissertation, I will explore the three harshest psalms of imprecation (Pss 58, 137, 109) in greater detail and seek to ascertain the theological foundations upon which their cries were uttered. Lastly, I will examine the categorical and apparently contradictory statements of the New Testament (particularly the command of Jesus to “love your enemies” and of Paul to “bless and curse not”) vis-à-vis the imprecations in the psalms, coupled with an attempt to account for like imprecations in the New Testament.

Moreover, I will approach the issue at hand from a biblical-theological, rather than a systematic-theological, standpoint. Therefore, I will limit my inquiry into the ethics of such imprecations to the corpus of the Old and New Testaments as they have been progressively revealed. This approach further entails the recognition of a direct connection between the testaments: that the Old and New Testaments speak alike of the same God, and essentially of the same people of God, who are governed by essentially the same

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45 For example: in Rev 1:17 Jesus is, by ascription, equated with Yahweh (alluding to Isa 44:6; 48:12); and in Rev 21:3, 7 God proclaims the culmination of the defining covenant declaration (cf. Gen 17:7-8; Lev 26:11-12; 2 Sam 7:14; Jer 31:33).

46 For example: 1 Pet 2:9 speaks of the New Testament church in language drawn from that inaugural declaration of Old Testament Israel as the people of God (Exod 19:5-6); Gal 3:29 attests that those who are in Christ are heirs of the Abrahamic promise; and Rom 4 affirms Abraham as our father in the faith and the exemplar of our faith. Although there have been historical disagreements between covenantal and dispensational theologians regarding the degree of continuity versus discontinuity between the testaments and the people of God, dispensationalism, as it has been most recently expressed, embraces an essential unity to the people of God. Ware argues that “we can think responsibly about the continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the church as both entities relate within the one people of God.” He elaborates: “Israel and the church are in one sense a united people of God (they participate in the same new covenant), while in
Indeed, the New Testament, by its own testimony and inference, is both the necessary complement and completion of the Old.48

another sense they remain separate in their identity and so comprise differing peoples of God. (Israel is given territorial and political aspects of the new-covenant promise not applicable to the church.) Israel and the church are in fact one people of God, who together share in the forgiveness of sins through Christ and partake of his indwelling Spirit with its power for covenant faithfulness, while they are nonetheless distinguishable covenant participants comprising what is one unified people. As the title of this chapter suggests, they are in fact the united ‘people(s) of God,’ one by faith in Christ and common partaking of the Spirit, and yet distinct insofar as God will yet restore Israel as a nation to its land. One new covenant, under which differing covenant participants join together, through Christ and the Spirit, as a common people of God—this, then, is the grace and the glory of the marvelous provision of God.” Bruce A. Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 69, 96-97. Blaising and Bock agree, rooting this unity in the person and work of Christ: he “is the key to the dispensations. . . . He gives the dispensations their unity—a unity in historical development, not a static transcendental ahistorical unity—and He gives the redeemed their identity as the people(s) of God.” Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993): 300-01.

47 For example: in Matt 22:36-40 our Lord distills the essence of the Old Testament commands as that of love for God and love for one’s neighbor (quoting from Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18); in 1 John 4:21 this same dual-faceted command is given to govern God’s New Covenant people; and in Gal 5:13–6:2 the “law of Christ” is linked to this very “law of love.”

48 For example: in Matt 5:17 Christ asserts that he came not to abolish the Old Testament, but to fulfill it; 2 Cor 1:20 teaches that all God’s promises find their ultimate realization in Christ—and thus also to those united to him; and Rev 21–22 and Gen 1–3 together form an overarching inclusio to the Scriptures in their entirety.