CHAPTER 2
UNSATISFACTORY SOLUTIONS

Across the centuries much has been written regarding the relation of the Christian to cries of imprecation as are found in the Psalms. Yet even in modern treatments of this vital issue, there have been little more than cursory efforts to integrate such imprecations holistically into the larger trans-testamental biblical theology,¹ and the solutions proposed have proven theologically inadequate for reasons outlined below. The Imprecatory Psalms have been unsatisfactorily explained as chiefly (1) expressions of evil emotions—either to be suppressed or expressed, (2) utterances consonant with Old Covenant morality but inconsistent with New Covenant ethics, or (3) words appropriately spoken solely by Christ in relation to his work on the cross,² and thus only by his followers through him.

Evil Emotions

Not to be expressed. The esteemed C. S. Lewis of last generation England, whose works have been a well-spring of inspiration for people of all ages, finds that “in some of

¹ The ongoing works of Walter Brueggemann are nearest the exception.
² I.e., in the fulfillment of the demands of divine justice.
the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth”—the worst of which is perhaps Psalm 109. But “even more devilish in one verse is the, otherwise beautiful, 137 where a blessing is pronounced on anyone who will snatch up a Babylonian baby and beat its brains out against the pavement.” Lewis uses such phrases to describe these psalms as: “terrible or (dare we say?) contemptible,” “indeed devilish,” “wicked” and “sinful,” “this fury or luxury of hatred,” “ferocious” and “dangerous.” He further believes with regard to them that “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.”

However, to embrace this position is questionable on four counts. Firstly, to insist that the numerous Imprecatory Psalms breathe words of hateful revenge and, as such,
are not to be repeated by those trained in the school of Christ who taught his followers to “love your enemies,” is to run counter to the prevailing piety of the psalmists—notably that of David, the principal author of these psalms. Though he did succumb to the temptation of rage and revenge (e.g., 1 Sam 25:21-22) and committed gross sin (notably, the account of his adultery, deception, and murder in 2 Sam 11), these failings did not express his prevailing character, which was rather revealed in his repentance (cf. Ps 51; 1 Sam 25:32-34). Moreover, he was quick to exhibit a Christ-like spirit toward his enemies—in particular, King Saul. It would thus appear an unlikely inconsistency if this principal author of the Imprecatory Psalms (23 of the 32 bear his explicit seal of authorship) were to exhibit in

11 For example, after having been hounded relentlessly by the madly jealous King Saul, David finally had the choice opportunity to dispatch him while he was ignobly positioned in the cave in which David and his henchmen were hiding. However, David’s conscience would not allow him to strike down “Yahweh’s anointed.” After Saul had gone back to his troops, David called out to him from the cave, “May Yahweh judge between me and you. And may Yahweh avenge me for what you have done, but my hand will not be against you” (1 Sam 24:13). And Saul’s response is enlightening, “When a man finds his enemy, does he send him on his way unharmed? May Yahweh reward you well for the way you treated me today” (1 Sam 24:20).

12 There is a certain level of debate, ambiguity, and uncertainty surrounding the use of the introductory ל in the superscriptions of the psalms. Indeed, its fluidity of meaning is patently evidenced by the three-fold use in Ps 18:1: מִקְמֶתָן לֵבָב יְהוָה לְפָרוֹת דֶּבֶר יִתְחָה, “for the choir director, of David, the servant of Yahweh . . .”. Granting this, however, I adopt the traditional understanding of the ל in, e.g., קָרֵי, as the лamedh of authorship for the following reasons: (1) The extended superscription found in Ps 18:1 makes the matter of authorship indicated by קָרֵי explicit. Moreover, it is likely that קָרֵי is the abbreviated form of the longer and frequent, e.g., קָם מֹוֹר קָרֵי, “a psalm of David.” That this is so to be construed, rather than as a psalm “for” or “concerning” David is buttressed by the like use in the prophecy of Habakkuk 3:1, where authorship is again explicit: קָרוֹ בֵּית יְהוָה בֵּית יַבֵּל, “a prayer of Habakkuk . . .”. (2) Such an understanding is consonant with David’s reputation as both musician and composer (e.g., 2 Sam 23:1; Amos 6:5; 1 Chr 15–16). (3) Both Christ and the apostles considered David himself to be the author of those psalms which bore the imprint קָרֵי (e.g., Mark 12:35-37; Acts 2:25-35). (4) The Tell Qasile ostraca (c. 8th cent. B.C.) evidence a use similar to that of the psalms: קָרֵי, “Belonging to the king.” John C. L. Gibson, Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, vol. 1, Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 15-17. Moreover, Deutsch and Heltzer have
these psalms a heart consistently far from the character of Christ.\textsuperscript{13} To the contrary, we find as a core practice that precedes the personal imprecations of David a pattern of love-in-action. Indeed, the utterance of any imprecation in the psalms comes only after the enemy’s repeated return of “evil for good” (Pss 35:12; 109:5), or after gross (and frequently, sustained) injustice (cf. Pss 58, 79, 137). For example, in Psalm 35:12-14, David relates:

\begin{verbatim}
12 They repay me evil for good—
what bereavement to my soul!
13 Yet I, when they were sick, I clothed myself in sackcloth,
    I humbled myself in fasting,
    but my prayers returned unanswered.
14 As though for my friend or brother, I paced back and forth;
    as though mourning for my mother, I bowed my head in grief.
\end{verbatim}

Secondly, the purposes which govern the expression of imprecation in the psalms and the principal themes that run repeatedly through them are of the highest ethical plane: (1) a concern for the honor of God (e.g., Ps 74:22, “Rise up, O God, and defend your cause; remember how fools mock you all day long!”); (2) a concern for the realization of justice amidst rampant injustice (e.g., Ps 58:12, “Then men will say . . . ‘Surely there is a God who judges in the earth!’”); (3) a concern for the public recognition catalogued numerous early Hebrew inscriptions on personal articles, the preponderance of which are likewise introduced by the $\text{Lamed auctoris}$ of ownership. Cf. R. Deutsch and M. Heltzer, \textit{Forty New Ancient West Semitic Inscriptions} (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publication, 1994); and ibid., \textit{New Epigraphic Evidence from the Biblical Period} (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publication, 1995). Furthermore, Gesenius long ago observed that “the introduction of the author, poet, &c., by this \text{Lamed auctoris} is the customary idiom also in the other Semitic dialects, especially in Arabic.” GKC, 420.\footnote{\textsuperscript{13} This is not to assert that David was in any way a stranger to sin and rebellion. But the governing principle of his life was $\text{Yod grafted in}. And it must be remembered that these Imprecatory Psalms of David were incorporated into the Psalter for Israel’s worship. Though this does not of itself demand that the things expressed therein are faultless, the sheer quantity of the cries for divine vengeance in the Psalms calls into question the view that they are not, in some measure at least, exemplary.}
of the sovereignty of God (e.g., Ps 59:14, “Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob”); (4) the hope that divine retribution will cause men to seek Yahweh (e.g., Ps 83:17, “Fill their faces with shame so that they may seek your name”); (5) an abhorrence of sin (e.g., Ps 139:21, “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh?”); and (6) a concern for the preservation of the righteous (e.g., Ps 143:11-12, “For the sake of your name, O Yahweh, preserve my life! . . . And in your lovingkindness annihilate my enemies and destroy all my foes, for I am your servant”).

Thirdly, to maintain that the expressions in the Imprecatory Psalms are evil and exude a spirit far distant from the Spirit of God is contrary to the inspiration of the Psalms.14 By the testimony of both David and David’s greater Son, the Psalms come under the purview of divine inspiration. David’s own attestation in 2 Samuel 23:2 is that “the Spirit of Yahweh spoke through me”—and this David is the premier human author of the Imprecatory Psalms. Furthermore, Jesus, in Mark 12:36, stated that “David himself spoke by the Holy Spirit.” He used this clause preparatory to a quotation from the Psalms.15 Moreover, and perhaps most pertinent, is the quotation of Peter from both Psalms 69 and 109—two of the most notorious of the Imprecatory Psalms—introduced by the statement

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14 But, it may well be asked, how can divine inspiration be applied to the Psalms, which, by their very nature, are the response of men back to God. How can the words of men to God be the Word of God to men? In what sense, and to what extent, can we admit that they bear the stamp of the Holy Spirit? To these questions it is readily admitted that there is a measure of mystery. But the larger testimony of Scripture as well the history of God’s people (including the process of canonization) witness that the Psalter, in its entirety, is included under the aegis of “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16)—by the Holy Spirit through godly men (cf., e.g., Heb 3:7, in which a quotation from Ps 95 is introduced by, “as the Holy Spirit says”).

15 Although these words are in specific reference to Psalm 110, the implications are farther reaching.
that these Scriptures “had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas” (Acts 1:16, 20). Indeed, Lewis himself recognized that there is a certain compromise of the divine inspiration of the Psalms that is necessitated when his view is held. Since he believed that the Imprecatory Psalms were “so full of that passion to which our Lord’s teaching allows no quarter,”16 he courted the middle territory “that all Holy Scripture is in some sense—though not all parts of it in the same sense—the word of God.”17

Fourthly, this view is contrary to the nature of the Psalms as a book fashioned for the worship of Yahweh by his people. To explain the Imprecatory Psalms as outbursts

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16 Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, 19.

17 Ibid. Lewis later elaborates: “The total result is not ‘the Word of God’ in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we . . . receive that word from it . . . by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message.” Ibid., 112. Zenger likewise compromises the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Psalms in his defense of their appropriate use in the modern church. He baldly asserts that he is “not interested in a fundamentalist defense of the psalms of enmity and vengeance that are experienced as difficult or genuinely offensive, as if they must necessarily be retained because they are ‘the word of God’ and ‘revelation’.” Erich Zenger, A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 63. Rather, “these psalms confront us with the reality of violence and, especially, with the problem of the perpetrators of this suffering and their condemnation by the judgment of God. In the process, they very often compel us to confess that we ourselves are violent, and belong among the perpetrators of the violence lamented in these psalms. In that way, these psalms are God’s revelation.” Ibid., 85. Barnes, on the other hand, sought to defend the inspiration of the Imprecatory Psalms by insisting that “all that inspiration is responsible for is, the correctness of the record in regard to the existence of these feelings—that is, the authors of the Psalms actually recorded what was passing in their own minds. They gave vent to their internal emotions. They state real feelings which they themselves had; feelings which, while human nature remains the same, may spring up in the mind of imperfect man, anywhere, and at any time.” Albert Barnes, Notes, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical, on the Book of Psalms, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1868), xxxviii. However, as Bush notes, the question is not “whether these imprecations are ‘truthful,’ but rather how this truth can be approved by God!” L. Russ Bush, “Does God Inspire Imprecation? Divine Authority and Ethics in the Psalms” (Evangelical Philosophical Society Presidential Address, November 16, 1990), 5.
of evil emotion not to be emulated may well account for the initial writing of the Psalms, but it does not adequately explain why these psalms were incorporated into the canon—indeed, the book of worship for God’s people! Gunn perceptively observes that to regard the Imprecatory Psalms “as wholly vindictive may be a sufficient explanation for the writing of them, because anyone in certain given circumstances of distress and provocation may have surrendered to this dark spirit. What we have to account for, however, is not the writing of them but their incorporation into the Psalter at the time when it was compiled, and in view of the purpose for which it was compiled. It is as nearly certain as can be that there was a higher reason for their inclusion in a collection that was intended solely for use in the worship of God.”¹⁸ Indeed, these troubling curses and cries for vengeance appear with such frequency that they form an integral part of the canonical Psalter¹⁹—and this without any literary or theological intimation of divine disapprobation for the expression of such sentiments.²⁰ Nor was there felt any need by later copyists and compilers to expunge such material as unbefitting the Book of God. Gunn further muses that there

¹⁸ George S. Gunn, God in the Psalms (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1956), 99. Similarly, Martin observes that the psalms included for use in the public worship of God contain an implicit claim that the poet’s expressed feelings are “in some sense true and right, such as others should sympathize with and, it may be, adopt as their own.” Chalmers Martin, “The Imprecations in the Psalms,” PTR 1 (1903): 540.

¹⁹ As Bush notes, the “prominence of the imprecatory material is an internal evidence that the biblical writers themselves did not see any inconsistency in their devotion to God and their call for judgment upon the wicked.” Bush, “Does God Inspire Imprecation?,” 6.

²⁰ Although it may be argued that such expressions were retained to show succeeding generations that all things may be rightly brought to Yahweh in prayer—even our rage and revenge (see below), this would have to be inferred, for such a limit and intent is nowhere explicitly stated. Moreover, it yet leaves open the question: Why are there so many Imprecatory Psalms?
must be some thought—albeit vivid and painful—in these psalms which the compilers “regarded as seemly and necessary in the people’s approach to God in worship; and they took the risk—a very large one—of the misunderstanding which would arise and has constantly arisen from the type of language in which that thought was clothed.”

This reality must be duly grappled with.

To be expressed and relinquished. Walter Brueggemann, in a related position, understands the Imprecatory Psalms as hateful cries for revenge—but cries which Christians must move beyond. Yet this way beyond the psalms of vengeance “is a way through them and not around them.” He feels that rather than disowning them, Christians ought fully to embrace these harsh psalms as their own. They voice a common sentiment, for humans are vengeful creatures. “Our rage and indignation must be fully owned and fully expressed.

21 Gunn, God in the Psalms, 99.

22 It is significant to note that the proposed solutions addressed in this chapter (with the exception of Brueggemann and those aligned with his position; cf. below) end up, in the final analysis, in distancing the praying of the Imprecatory Psalms from the present expression of the people of God—a distance which is manifestly foreign to the apparent intent of the psalms as they have been passed down. Indeed, the Psalter in its entirety was incorporated into the Christian Canon, with the tacit affirmation of its continued status as the Book of Worship for God’s people. For example, the characteristic Christian life includes “speaking to one another with ‘psalms’” (Eph 5:19). As Drijvers concludes, the psalms, viewed as a whole and from a redempto-historical standpoint, “are sung by the Church now when she comes to meet him who is both holy and present, now when she experiences the riches of salvation and the neediness of the pilgrim state, now when she looks forward with longing to the full communion with God in heaven, where all the uncertainty of man’s life on earth shall be at an end. The psalms are the Songs of the New Covenant!” Pius Drijvers, The Psalms: Their Structure and Meaning (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 214.

Then (and only then) can our rage and indignation be yielded to the mercy of God.\textsuperscript{24}

Rather than banning such rage from the worship of God and the life of faith,

Brueggemann nobly insists that this “rage is rightly carried even to the presence of Yahweh,”\textsuperscript{25} that it may be relinquished there.\textsuperscript{26}

This position is to be commended (1) for seeking to maintain the rightful place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the life of the Christian and in Christian worship, and (2) for contending that all of life is to be brought to God in prayer and relinquished to his lordship. However, in yet viewing the imprecations therein as “evil,” Brueggemann fails to reckon fully with the presence of similar imprecations in the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament foundations upon which the imprecations are voiced.\textsuperscript{27} Indeed, the larger trans-testamental testimony appears to exonerate and even commend them in limited and appropriate instances. These “curses” are based upon the covenant promises of God, and if that is so, then it would apparently not be inherently evil for his people to—albeit passionately—petition him for the fulfillment of these promises.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} Walter Brueggemann, \textit{The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 85.

\textsuperscript{26} This conviction is echoed by Craigie, who concurs that although the sentiments expressed in the Imprecatory Psalms “are in themselves evil, they are a part of the life of the soul which is bared before God in worship and prayer.” Peter C. Craigie, \textit{Psalms 1–50}, \textit{WBC}, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 19 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 41. Zenger likewise notes that the Imprecatory Psalms bring us face to face with “the fundamental biblical conviction that in prayer we may say everything, literally everything, if only we say it to GOD.” Zenger, \textit{A God of Vengeance!}, 79.

\textsuperscript{27} These Old Testament theological foundations and New Testament imprecations will be dealt with in later chapters.
And initially, this yearning for God’s just vengeance on the inveterately wicked that we find in the Psalms is far from evil—Jesus himself was known to display the rage evoked by stubborn sin. Prominent in this regard are: “He looked around at them in anger, deeply grieved at their stubborn hearts” (Mark 3:5), and “Snakes! Brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to Gehenna?!”28 (Matt 23:33). In both cases Christ was reacting against the hardened unbelief and opposition of the religious leaders of his day. Although neither of these statements is strictly imprecatory, they do bear the same sense and intensity: they exhibit a similar sentiment (i.e., the yearning for divine vengeance)29 expressed through a similar emotional state (i.e., rage), which are the cornerstones of Brueggemann’s contention that the imprecations in the Psalms are indeed evil. And if this is the example of the supremely ethical Jesus, then a righteous “rage” has been reclaimed.

In addition, an instance of actual imprecation from the lips of Christ is recorded in Mark 11:12-14, 20-21 (cf. Matt 21:18-20). As both the near context and the larger development of the Gospel elucidate, Christ’s cursing of the fig tree is a not-so-veiled imprecation against faithless and fruitless Israel—an Israel who had so stubbornly rejected him.30

28 I.e., hell. Gehenna (gevenna) is a transliteration of the Hebrew מֵגֶן, “Valley of [the Son of] Hinnom.” This was the valley on the south side of Jerusalem where the notorious infant sacrifices to the pagan gods Molech and Baal were carried out, and which received the severest of denunciations from Yahweh (e.g., Jer 32:35). It was also the place for the dumping of refuse. This location of abominable terror and burning served as a vivid picture of eternal damnation, of hell.

29 Cf. Luke 12:49, “I have come to cast fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” (cf. the impassioned “woe” of Christ uttered against Judas in Matt 26:24).

30 This passage will be dealt with in more detail in chapter five.
Moreover, weighted against the contention that the Imprecatory Psalms pulsate with the venom of malice and revenge is the sheer volume of Imprecatory Psalms in the Psalter. If imprecations or calls for divine vengeance against the inveterately evil or unjust are to be construed as expressions of the faithful believer’s dark side—even if intended as a teaching tool, how is the inclusion in the Psalter of such a disproportionately large contingent of imprecations to be explained? Indeed, their prevalence in the Book of Worship by those of established piety lends credence to the opinion that such cries are to be embraced as the believer’s justified appeal to divine power and rectification in the midst of human powerlessness and oppression, rather than utterances to be desperately avoided.

**Old Covenant Morality**

*Inferior morality.* Approaching the issue from a dispensational and progressive-revelational standpoint, Roy Zuck seeks to alleviate the difficulty aroused by the Imprecatory Psalms by claiming that “the unfolding of revealed truth in the Word of God is accompanied by a similar advancement of morals,” and that “the Old Testament is on

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32 Roy Ben Zuck, “The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1957), 73. Hammond similarly estimates “that prayers for the temporal and even capital punishment of the wicked, while unlawful and unjustifiable on the lips of Christian men, were nevertheless, under certain conditions, perfectly lawful and perfectly natural on the part of those to whom life and immortality and a judgment to come had not been brought to light.” Joseph Hammond, “The Vindictive Psalms Vindicated: Part IV,” *Expositor* 3 (1876): 452. This assertion is countered, however, when one encounters imprecations in the New Testament which bear the same or a similar likeness.
a lower moral plane than the New Testament.” Of principal support for his thesis is the observation that, “though there are many passages which speak of tenderness and kindness toward others, even toward enemies, the Old Testament never speaks of forgiving or loving avowed enemies of God.” This assertion is placed opposite the words of Jesus in the New Testament, in which he urged his disciples to “love your enemies” (Matt 5:44), and adjured his Father to “forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). In the entire Old Testament, Zuck finds only two passages which speak of consideration for one’s enemy—neither of which “says anything about forgiving or loving that enemy!” The verses cited are Exodus 23:4-5 and Proverbs 25:21, which state, respectively: “If you happen upon the stray ox or donkey of your enemy, you must surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you fallen under its load, do not fail to help him; you must surely help him with it.” “If one who hates you is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.”

However, there are two principal objections to this proposed solution to the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms and Christian ethics. Firstly, the narrow understanding

33 Zuck, “The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 70. He adds: “The difference in the dispensations of law and grace demands an acceptance of the fact that the moral standards of the Old Testament were not on the high level of that of the New Testament. For example, love for one’s enemies as found in the New Testament is foreign to Old Testament morality.” Ibid., 73 (italics added). However, although it is rightly espoused that the New Testament ethic of enemy-love is made more explicit and given greater emphasis, and the ramifications of that ethic are more widely explored and applied, it is not wholly new. Indeed, the concept of enemy-love is not foreign to Old Testament morality; rather it is latent or subdued, finding full flower in Christ. The radical command of Christ to “love your enemies” (Matt 4:43-48) is addressed in chapter five.

34 Ibid., 60.

35 Ibid.
of love placed upon the Old Testament (or the New, for that matter) is countered by the broader teaching and example of Scripture. In both testaments, love is expressed tangibly in acts of kindness, so that a deed of kindness is viewed as an act of love. For example, Leviticus 19, from which the second great commandment arises, is replete with various “actions” that reveal a heart of love for one’s neighbor. These include such things as “intentionally leaving the edges of the harvest field for the poor and the foreigner” (Lev 19:9-10); “paying your workers in a timely fashion” (Lev 19:13); “showing respect for the elderly” (Lev 19:32); and “treating the foreigner as if he were a native” (Lev 19:34). Indeed, in this latter passage, Yahweh goes on to command the Israelites to “love him [the foreigner] as yourself, for you were foreigners (מרגא) in the land of Egypt.”36 This helps us to understand that the reference to “loving one’s neighbor” in Leviticus 19:18, though paralleled with “one of your people,” is by no means meant to be confined there. Rather, that dictum is intended to apply to anyone nearby whose need one may meet, to whom one can show tangible love. This, in many ways, laid the foundation for Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to the query, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29-37).

Furthermore, in Matthew 5:45 (cf. Luke 6:35), Jesus established the command for loving one’s enemies upon the example of the kindness of God, who “sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” alike. Moreover, this kindness toward one’s enemies is both unquestionably commanded (Exod 23:4-5; Prov 25:21) and exampled in the Old

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36 Thus, although the term מרגא speaks generically of a “resident alien,” in this context there is the added nuance of a basic and natural enmity as well. For, although Israel entered Egypt on friendly terms, their “sojourn” in Egypt was characterized by the enmity of denigration and oppression of slavery. It is this mistreatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians that Yahweh seeks to counter among his own people, counter to their inclinations (cf. Deut 10:19).
Testament (e.g., Elisha in 2 Kgs 6:18-23; Naaman’s slave girl in 2 Kgs 5; and Yahweh vs. Jonah in Jonah 3-4). To distance deeds of kindness from the definition of love would be to limit the intent of Scripture without warrant. Thus, the Old Testament does indeed speak of loving one’s enemies—but this enemy-love is placed in the language, command, and example of enemy-kindness, which is love in action.

Secondly, the approach which seeks to explain the ethics of the Imprecatory Psalms on the basis of a morality inferior to that which we possess in the New Covenant runs counter to a proper understanding of progressive revelation. Hibbard has insightfully explained the nature of progressive revelation: God withholding from one age what he has bestowed upon a subsequent one. “But what the Holy Spirit actually commanded, or inspired the Old Testament writers to utter, on moral subjects, is, and must be, in harmony

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37 This account of kindness—of love—towards one’s enemies, is one of the most dramatic in all of Scripture. When the Israelites were hopelessly caged in the town of Dothan by their perennial enemies, the Arameans, the prophet Elisha prayed that God would blind the eyes of the enemy army. By a ruse, he then led them to the Israelite capital of Samaria. Once inside “their” enemy territory, their sight was returned, and the Israelite king asked Elisha if he should kill them. Elisha declined, and directed the king instead to give them food and water, and to send them back unharmed. And from that point on, there was a period of peace between them.

38 The Arameans of Elisha’s day were the epitome of the enemy. And Naaman’s unnamed slave girl, acquired by an army raid, surprisingly sought the welfare of her foreign master—the Aramean army commander; and Elisha likewise responds to his need with grace and kindness.

39 This example of Yahweh’s “unexpected” compassion toward the Assyrians—his inveterate adversaries and the oppressors of his people—is contrasted with the unbecoming response of Jonah.
with absolute morality.” And Archer well echoes that “progressive revelation is not to be thought of as a progress from error to truth, but rather as a progress from the partial and obscure to the complete and clear.” There is indeed a degree of difference in the progress of the testaments; but it is a difference in degree not in kind. Beardslee freely admits this development, yet rightly insists that “in essence there is only one principle in regard to morals pervading the Scriptures.”

This essential moral principle is articulated by Jesus, who asserted that the two “great commands” given in the Old Testament are the same two “great commands” reinforced in the New. When he was tested by one of the Pharisees with the question, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:36-40). Thus, from Jesus’ own testimony, the morality of the New Covenant in its highest


41 Gleason L. Archer Jr., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, revised and expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 500. Although not technically imprecatory, Rev 22:18-19, the culmination of revelation’s progress, issues grave warnings in a manner reminiscent of certain ancient Near Eastern curses (cf. chapter 3, note 31). This example further illustrates the close relation between actual imprecation and divine threat: that they are not two entirely distinct domains, but rather ones which bear a certain measure of semantic overlap, as evidenced by, e.g., Deut 28, in which the divine threats are defined as “curses” (for further discussion of this relation, cf. Appendix A).

expression is constant with that of the Old. The way that morality is expressed in the varying dispensations, however, may indeed vary. This is due, among other things, to the centralized status of God’s people in the Old Testament versus the decentralized status in the New. In the Old Testament, God’s people were surrounded by enemy nations: the necessity of their survival and the fulfillment of God’s promises required a prevailing posture of caution or war. But with the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit as the culmination of the ages and the climax of promise has come a more explicit embrace of enemy-love and enduring abuse and the opening of the nations to the gospel of grace.

On a similar basis as the above, Chalmers Martin distances the praying of the Imprecatory Psalms from the New Testament believer when he asserts that the “distinction between the sin and the sinner was impossible to David as an Old Testament saint,” but

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43 Cf. Gal 5:13-14; 6:2; Rom 13:8-10; 1 John 4:20-21. Thus, Zuck’s contention in “The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms” (56, 58) that “in Old Testament times God did not require as much of those who were not permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit as he does of us today” and “that David lived in a dispensation when the higher moral precepts of the New Testament were not in existence” is largely illegitimate, for the two great commands remain constant through both dispensations. Therefore, it is not a matter of higher versus lower moral precepts—they have ever remained fundamentally constant; rather, it is a matter of differing administrations and the outworking of those precepts in the progress of redemption. As Edwards notes: “Because the same God is the author of both dispensations, what is essentially bad, at one period, must be so at all times.” B. B. Edwards, “The Imprecations in the Scriptures,” BSac 1 (1844): 101.

44 And yet even to these, love/kindness was demonstrated in certain discrete instances (cf. examples noted above).

45 Cf., e.g., Matt 5:43-44; 1 Pet 2:21-23.

46 Martin, “The Imprecations in the Psalms,” 548. He continues: “This impossibility arose out of the fact that the doctrine of Satan, which makes it easy for us to pity the sinner while we hate and condemn the sin, was then very imperfectly revealed. We pity the sinner because we view him as not exercising an unconstrained choice of evil, but as being the victim of a cruel compulsion... They thought of these men as choosing evil simply because they loved it, and therefore as being worthy to be hated by all those who loved and chose the good.” Ibid. This,
is a distinction which must rightfully now be made. According to Martin, the progress of revelation alters the Christian’s stance toward the enemies of God from one of enmity against the whole being to one of mere hatred of the governing principle of sin operating through the sinner. This conclusion is similarly echoed by Althann who, after examining the use of imprecation in the Psalms vis-à-vis the cultural milieu in which they appear, proposes a solution to our present repugnance for such severe and unseemly language by “interpreting the expressions about the extermination of the godless in terms of the eradication of the causes of disequilibrium in the private and community life of Yahweh’s faithful. . . . Thus, a Christian re-reading turns the execration of individuals into a denunciation of the unjust situation provoked by them.”

Yet, however common this sentiment may implicitly be in modern Christendom, it insufficiently characterizes the broader theology of Scripture. Therein, it is not merely “love the sinner but hate the sin,” but also paradoxically, “love the sinner but

however, is a misreading of the biblical evidence. Although the doctrine of Satan was in its fledgling stage in the Old Testament, nowhere in the New Testament is it affirmed that as sinners humans are mere victims of Satan’s whim. Rather, the New Testament echoes the sentiment of the Old, that without God people do indeed love and freely choose evil (e.g., Rom 3:10-18 as a collage of quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah).


48 E.g., C. S. Lewis, in reflecting upon the imprecations in the psalms, denies that God looks upon the psalmists’ enemies as they do (i.e., with hatred). While he asserts that God doubtless “has for the sin of those enemies just the implacable hostility which the poets express,” he maintains that such hatred is directed “not to the sinner but to the sin.” Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, 32.
hate the sinner.” McKenzie rightly observes that “sin as an abstraction has no existence. The sin which we hate has its concrete existence in human wills.” John L. McKenzie, “The Imprecations of the Psalter,” AER 111 (1944), 91. It is for such reason as this, he argues, that law-abiding citizens may consent to the execution of a murderer—not because of the pleasure his killing gives them, but because his death restores the order of justice which his crime has violated. Ibid., 90. Moreover, McKenzie, speaking out of the context of the Second World War, contends that “we would not carry on the war if we did not regard our enemies as evil and desire efficaciously to inflict evil upon them. This is a species of hatred.” Ibid. He then further perceptively muses: “there is a lawful hatred of the sinner; and indeed there must be, since such a hatred is the obverse of the love of God. The love of God hates all that is opposed to God; and sinners—not merely sin—are opposed to God. And if such a sentiment is lawful, its expression is lawful; and one may desire that the evil in another receive its corresponding evil—provided that this hatred is restrained within the limits of that which is lawful. These limits are: 1. Hatred must not be directed at the person of one’s neighbor; he is hated for his evil quality. 2. One may desire that the divine justice be accomplished in the sinner; but it must be a desire for divine justice, not a desire for the personal evil of another out of personal revenge. 3. The infliction of evil may not be desired absolutely, but only under the condition that the sinner remains obdurate and unrepentant. 4. It must be accompanied by that true supernatural charity which efficaciously desires the supreme good—the eternal happiness—of all men in general, not excluding any individual who is capable of attaining it. In a word, the sinner may lawfully be hated only when he is loved.” Ibid., 92-93. In like manner before him, Aquinas had affirmed that “God hates the detractor’s sin, not his nature. So we may hate detractors in the same way without sin.” Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, vol. 35, Consequences of Charity, trans. Thomas R. Heath (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1972), 11. Sutcliffe similarly argues that God’s hatred of sinners—and thus ours as well—“is a hatred of the sinner precisely as a sinner or in other words it is a hatred of his sinful character.” E. F. Sutcliffe, “Hatred at Qumran,” RevQ 2 (1960): 347.

50 Cf., e.g., Isa 66:24; Mark 9:47-48; Rev 14:9-11.

51 Although the form of ἐπιβαρέσῃ here is jussive rather than imperfect, the sense is evidently to be construed as imperfect, as suggested by the context and so rendered by a consensus of translations (likewise, cf. the LXX’s future ἐπιβαρέσῃ).
on the wicked coals of fire\textsuperscript{52} and sulfur,” with Matthew 5:44-45, “Love your enemies . . . so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he . . . sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” alike. It is further compounded by the comparison of Isaiah 63:3-4, “I trampled them in my anger . . . their blood splattered my garments . . . for the day of vengeance was in my heart,” with Ezekiel 33:11, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” As Piper muses upon this paradox, he observes that “God is grieved in one sense by the death of the wicked, and pleased in another.”\textsuperscript{53} This is evidence of what he labels “the infinitely complex emotional life of God,”\textsuperscript{54} in which he is able simultaneously both to love and to hate unbelievers—loving them in the sense of his common grace distributed “commonly,” and hating them in the sense that they stand as rebellious sinners before a holy God.

And this life of God is a life the Christian is to emulate—albeit in a vastly inferior manner.\textsuperscript{55} In so much as the Christian is able, as a finite being, to image the

\textsuperscript{52} Reading ἐνταλμαί, “coals of” (cf. Symmachus’ ἐνταλμαί), in lieu of the MT’s ὑπναῖ, “snares.” The difficulty of the MT as it stands is exacerbated in that it portrays an unparalleled metaphor for judgment, and evidently arose due to an accidental transposition of the yod and mem in a consonantal text. Moreover, the adopted reading yields better line symmetry (5:4) than that of the MT (3:6), which reads instead (supported by the LXX): “He will rain on the wicked snares; fire and sulphur and a scorching wind will be the portion of their cup.”


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Humans are created in God’s image (and thus are to image Him, Gen 1:26-28); Christians are being renewed in that image (Col 3:10); and they are to follow the example of Christ (as patterned by Paul, 1 Cor 11:1).
character and sentiment of God, he is called to do so. In this endeavor he finds as his pattern the person of Christ, who both lived pervasive love, yet did not shy away from severe denunciations against the (even religious) unrepentant wicked. On the Christian’s part, then, this paradox is lived out practically and particularly with regard to those hardened sinners deemed “beyond the ken of repentance;” and imprecations of judgment against them are uttered “on the hypothesis of their continued impenitence.” Under

56 In this regard it is instructive to place that “patently offensive outburst” of David, uttered in Ps 139:19, 21-22, in tandem with the description of God’s character and sentiment toward the wicked expressed in Ps 5:5-7. By doing so, it may be seen that David is seeking but to image God’s character and echo his sentiment.

5:5 Surely, you are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; evil cannot dwell with you.
6 The boastful cannot stand before your eyes; you hate all who practice iniquity.
7 You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men Yahweh abhors (5:5-7).

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 loathe those who rise up against you?
22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies (139:19, 21-22).

57 Cf., e.g., John 4:4-42 and 8:2-11 with Matt 11:20-24 and 23:1-39 (the relation of woe to imprecation is discussed in Appendix A).

58 Surburg, “The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 100.

59 This creative tension of loving yet hating the hardened sinner is ably represented by Thrupp: “Imprecations of judgment on the wicked on the hypothesis of their continued impenitence are not inconsistent with simultaneous efforts to bring them to repentance; and Christian charity itself can do no more than labour for the sinner’s conversion. The law of holiness requires us to pray for the fires of divine retribution: the law of love to seek meanwhile to rescue the brand from the burning.” Joseph Francis Thrupp, An Introduction to the Study and Use of the Psalms, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1860), 202.
such circumstances, “to wipe out the sins results in the destruction of the sinner.”60 This is most often seen in the necessity of public justice executed against flagrant criminals. And it is against men such as these—“bloodthirsty men”—that David cried, “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh?” (Ps 139:21).61

_Differing dispensations._ In a distinct but related dispensational approach, Carl Laney sees the issue as one not of inferior morality versus superior morality, but as one simply of differing dispensations. He astutely observes that “the fundamental ground on which one may justify the imprecations in the Psalms is the covenantal basis for the curse on Israel’s enemies”62 as found in the Abrahamic Covenant of Genesis 12:1-3, which promised blessing on those who blessed Abraham’s seed and cursing on those who cursed them. But because he views Abraham’s seed as including solely those of the race and nation of Israel, he asserts that “it would be inappropriate for a church-age believer to call down God’s judgment on the wicked.”63

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60 Surburg, “The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 100. Indeed, in God’s economy, “the wages of sin is death” for the sinner (Rom 6:23). And for all whose sins are not wiped out in the cross of Christ, they remain under the condemnation of God (John 3:18, 36).

61 In many ways, this “hating” is a relational term, realized as a distancing of oneself from the wicked: notice how David prefaces his remark of hatred with, “Away from me!” (Ps 139:19). Additionally, the godly Judean King Jehoshaphat was chided by Jehu the seer, following his return from the ill-fated war alliance with the wicked Israelite King Ahab, for “loving those who hate Yahweh” (2 Chr 19:2; i.e., allying himself with one so opposed to God, passively affirming his wickedness).

62 J. Carl Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” BSac 138 (1981): 41-42. And upon this basis, “David had a perfect right . . . to pray that God would effect what He had promised.” Ibid., 42.

63 Ibid., 44. In like manner, he dismisses the cry for divine vengeance of the martyrs in heaven (Rev 6:10) as “not applicable to the church age.” Ibid.
However, in addition to ignoring the manifest presence of imprecations on the lips of saints in the “dispensation of grace,” this position runs counter to the testimony of the New Testament which affirms the enduring validity of the Abrahamic promise for those who embrace Christ through faith (cf. Gal 3:6-29). Laney’s restriction of the Abrahamic promise to “Israel according to the flesh” (1 Cor 10:18) is parried by Paul’s affirmation in Galatians 3:29 (cf. Rom 2:28-29) that “if you belong to Christ, then you belong to Abraham’s seed, (and are thus) heirs according to the promise.” And if one is an heir of the Abrahamic Covenant through Christ, one is an heir—in some measure at least—to the promise of blessing as well as cursing found therein.

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64 Most notable of which are Gal 1:8-9 and Acts 8:20. These passages, among others, will be addressed in chapter five.

65 According to the argument of Paul in Gal 3, in which he plays off the ambiguity latent in the collective singular σπέρμα/♂♂ (Gal 3:16; Gen 12:7; 13:15; 22:18), Messiah Jesus is “the Seed” par excellence, of whom the covenant promise was made—as interpreted through the development of the promise in the Davidic and New Covenants. As Matt 1:1 presents him, he is the Son of David and the Son of Abraham. Both Solomon, the initial fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:12-16), and Isaac, the initial fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 21:12) are swallowed up in Christ. He is the “yes” of all God’s promises (2 Cor 1:20); thus, all who share in Christ share in the promises. Indeed, Donaldson argues that Paul’s fundamental concern in Gal 3:1–4:7 is “the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentile believers among the true ‘seed’ of Abraham.” T. L. Donaldson, “The ‘Curse of the Law’ and the Inclusion of the Gentiles: Galatians 3.13-14,” NTS 32 (1986): 94. This inclusion of all races and classes into the Abrahamic promise as his “seed” through Christ “the Seed” comes to a focus in Gal 3:26-29, the latter verse of which proclaims: “If you belong to Christ, then you belong to Abraham’s seed, (and are thus) heirs according to the promise.”

66 This blessing of the Covenant, which is the focus of Paul’s discussion, is articulated as the blessing of life, of sonship, of the Spirit (Gal 3:14, 26; 4:4-7); and the curse (taken from the Mosaic Covenant) is the curse of death and condemnation (Gal 3:10-13). This “blessing” is drawn specifically from Gen 12:3b, which promises that the Gentiles would be “blessed” through Abraham; and thus, the distilled argument of Paul is that the Gentiles through faith in Christ, the Seed of Abraham, fully partake in the Covenant made to Abraham. This covenant also promised: “I will bless those who bless you; and I will curse him who curses you.” Granted, the blessings of the Covenant explicitly mentioned by Paul, which the Gentiles inherit, are spiritual in nature. However,
Bobby Gilbert follows in a kindred line of argument. After establishing the trans-temporal justice of the _lex talionis_67 as the basis upon which the author of Psalm 137 cries out for violence against the violators, he retreats in response to the question of whether this same attitude would be appropriate for a Christian. The basis upon which he asserts that the Christian is unable to respond in such a manner is that “the _lex talionis_ was a civil law given to the nation Israel as a means of administering justice under Israel’s theocracy. As a civil law, it is not binding upon the New Testament believer. It cannot, therefore, be the basis of New Testament imprecations.”68

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67 I.e., “the law of just recompense,” which legislated that the punishment was to fit the crime: “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life” (Exod 21:23-25; Lev 24:17-20; Deut 19:18-21).

68 Bobby J. Gilbert, “An Exegetical and Theological Study of Psalm 137” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981), 81. Gilbert dismisses the _lex talionis_ as a proper foundation upon which the New Testament believer could utter imprecations. Instead, he argues that “when Paul requests the judicial wrath of God upon those who do not love the Lord (1 Cor. 16:22) or...
This proposed solution is to be questioned, however. Gilbert rightly insists that
the divinely instituted *lex talionis* “is based upon the retributive nature of God himself.”
69 Although Yahweh is a God of love, he “is also a God of retribution who deals with His
creature’s trespasses against His holiness on the basis of His retributive justice.”
70 This is seen most clearly and poignantly in the necessity of the cross—and it is the cross which both
bridges and binds the two testaments. Since, moreover, it is a grounding assertion of
Scripture that the nature of God does not change (e.g., Mal 3:6; Heb 13:8), the principle of
divine justice based upon that nature, as encased in the *lex talionis*, must as well remain
constant. 71

69 Ibid., 58.
70 Ibid., 69.
71 Indeed, this trans-testamental law in its cousin formulation, “the law of sowing and
reaping,” is expressed in such diverse passages as Prov 26:27, Hos 8:7 and 10:12-13, and Gal 6:7-8;
and Jesus’ own version of the divine law of retribution is stated in Matt 7:2: “With the measure you
use it will be measured to you.” Notice also how the cry of Ps 137:7-9 finds its ultimate realization
in Rev 18:5-6, 20-21. Further example of the operation of the *lex talionis* in the New Testament is
seen in the apostle Paul’s confrontation with Elymas the magician in Acts 13:8-11. Indeed,
although Allen insists that the “Christian faith teaches a new way, the pursuit of forgiveness and a
call to love,” he perceptively asks: “Yet is there forgiveness for a Judas (cf. John 17:12) or for the
vol. 21 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 242. The issue of the *lex talionis* will be addressed in more
detail in chapter four.
Although he approaches the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms from a covenantal perspective, Meredith Kline comes to a similarly dispensational conclusion. He posits that the Old Covenant witnesses to “Intrusion ethics”—that the ethics of the consummation have been “intruded” into the era of common grace. He believes that the ethics of the Sinaitic Covenant in particular are “an anticipatory abrogation of the principle of common grace”\(^72\) inappropriate for the New Testament age, but which will be realized as the ethics of the age to come. He notes in this regard the example that believers in the eschaton, in patternning their ways after God’s, “will have to change their attitude toward the unbeliever from one of neighborly love to one of perfect hatred.”\(^73\) The Imprecatory Psalms, then, in their expressions of hatred and their cries for vengeance, witness to this divine abrogation of common grace and, as such, would be illegitimately echoed by the New Testament church.

One of the principles of common grace, as Kline elucidates, is that “we may not seek to destroy those for whom, perchance, Christ has died.”\(^74\) Mennega shares his sentiment, claiming that “we do not by special revelation know who are and who are not reprobate, as the psalmists of old did. We can therefore never use these psalms to refer

\(^{72}\) Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 160. His contention is based in large measure on the deduction that the Israelite theocracy was divinely instituted to typify the perfected kingdom of God. Ibid., 167.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 160.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 161. For Kline, it is only the principle of intrusion that makes the destruction of physical enemies in the Old Covenant, and the cries for such in the Psalms, permissible. For in the consummation, “no longer will there be the possibility that the enemy of the saint is the elect of God.” Ibid., 162.
them to particular individuals or groups of individuals who at any specific time by their actions display enmity at God’s kingdom. Those who are enemies of God at present may be his choice vessels tomorrow.”75 Now, however true this latter statement may be, to the larger construction it must be objected that nowhere in Scripture is it affirmed that the psalmists knew by God’s Spirit who were reprobate in the divine decree76—but they did know who were the inveterate enemies of God and his people! And neither does Scripture categorically forbid the cry for judgment against such people.77 Zuck rightly admits the presence of unmistakable imprecations in the dispensation of grace (and he cites 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9; 5:12; 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 6:9-10), which he explains as voiced against “those who are the avowed adversaries of the Lord,” and “who are inexorably opposed and relentlessly antagonistic to the gospel of Jesus Christ.”78 And this, it ought be noted, is the very point of the Old Testament imprecations. They also are voiced against the “inveterate

75 Harry Mennega, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms” (Th.M. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1959), 87. Likewise, Vos proffers the same assertion in prescribing Christians from offering petitions to God (like the psalmists’) for the physical death of particular persons, because the Christian “does not know which wicked persons, in the secret counsel of God, are reprobates and which are included in the election of grace.” Vos, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 138. Thomas, in seeking to justify the prayer of the martyrs in Rev 6 (which he believes is guaranteed to be free of any selfish motive, since it is uttered in heaven), asserts that they are able to pray this way because they had been given some special revelation which identified the reprobate—a knowledge possessed only in divine perspective. Robert L. Thomas, “The Imprecatory Prayers of the Apocalypse,” BSac 126 (1969): 129-30. This, however, merely evades the issue.

76 Divine inspiration of the Psalter, which is explicitly affirmed, does not entail a special knowledge of the human author into God’s secret decree.

77 Jesus’ words: “Love your enemies,” along with Paul’s “bless and do not curse,” will be addressed later in chapter five. For Jesus’ address of the lex talionis in personal ethics (Matt 5:38-42), cf. chapter four, note 84.

adversaries of the Lord.” Furthermore, Christians are never called to make the unerring judgment delineating those who are “permanently identified with the kingdom of evil.”

But Christ himself has given the guiding principle by which to detect, in a practical manner, the elect from the reprobate: “By their fruit you shall know them” (Matt 7:16, 20).

Moreover, whereas Kline seeks to uphold the permanent validity of the moral law of Moses by insisting that “the distinction made is not one of different standards but of the application of a constant standard under significantly different conditions,” his assertion is not lived out in practice. Rather, in the development of his thesis, the ethics of common grace are thoroughly pitted against the ethics of the consummation. For example, in his discussion of the ethics of the Conquest, Kline asserts that

. . . if Israel’s conquest of Canaan were to be adjudicated before an assembly of nations acting [solely] according to the provisions of common grace, that conquest would have to be condemned as an unprovoked aggression and, moreover, an aggression carried out in barbarous violation of the requirement to show all possible mercy even in the proper execution of justice. . . . It will only be with the frank acknowledgment that ordinary ethical requirements were suspended and the ethical principles of the last judgment intruded that the divine promises and commands to Israel concerning Canaan and the Canaanites come into their own. Only so can the conquest be justified.

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79 Ibid., 66.


81 Though this method is by no means foolproof (cf. the example of Saul–Paul), it is, nonetheless, the Christian’s sure and proverbial guide in daily living.


83 Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority, 160.

84 Ibid., 163.
However, the primary issue and ethical justification of the conquest of Canaan rests on the people’s obedience to the command of God—the God of all mercy and justice. Moreover, Van Til rightly comments that “there is essentially one principle of ethics running through both the Old and the New Testaments.”85 This may be evidenced by, if nothing else, the repetition on the lips of Christ of the two great commands of the Old Testament86 as the two great commands of the New: a wholehearted love of God and neighbor. 87

In like manner to Kline, Peels believes that, although it is incorrect to condemn the Old Testament imprecatory prayer from the perspective of New Testament ethics, “it is also impossible within the New Testament situation to raise the imprecatory prayer in the same manner as was done by the psalmists of the Old Testament.”88 This he bases on the fundamental change that has occurred in the cross. Indeed, the imprecatory prayer “must

85 Cornelius Van Til, “Christian Theistic Ethics” (Class syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1952), 14. Indeed, even with respect to the ethical requirements of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which are often placed in contradistinction to the ethical aura of the Old Testament, Ladd understands that “if Jesus’ ethics are in fact the ethics of the reign of God, it follows that they must be absolute ethics. . . . Jesus’ ethics embody the standard of righteousness which a holy God must demand of men in any age.” George Eldon Ladd, The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 290-91.

86 As has been recognized for some time, these two commands are the essence of the Decalogue: the heart of the law of Moses.

87 Although there is indeed a different level of emphasis between the testaments regarding the believer’s status toward his enemies (i.e., loving vs. hating them), due in large part to the different stage of the outworking of God’s plan among and through his people, a love of neighbor, expressed in kindness, which included one’s enemies in their time of need, was both commanded and exampled in the Old Testament (cf. discussion above, pp. 36-40).

necessarily undergo modification because the cross of Christ is the definitive, visible revelation of God’s justice.”\textsuperscript{89} He advocates that the imprecatory prayer, when properly transformed into a New Testament context, would be characterized by an eschatological and partially spiritualized focus, which “could take the form of a general anathema against all opposing powers”\textsuperscript{90}—especially the kingdom and power of the Evil One. In this Longman agrees when he insists that, although David appropriately uttered curses against personal enemies, it would be wrong for a New Testament believer to follow suit. Rather, he argues, since the Christian’s warfare is against Satan and the spiritual forces of evil, his curses are to be reserved for them.\textsuperscript{91}

Two objections may be noted, however. While there is indeed more explicit emphasis on the spiritual warfare of New Testament saints and their eschatological hope—as expanded and clarified in the progress of revelation, both elements were central in the experience of Old Testament saints as well. Theirs was the daily awareness of the opposing “gods” of the various surrounding nations,\textsuperscript{92} and theirs was the hope of the eschaton in its varied facets as iterated repeatedly through the prophets.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 245. He further elaborates that, in the cross of Christ, God’s judgment is fundamentally completed in an anticipatory way, awaiting the final revelation of this judgment by Christ on the last day. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 246.

\textsuperscript{91} Tremper Longman III, \textit{How to Read the Psalms} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 139. He grounds his conclusion on the observation that, as the Scriptures unfold from Genesis to Revelation, God radically changes the relationship of his people with those outside the community of God.

\textsuperscript{92} E.g., Deut 32:16-17; Josh 24:14-15; 1 Sam 4–6; 1 Kgs 17–18.

\textsuperscript{93} E.g., Isa 2; 4; 11; 19:16-25; 24–27; 34–35; 60–62; 65:17–66:24.
The second issue regards the presence of personalized and extreme maledictions in the New Testament, with no implication of condemnation attached to them. Of particular note are (1) Paul’s vehement “anathema” against the Judaizers who had infiltrated the Galatian churches and proclaimed a “gospel” of legalism: “If anyone preaches a gospel to you other than the one you received, let him be damned!” (Gal 1:9); and (2) Peter’s curse of Simon the Sorcerer, who sought to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit: “May your money perish with you!” (Acts 8:20). In addition, these examples demonstrate the drawing of a marked conclusion as to the eternal status in the decree of God of those imprecated, even though the hope of repentance is ever implicit or is actually offered (e.g., Acts 8:22). Moreover, although the justice of God was definitively revealed in the cross of Christ, this does not relieve the persistent injustices against God’s people nor wholly assuage their justification for calling down God’s justice (e.g., Luke 18:1-8). Neither do the words of Christ from the cross: “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34),94 of necessity

94 It is of interest to note that Jesus’ words, assuming their authenticity (though they are absent from a few important and diverse early manuscripts, notable among which are 75, N*, B, D*, and W—all from the third to fifth centuries), are more probably directed toward the Romans rather than the hardened and antagonistic Jewish religious leaders. For those, Jesus had a different sentence (cf. Matt 23). That the Romans are the ones specifically addressed is implied by the context directly surrounding the appeal. The antecedent of “them” in Luke 23:33 is the Romans who crucified him in v. 32; and in v. 33b, it is the Romans again who are observed to divide up his clothes. Reiling and Swellengrebel agree: “autoi” may refer to the Jewish high priests or to the Roman soldiers. The latter is preferable.” J. Reiling and J. L. Swellengrebel, A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Luke, Helps for Translators, vol. 10 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 731. Marshall likewise equates the antecedent with the Roman executioners, yet also considers that it possibly includes all who were involved in Christ’s crucifixion. I. Howard Marshall, The Gospel of Luke, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 867. In contrast, the echo of Christ’s words from the cross on the lips of the dying martyr Stephen are notably directed toward religious Jews. However, their level of “stubbornness” (Acts 7:51) is apparently deemed to be of a different caliber than their earlier counterparts (cf. Acts 6:9; 7:59-60).
mute their plea. Rather, the New Testament records the utterance of imprecations and petitions for divine vengeance on the lips of earth-bound and heaven-arrived saints alike (notably Rev 6:9-10).95

**Songs of Christ**

The question is sometimes asked, “Who is the ‘I’ of the Psalms? Who is it who petitions God to destroy his enemies?” Is it the individual believer or the covenant community? Is it David or the Davidic monarch? Or is it Christ himself who prays these prayers, and the Christian through him? Indeed, for Jay Adams, this “is really the critical issue with the imprecatory psalms. If you were to ask God to destroy your personal enemy, that would be in essence cursing that enemy and, therefore, sinful. But if the King of Peace asks God to destroy His enemies, that is another matter!”96 Adams further states that these psalms are not “the emotional prayers of angry men, but the very war cries of our Prince of Peace!”97 Indeed, these psalms “can only be grasped when heard from the loving lips of our Lord Jesus.”98

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95 Here, in particular, this cry of the martyred saints in heaven for divine vengeance is in language strikingly reminiscent of the Imprecatory Psalms (cf. especially Ps 79:10). For such breadth of definition as inherently germane to the discussion, cf. chapter 1, pp. 46.


97 Ibid., 33.

98 Ibid.
In this, Adams concurs with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr of World War II, who likewise denies that one can simply echo the prayers of David in the Imprecatory Psalms, grounding his assertion on the basis that “according to the witness of the Bible, David is, as the anointed king of the chosen people of God, a prototype of Jesus Christ. What happens to him happens to him for the sake of the one who is in him and who is said to proceed from him, namely Jesus Christ. . . . David was a witness to Christ in his office, in his life, and in his words. . . . These same words which David spoke, therefore, the future Messiah spoke through him. The prayers of David were prayed also by Christ. Or better, Christ himself prayed them through his forerunner David.”

Bonhoeffer argues, although David did, in fact, utter these prayers of imprecation against his enemies, he did so only as the type of Messiah Jesus who was to arise from his line.

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99 With regard to Psalm 58, Bonhoeffer asserts, “Is this frightful Psalm of vengeance our prayer? Are we actually allowed to pray in such a manner? . . . No, we are certainly not permitted to pray like that.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “A Bonhoeffer Sermon,” trans. Daniel Bloesch, ed. F. Burton Nelson, *Theology Today* 38 (1982): 467. And with regard to this same psalm, Adams seeks to assert that, although David is the author of this psalm, since he is not innocent it is Christ who is praying this psalm with David; for “only one who is just can rightfully accuse others of injustice; only someone who is guiltless can pray this way.” Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, 103.

 Regarding Psalm 83, Adams likewise asks, “Without assistance how can we ever righteously pray this prayer? I answer this question unequivocally: We never can! We cannot pray this prayer on our own.” Ibid., 56. However, laying aside hermeneutical issues of historical credibility, this approach confuses absolute innocence and justice with relative innocence and justice. As in much of the Old Testament in particular, the latter is meant here; otherwise no believer, no matter how godly, could rightly plead for God’s justice or accuse of sin—no matter how extreme (which is patently false, as even the teaching of Christ admits—e.g., Matt 7:1-6).


101 A weakness in this position is its failure to adequately address the issue of confessions of sin in the Davidic psalms. E.g., Psalm 40, which is applied in part (vv. 6-8) by the author of Hebrews to the person of Christ (Heb 10:5-10), also contains a frank acknowledgment of personal sin (v. 12)—which was foreign to Christ’s experience, but known to David’s.
He further contends that “David could never have prayed for himself against his enemies in order to preserve his own life. We know that David humbly endured all personal abuse. But Christ, and therefore the church of God, is in David. Thus his enemies are the enemies of Jesus Christ and his holy church. For that reason Christ himself is praying this Psalm in David—and with Christ the universal holy church.” So, to the question initially raised, “Who prays the Imprecatory Psalms?” Bonhoeffer answers: “David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays, Christ prays, we pray. We—that is, first of all the entire community in which alone the vast richness of the Psalter can be prayed, but also finally every individual insofar as he participates in Christ and his community and prays their prayer.”

Moreover, Bonhoeffer views the Imprecatory Psalms as prayers, not so much for the execution of God’s vengeance on instances of gross injustice, but rather for the execution of God’s judgment on sin in general—a judgment in history fully and solely satisfied in the cross of Christ.

God’s vengeance did not strike the sinners, but the one sinless man who stood in the sinners’ place, namely God’s own Son. Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God, for the execution of which the psalm prays. He stilled God’s wrath toward sin and prayed in the hour of the execution of the divine judgment: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do!’ . . . God hates and redirects his enemies to the only righteous one, and this one asks forgiveness for them. . . . Thus the imprecatory psalm leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God out of my own resources. Only the

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102 Bonhoeffer, “A Bonhoeffer Sermon,” 467. The invalidity of the assumption that David could not have lawfully uttered such imprecations against his own enemies will be progressively addressed in chapter four.

crucified Christ can do that, and I through Him. . . . In this way the crucified Jesus teaches us to pray the imprecatory psalms correctly.  

However, although divine justice toward the redeemed was fully satisfied in the cross, divine justice toward the reprobate is not fully satisfied except in the torments of eternal hell. And it is out of the scourges of injustice from such as these that the cry of the righteous arises. In addition, according to the testimony of Scripture, David does indeed function both genetically and typologically as the forerunner of Christ. But this is not meant to disassociate his words and actions from his person in history. Indeed, delaying these Davidic psalms of imprecation until the cross of Christ, and distancing them from their manifestly historical setting and speaker, robs them of both their immediate and archetypal significance and power.

Furthermore, this proposed solution does not adequately answer the problem aroused by the presence of imprecations in non-Davidic Imprecatory Psalms, for not all of the Imprecatory Psalms designate David as their author (notably Ps 137). And this

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104 Ibid., 58-60. Although Bonhoeffer admits that Satan’s activity in inciting the enemies of Christ and his church to acts of violence and injustice will continue until the day of judgment, he yet insists that Christ, in vicariously praying these imprecatory psalms for us, centers their call for God’s just vengeance solely in his own innocent suffering on the cross. Cf. Bonhoeffer, “A Bonhoeffer Sermon,” 471.

105 Cf., e.g., 2 Thess 1:5-10; John 3:16-18, 36; Rev 14:9-11; 20:15.

106 Calvin, commenting on Psalm 109, observes that David, although he “here complains of the injuries which he sustained, yet, as he was a typical character, everything that is expressed in the psalm must properly be applied to Christ . . . and to all the faithful, inasmuch as they are his members; so that when unjustly treated and tormented by their enemies, they may apply to God for help, to whom vengeance belongs.” John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, vol. 4, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1847), 268.

107 Ps 137 dates from the Babylonian exile; Pss 74, 79, and 83 list Asaph as their author, and Pss 71, 94, 104, and 129 are anonymous.
objection is not satisfactorily addressed by subsuming all of the Psalms under the aegis of
his name.108 Neither does it answer the imprecations or cries for divine vengeance in other
parts of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments alike. If imprecations against one’s
enemies and the enemies of God are deemed morally legitimate in other parts of
Scripture—and these are not rendered legitimate by placing them on the lips of Christ, then
this proposal offers no genuine solution to the issue of imprecation in the Psalms, nor to
the issue of imprecation in general.

Summary

In recent decades, numerous solutions to the problem of the Imprecatory
Psalms and Christian ethics have been proffered. Although they address the issue from
vastly differing perspectives, the tendency of these varied proposals is to distance the
utterance of imprecations, as embodied in the Imprecatory Psalms, from Christian ethics.
Representatives of these principal proposals have been examined and their positions found
biblically and theologically unsatisfactory for the reasons enumerated below.

The view of Lewis that the Imprecatory Psalms are to be explained as the
expression of evil emotions to be utterly avoided fails to adequately account for the
prevailing piety of the psalmists, the elevated ethics promoted in these psalms, the

108 Bonhoeffer readily affirms that “not all the Psalms are by David, and there is no
word of the New Testament which places the entire Psalter in the mouth of Christ.” Bonhoeffer,
Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible, 20. Nevertheless, he believes that the intimations of Scripture
point to the entire Psalter as “decisively bound up with the name of David.” Ibid. However true this
may be, Bonhoeffer’s position is dependent, not on a generic association, but on the genetic and
typological link of historical David to historical Jesus, rendering the legitimacy of this extrapolation
invalid. And certain of the Imprecatory Psalms are unquestionably non-Davidic (cf. note 107 above).
inspiration of the Imprecatory Psalms, and the presence of the Imprecatory Psalms in the canon—indeed, in its book of worship. The related position of Brueggemann that views such utterances as evil—and yet as an evil to be expressed to God and relinquished there— admirably answers the objection of these psalms in worship. However, it yet fails to fully reckon with the presence of like imprecations in the New Testament, the Old Testament theological foundations upon which they are uttered, and the profusion of such imprecations in the psalms.

The view that understands such imprecations as consistent with Old Covenant morality but inappropriate for the New Era is also expressed in two forms. The stance of Zuck that sees such imprecations as evidence of an inferior morality operative in the Old Testament overly restricts the biblical definition of love and minimizes the fundamental ethical continuity between the testaments in its application of progressive revelation. The explanation of Martin and Althann downplays the inextricable tie in both testaments between the sinner and sin. The related positions of Laney and Gilbert that exonerate the morality of the Imprecatory Psalms and yet consider it inappropriate for the New Testament believer based solely on the difference in dispensations rightly find a covenantal and theological foundation for such imprecations. However, they fail to adequately address the enduring validity of the Abrahamic promise and the implications inherent in the unchanging character of God. The perspective of Kline essentially pits the ethics of the Old Covenant against the New. The approach of Peels and Longman fails to reckon with the eschatological hope and spiritual awareness of the Old Testament believer, along with the presence of personalized imprecations in the New Testament.
The view of Adams and Bonhoeffer which asserts that the Imprecatory Psalms are appropriately prayed solely by Christ and only by his followers through him and his work on the cross overstates David’s typological function, understates his historical situation, and evades the issue of such expressions in non-Davidic Imprecatory Psalms and in the remainder of Scripture.

Given the noted inadequacies of the prevailing proposed solutions to the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms and Christian ethics, the need for a biblically and theologically sound solution remains—a need I will seek to address and to fill.