CHAPTER 4
THE HARSHEST PSALMS OF IMPRECATIO

In the corpus of the Psalter reside numerous psalms characterized by impreca
tions or cries for divine vengeance. To address them in their entirety would exceed the bounds and intent of this dissertation. Therefore, I will approach the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms and their relation to Old and New Testament ethics by means of primarily three psalms—each representing one of the three major spheres of imprecation found within the larger body of the 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. Moreover, these three psalms in particular have been chosen because they contain the harshest language or most severe imprecations voiced against enemies to be found in the Psalter. Thus, if an answer may be given to these, then an answer may be given to all. These harshest psalms of imprecation will be explored by examining both the circumstances out of which their cries of cursing came, as well as the theological foundation upon which such words were uttered.

Psalm 58

Curse against a societal enemy.

לָמֶשֶׁנֶּהֶנֶּנֶּה נִשְׁחֹת לְדוֹר מִכָּהֶנֶּה: ¹

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1 Reading the defective spelling מְלֵֽאָה, (as in Exod 15:11) contra MT’s מְלָאָה, “(in) silence.” There is early and widespread versional confusion regarding the correct pronunciation and, thus, understanding of the word. For example, the LXX translates Μλαξ with αρα, evidently reading Μλαξμ, “but, indeed”; and Aquila translates as αλαλια, from the Hebrew מְלָאָה, “unable to speak, dumb.” The editor of BHS (and many commentators) suggests the reading מְלֵֽאָה (y) xe “rams” (i.e. “mighty ones/leaders”; cf. Exod 15:15). All of the above endeavors involve solely vocalic alterations, witness to the claim that “before the 9th century, Hebrew was written in a purely consonantal script.” Frank Moore Cross Jr. and David Noel Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography: A Study of the Epigraphic Evidence*, American Oriental Series, ed. James B. Pritchard, vol. 36 (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1952), 56. This is a time frame that well suits Davidic authorship. That מְלֵֽאָה, “gods,” is to be preferred, is further supported by Ps 82 (addressed below).

2 Although the accentuation of the MT appends גָּב to the former phrase, it is better placed as initial to the following, based principally upon the essential element of Hebrew poetry—parallelism. So fashioned, the lines form an artful synonymous parallelism and achieve line balance—both consonant with the pattern prevailing in the remainder of the psalm:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{c} & \text{b} & \text{a} \\
\text{אַרְּךָ בֶּן} & \text{עָלָּה} & \text{תַּפְסָלָו} \\
\text{c}^1 & \text{b}^1 & \text{a}^1 \\
\text{בָּאָרָם} & \text{הָנָּסָי} & \text{תַּפְסָלָו}
\end{array}
\]
For the director of music: “Do Not Destroy”; a miktam of David.

2 Do you indeed, O “gods,” decree what is right?  
   Do you judge with equit y, O sons of men?

3 No, in your heart you plan injustice;  
   in the earth you weigh out the violence of your hands.

4 The wicked are estranged from the womb;  
   they go astray from birth, speaking lies.

5 Their venom is like the venom of a serpent,  
   like a deaf cobra that stops its ears,

6 that does not heed the sound of the charmers,  
   the skillful binders of spells.

7 O God, smash their teeth in their mouths;  
   Break off the fangs4 of the young lions, O Yahweh!

8 Let them flow away like water that runs off in all directions;5  
   let him prepare to shoot his arrows,6 only to find them headless! 7

9 Like a miscarriage,8 let him melt away;

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3 Taking the הבן אלים as vocative rather than accusative. The Hebrew construction is indeterminate; the LXX, however, clarifies this ambiguity by reading the vocative οἱ οἱ οἱ οἱ here. That the Septuagint translators did so rightly, I believe, is illustrated by the structure of the verse. After the introductory sarcastic question, the verse is framed in chiastic synonymous parallel:

4 Although מלקותה is a hapax legomenon, such a translation as this is demanded both by the context and by the close relationship to the slightly better attested מלקותה (Job 29:17; Prov 30:14; Joel 1:6). Moreover, I would conjecture that to the ancients מלקותה was an accepted metathesized form of מלקותה, on the analogy of, e.g., כבש/כבש, “lamb.”

5 For this sense of the Hithpael of הלקלך, cf. Judg 21:24, “And the Israelites dispersed ( الحملכ) from there at that time: each to his tribe and to his family”; and Ps 77:18, “Your arrows (i.e., lightning) flashed in all directions (حملך”).

6 מְדוּרָה is literally, “let him tread . . .”. This verb is normally combined with the noun קֵשׁ, “bow,” for “to tread the bow” was to prepare it for use in battle (cf. Ps 11:2; Isa 5:28). The image is that of a warrior placing his foot upon the rigid bow that it might be bent and strung. This imagery may also be used metaphorically, as in Jer 9:2, “they tread their tongue, their bow of deceit” (שָׁפֵךְ אֵלֵּשֶׁת קֵשׁ שַׁךְ). If this metaphor was current in the mind of the psalmist as he penned v. 8, he may very well have been appealing for the “utter emasculation” (cf.حملך) of the judges’ decrees of injustice.

7 מְמוּלָל is literally, “thoroughly circumcised.”
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.

12 Then men will say, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges in the earth!”

When considering the imprecatory nature of this individual lament, two questions must first be asked and answered: (1) Who are being cursed?, and (2) What kind of

8 The translation of this hapax legomenon (presumed לְלִבִּל, “to mix, moisten”) is disputed. While most scholars cautiously adhere to the traditional understanding “snail,” which to the observer may appear to melt away in its own slimy trail, the translators of the Septuagint rendered לְלִבִּל by the term καρφός, “wax.” Such attempts, however, do not adequately consider the prevalence of synonymous parallelism in this psalm. Given the pattern seen in all verses—excluding the title, v. 8, and the contentious v. 10—a similar construction is expected here. Driver I believe correctly contends for a translation which connotes an early miscarriage, drawing on the discussion of the Aramaic וָלְלָל in the Jerusalem Talmud, Niddah 59:3. Therein, the terms evidently refer to a miscarriage at such an early juncture that gender identification is yet impossible (this distinction between an early and late miscarriage, וָלְלָל and וֹלָל, he buttresses by appeal to Aristotle and Hippocrates). G. R. Driver, “Studies in the Vocabulary of the Old Testament. V,” JTS 34 (1933): 41-43.

9 This interpretive phrase (“feel the heat of”) is literally, “perceive.”

10 Literally, “living.” The language of this phrase suggests the suddenness and violent intensity of fury.

11 This verse is notoriously difficult (even Dahood refrains from venturing a translation here). Of the myriad emendations conjectured to elucidate the text, the proposal of Althann is most appealing, in that he seeks to explain the verse with the minimum of adjustment. In lieu of the MT’s כָּפַר כֹּכָב, he reads כַּפַּר בֵּית כֹּכָב—merely a difference of word division with no consonantal alteration. And, rather than viewing the double כָּפַר as the preposition “like, as,” he appeals to the Eblaite ma-a-wa, “water,” which, after the loss of case endings became maw and eventually mô by the contraction of the diphthong. He thus translates Psalm 58:10 as: “Before they perceive the thorns He will strike them with a bramble, like running water, like raging water He will sweep them away.” R. Althann, “Psalm 58,10 in the Light of Ebla,” Bib 64 (1983): 123-24. However, although his proposed word division is plausible, Althann’s interpretation of כָּפַר is unlikely, due largely to the manifest usage of כָּפַר in vv. 5, 8, 9 as “like, as” (note especially the construction in v. 8 כָּפַר-פְּרָד). As the text stands, with evident ellipses (as is frequent in poetry), the imagery appears to emphasize appeal to the swiftness of the wicked’s destruction—faster than a cooking pot can sense the flash of the freshly lit brambles, as sudden as rage may flare up.
people are they? Firstly, the objects of David’s imprecations are the rulers or “judges” of the community—those whose position involves ensuring that justice is properly meted out.

Indeed, this psalm is framed by an ironic inclusio of judicial terms and ideas: contrast the human שפיץ (v. 2) with the divine שפיץ (v. 12); the human אלהים (v. 2) with the divine אלהים (v. 12); the lack of human justice שפיץ (v. 2) with the hope of divine justice צדק (v. 12); and the human perversion of צדק (v. 2) with the divine vindication of the צדק (v. 12).

The identity of these אלהים, “gods,” as the leaders of the land is borne out not only by the context of this psalm, but also by that of its sibling, Psalm 82, in which the rulers of the people are spoken of as אלהים. In arrangement of structure, development of theme, and manner of address, Psalm 82 is much like that of Psalm 58. And although Psalm 82 begins with the imagery of the divine assembly over which God presides, it condescends immediately to the realm intended by that imagery—that of corrupt human leadership: even these “gods” will yet die like men (82:7). Moreover, in the settings of Exodus 21:6; 22:7-8, 27 [Heb.], there is some ambiguity in the use of the term אלהים—even whether it refers to God or to his representatives who function judicially under his authority. This ambivalence is reinforced in Deuteronomy 19:17, where the two parties in dispute are called to “stand before Yahweh, before the priests and the judges.” Here, in

12 Cf. Jesus’ understanding of Ps 82 in John 10:34-36, where his rebuttal to the Jews hinges on the identity of these “gods” as men—men who had received the word of God.

13 A third option has been proposed by Gordon who argues, appealing principally to Nuzi court records, that the אלהים here are household gods before whom oaths were made. Cyrus H. Gordon, “אלהים in its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges,” JBL 54 (1935): 139-44. This, however, is inconsistent with the pristine theology and practice of Israel.
Psalm 58:2, the psalmist sarcastically addresses what we might call these “gods of government” “to inquire whether they are ruling according to the demands of their positions under God’s sovereignty.”

In addition, that the widespread injustice and violence in the earth is to be attributed to the dereliction of duty by the divinely endued human authorities rather than, as Weiser asserts, by “the ‘gods’ who constitute the celestial court of Yahweh and are to dispense justice on earth as his servants and functionaries,” whose lackeys are the רָשָׁתָן, is supported by a number of textual factors: (1) the crafted inclusio of vv. 2 and 12 unifies the psalm; (2) the plausibly vocative “O sons of men” parallels “O gods” in v. 2; (3) mention of the רָשָׁתָן follows immediately and in the same vein as v. 2, making it appear that the two groups are to be equated; (4) the רָשָׁתָן are manifestly human—they are born and they bleed (vv. 4, 11); (5) the לִיָּהֳן are confronted with a crime of speaking in v. 2; likewise the רָשָׁתָן in v. 4—perpetual deception; and (6) the לִיָּהֳן, if distinct from the


mysteriously disappear from the text and escape unscathed; however, if the לָוֶּה are equated with the העַד, then they do receive their due punishment.17

Secondly, the character of these individuals, especially in regard to their societal capacity, is described as unjust where justice should pervade (vv. 2-3), chronically dishonest (v. 4), ferociously violent (vv. 3, 7), and stubbornly wicked and deadly (vv. 4-6). Hibbard notes an enlightening illustration in this regard, which once occurred during family worship:

I happened to be reading one of the imprecatory psalms, and as I paused to remark, my little boy, a lad of ten years, asked with some earnestness: ‘Father, do you think it right for a good man to pray for the destruction of his enemies like that?’ and at the same time referred me to Christ as praying for his enemies. I paused a moment to know how to shape the reply so as to fully meet and satisfy his enquiry, and then said, ‘My son, if an assassin should enter the house by night, and murder your mother, and then escape, and the sheriff and citizens were all out in pursuit, trying to catch him, would you not pray to God that they might succeed and arrest him, and that he might be brought to justice?’ ‘Oh, yes!’ said he, ‘but I never saw it so before. I did not know that that was the meaning of these Psalms.’ ‘Yes,’ said I, ‘my son, the men against whom David prays were bloody men, men of falsehood and crime, enemies to the peace of society, seeking his own life, and unless they were arrested and their wicked devices defeated, many innocent persons must suffer.’ The explanation perfectly satisfied his mind.18

Thus, in this psalm David is calling down God’s vengeance, not upon transient transgressors of God’s laws, who harm out of ignorance or whose abuses are casual rather than premeditated and repetitive, but upon those who chronically and violently flaunt their position contrary to God’s righteousness. In particular, its cry resounds against those in positions of governing, legislative, or judicial authority who exploit their power for evil

17 For these latter four items, see David P. Wright, “Blown Away Like a Bramble: The Dynamics of Analogy in Psalm 58,” RB 103 (1996): 219.

18 F. G. Hibbard, The Psalms Chronologically Arranged, with Historical Introductions; and a General Introduction to the Whole Book, 5th ed. (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856), 120.
and their own ends. Indeed, the venom of this psalm is reserved for those who, when they should be protecting the helpless under their care, instead persecute and prey upon them.19 For such as these, even Jesus reserved the harshest sentence. 20 It is important to note, however, that in this psalm David himself is not seeking to exact revenge. Rather, he appeals to the God of vengeance. As Bonhoeffer observes, “whoever entrusts revenge to God dismisses any thought of ever taking revenge himself.”21

19 James 5:1-6 speaks in like caustic manner, although against the rich who had exploited their workers and manipulated the court system to condemn the innocent for their own gain: “1 Listen now, you rich, weep and howl at your coming miseries! 2 Your wealth has rotted and your clothes have become moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have corroded, and their tarnish will be a testimony against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded treasure in the last days. 4 Look! The wages you withheld from the workers who mowed your fields cries out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have entered the ears of the Lord of Hosts. 5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence; you have nourished your hearts in the day of slaughter; 6 you have condemned and murdered the righteous, who did not oppose you.” This pronouncement of both present woe and impending doom is then juxtaposed to an encouragement for the righteous to endure such injustice patiently, based upon the assurance that the coming of the Lord is near, and he will judge (Jas 5:7-11). Although not identical to the character of the Imprecatory Psalms, this larger passage (5:1-11) does betray a similar ethic: that it is appropriate at times for the righteous to proclaim or cry out for the judgment of God upon severe or violent oppressors, while at the same time remaining steadfast in suffering, relinquishing the enactment of that judgment to the divine Judge. The veiled reference to the “cries of the harvesters entering the ears of the Lord of Hosts” (v. 4) is notable in this regard, for these cries for justice would have been voiced in the common language of the Old Testament—cries exemplified in the Imprecatory Psalms. Indeed, Adamson calls Psalm 58 “a striking parallel” to this passage. James B. Adamson, The Epistle of James, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 184. Moreover, James, in verse 10, utilizes the Old Testament prophets as examples of this patience under unjust suffering—prophets who, like the psalmists, in extreme instances uttered maledictions against hardened and injurious enemies (e.g., Jer 18:18-23, in words strikingly reminiscent of Ps 109), even though they were characterized by their “longsuffering” or “slow temper” (μακροθυμία).

20 Speaking against the religious leaders of His day (albeit in non-imprecatory language), he warned: “Watch out for the scribes . . . who devour the houses of widows! Such will receive the severest judgment” (Mark 12:38, 40).

Moreover, in light of this sustained reality of surrounding societal injustice, Psalm 58 functions as the voice of faith responding to an implied barrage of pointed questions—whether from the psalmist himself or from others to the psalmist—which strike at the very heart of that faith: Is there really a sovereign God who executes justice on this earth? Does it make any sense for the righteous still to trust in him, when, by all appearances, evil goes unpunished and uncontested? Indeed, “the foundational principles of existence are on trial.” As Piper passionately articulates: if God were never to bring vengeance on his enemies and the oppressors of his people, “then he is an unfaithful God whose covenant is worthless. For he would be saying in effect that it is a matter of complete indifference whether one trusts in him or not. He would be discounting the greatness and worthiness of his own name by admitting that faith and blasphemy are for him as good as equal. Or even worse, he would be awarding blasphemy the greater portion.” It is against just such a background as this that the joy of the righteous must be understood. The righteous rejoice when God comes in vengeance to break the rule of the wicked and to punish injustice, and through this restoration of justice to put to rest all doubts and

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questions. It is the joy and the eternal relief of heaven and God’s people to see the 
liberation of saints, the restoration of justice, and the acquittal of God.24

In this regard, Calvin’s insights are instructive. Reflecting on Psalm 58:11 Calvin comments that patterned after the example of God, the righteous should “anxiously 
desire the conversion of their enemies, and evince much patience under injury, with a view 
to reclaim them to the way of salvation: but when wilful [sic] obstinacy has at last brought 
round the hour of retribution, it is only natural that they should rejoice to see it inflicted, 
as proving the interest which God feels in their personal safety.”25 Now although he is 
generally hesitant to promote the utterance of imprecation, Calvin does affirm its 
appropriateness on extreme occasions. For example, commenting on Psalm 109:16, he 
advises that since “we cannot distinguish between the elect and the reprobate, it is our duty 
to pray for all who trouble us; to desire the salvation of all men; and even to be careful for 
the welfare of every individual. At the same time, if our hearts are pure and peaceful, this 
will not prevent us from freely appealing to God’s judgment, that he may cut off the finally 
impenitent.”26

Furthermore, this joy of God’s people over the destruction of her and God’s 
enemies, in like language and imagery, is a motif that runs through the canon of Scripture.


25 Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, 2:378.

It begins in the Song of Moses (Deut 32:43),\textsuperscript{27} finds expression in the Psalms (Ps 58:11),\textsuperscript{28} is proclaimed in the Prophets (Jer 51:48,\textsuperscript{29} against literal Babylon), and climaxes in the Book of Revelation (18:20,\textsuperscript{30} against anti-typical Babylon).

Thus in summary, in Psalm 58 David addresses the rulers of the community, ironically labeling them “gods,” to inquire whether they do indeed rightly fulfill their judicial function and responds to his own query with a resounding “No” (vv. 2-3), after which he describes their character as wholly wicked and injurious (vv. 4-6). Verses 7-10 comprise the curses which characterize the psalm as imprecatory, in which, by the use of vivid imagery and simile, David appeals to Yahweh to render them powerless—and even to destroy them if need be. The realization of this longed for divine vengeance will serve both to vindicate and comfort the righteous who have suffered so grievously, and to establish Yahweh as the manifest and supreme Judge of the earth (vv. 11-12). For with the prevalence of such societal evil, the honor of God and the survival of his faithful are at stake.

\textsuperscript{27} I emend the text (for discussion, cf. Appendix B) to read: “Rejoice, O nations, with his people, and let all the gods worship him. Surely, the blood of his servants he will avenge; he will take vengeance on his adversaries and make atonement for the land of his people.”

\textsuperscript{28} “The righteous will rejoice when he sees vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.”

\textsuperscript{29} “Then they will shout for joy over Babylon—heaven and earth and all that is in them—for from the north the destroyers will come against her.”

\textsuperscript{30} “Rejoice over her (i.e., Babylon destroyed), O heavens and saints and apostles and prophets, for God has judged her for the way she treated you.”
But one may ask, “What about the intensity of the imagery? How could the psalmist pray in such hideous terms?” Without a doubt, this psalm—and verse 11 in particular—“is one of the most fearful passages in the Old Testament. The combination of vengeance, joy and bloody foot-bath all in one text causes an intuitive aversion.”\(^{31}\) In response to this query, one must first recognize that what is voiced here is poetry, and that inherent in the nature of poetry is the use of vivid imagery. Where a concept in narrative may be described dispassionately, in poetry it is more likely to be expressed emotively. Coupled with this, the ancient Semites tended to speak in terms which the modern Western world prefers to phrase more delicately. For example, one may note the free use the Old Testament makes of the word “hate” to denote both rejection as well as the negative passion\(^{32}\) (cf. the various nuances in such passages as Mal 1:2-3;\(^{33}\) Hos 9:15, 17;\(^{34}\) Ps 139:21-22\(^{35}\)), and the prevalent use of bloody terminology as is found here and in much of the eschatological prophecies. Peels perceives that Psalm 58:11b—“he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked”—phraseology which seems “so offensive to modern ears, simply intends to employ a powerful image, borrowed from the all too realistic situation of the


\(^{32}\) Jesus further utilized this “love/hate” dichotomy to emphasize the necessity of a disciple’s “first loyalty” to him (cf. Luke 14:26 with Matt 10:37).

\(^{33}\) “I loved Jacob, but Esau I hated.”

\(^{34}\) “Because of all their evil in Gilgal—surely there I hate them. Because of their evil deeds, I will drive them from my house. No longer will I love them’ . . . . My God will reject them.”

\(^{35}\) “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh, and loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.”
battlefield following the fight (wading through the blood), to highlight the total destruction of the godless.”

Moreover, much of Scripture’s “immoderate” language is heard from the lips of Jesus himself, so that from the perspective of faith, it may not be unduly—if at all—slighted. And lest one think that Christ merely accommodated his tone to that of a more savage age, it is instructive to note that the Christian canon closes with like language (e.g., Rev 14:19-20; 18:4-8, 20; 19:1-3, 15), but in the tongue of the more “rational” Greek culture.

Secondly, one must grapple with the realization that passionate rhetoric naturally and rightly arises from extreme circumstances. As Kidner observes, “the words wrung from these sufferers as they plead their case are a measure of the deeds which provoked them. Those deeds were not wrung from anyone: they were the brutal response to love (109:4) and to pathetic weakness (137).”

And here in Psalm 58, the invectives hurled one upon the other serve to express both the psalmist’s sincere desire and his sense of outrage at the flagrant violations of justice. These sentiments must be uttered with passion. This is done by means of the free use of potent simile, metaphor, and even limited

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36 Peels, The Vengeance of God, 218. In this regard, compare Ps 68:22-24, which speaks in like language. Although envisioning an actual battle in which the foes of God are slain, it is also in some measure hyperbolic, to emphasize the sure and utter desolation of the wicked, that the righteous might exult in the triumph of God: “Surely God will smite the heads of his enemies, the hairy crowns of those who go on in their guilty ways. The Lord says, ‘From Bashan I will bring them; I will bring them from the depths of the sea, that you may plunge your feet in blood, while the tongues of your dogs have their share of your foes.’”


38 Kraus comments regarding the thrust of this psalm: “It is when injustice has become intolerable that the plea for God’s intervention resounds.” Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalms 1–59: A Commentary, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 537.
hyperbole: in Psalm 58:7-8, David pleads for Yahweh to break the power of the wicked “gods” or judges; in Psalm 58:9-10, he further seeks their sudden demise; and in Psalm 58:11, his confidence in Yahweh’s intervention of vengeance is depicted by the image of total battle victory. In its fiery outbursts, this psalm “fights for the indispensable union of religion and ethics,”39 the intertwined embrace of life and faith.

_Theological foundation._ The Torah is the foundational revelation of God—not only because it was given first, but also because in it lies latent and in germinal form the expanse of theology that is developed more fully in succeeding revelation. Not surprisingly, then, the Imprecatory Psalms base their theology of imprecation in the Torah—notably the promise of divine vengeance in the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1-43), the principle of divine justice in the lex talionis (e.g., Deut 19:16-21), and the promise of divine cursing in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:2-3). Imprecations in the Psalms are fundamentally cries for God’s vengeance to fall upon the stubborn enemies of God and his people. And here in Psalm 58 particularly, as in others,40 the principal basis upon which David utters his heated cries is this covenantal promise of divine vengeance. This theology of divine vengeance promised to God’s people in their distress is given its initial and most classic articulation in


Deuteronomy 32—the song of rehearsal and remembrance for God’s people, the “Song of Moses.”

The Book of Deuteronomy is structured after the pattern of ancient suzerain-vassal treaties and, in this form, Deuteronomy 32:1-43 functions as a “witness” of the covenant—a character underscored by its intended repetition in the lives of God’s people. Moreover, the Song of Moses has an ongoing prophetic function, as a witness to the ongoing covenant of God with his people—the application of which carries through to the end of the canon, wherein the cry for divine vengeance for the blood of saints spilt is yet raised (Rev 6:9-10) and its accomplishment rejoiced in (Rev 19:1-2). This is illustrative of both the primary and secondary purposes of the Song: primarily as a witness against Israel for their rebellions (cf. Deut 31:19-21, 28; 32:5-30), but also secondarily as a testimony to the faithfulness of God (in the face of his people’s faithlessness), which issues in his vengeance against her oppressors (cf. Deut 32:4, 31-43).

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41 The command in Deut 32:7 to “remember” (דָּרָךְ) signifies more than a mere cognitive recollection. In this context, remembering involves the oral rehearsal of Israel’s history and how God provided for his people (cf. similar usage in Deut 9:7). Indeed, in its wider biblical usage, the term דָּרָךְ frequently means to rehearse or to reenact. For instance, Jer 31:34 speaks of Yahweh remembering Israel’s sin no more, which, in light of God’s omniscience, should not be taken to mean a cognitive forgetting, but rather a relational forgetting—to no longer rehearse Israel’s sin, to not hold it against her account. Furthermore, at Jesus’ Last Supper, he commanded his people to reenact the event “in remembrance” of him (1 Cor 11:23-26).

42 As Craigie comments: in its context of transition, “the song was not only a song of witness for the present, but one that would continue to be sung in the future, thus bearing a continuing witness of the covenant commitment and reminding the people of the implications of a breach of the covenant.” Peter C. Craigie, The Book of Deuteronomy, NICOT, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 374.

43 As Driver summarizes the message of the song: “The object of this poem is (v. 4-6) to exemplify the rectitude and faithfulness of Jehovah, as manifested in His dealings with a corrupt and ungrateful nation. With this aim in view, the poet, after the Exordium (v. 1-3), describes, firstly,
The most relevant portions for the discussion here are verses 33-43:

The providence which had brought Israel safely through the wilderness, and planted it in a land blessed abundantly by Jehovah’s goodness (v. 7-14); secondly, Israel’s ingratitude and lapse into idolatry (v. 15-18), which had obliged Jehovah to threaten it (v. 19-25) with national disaster, and almost (v. 26f.) with national extinction; and thirdly, Jehovah’s determination to grant His people victory over their foes, by speaking to them through the extremity of their need, and leading them thereby to a better mind (v. 28-43). The thought underlying the whole is thus the rescue of the people, by an act of grace, at the moment when annihilation seemed imminent. The poem begins reproachfully; but, in general, tenderness and pity prevail above severity, and towards the close the strain rises into one of positive encouragement and promise.” S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 3d ed., ICC, ed. Samuel Rolles Driver et al. (N.p., 1902; reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965), 344.

44 In lieu of the introductory מִּנֵּום, the Samaritan Pentateuch reads מִּנֵּום, “in the day of,” and is supported by the Septuagint which, in reading εἰς ἡμέραν, either translated from a Vorlage containing מִּנֵּום or understood מִּנֵּום as an abbreviation for מִּנְּף. It is to be granted that this reading better accords with מָלֵא in the parallel line. Yet it is also quite possible that the transmitters of the Samaritan tradition and the translators of the Septuagint were inadvertently drawn to the parallelism with מָלֵא מִּנְּף and the mention of מִּנְּף later in the same verse, and influenced by the prevalent use of מִּנְּף מָלֵא in later texts (e.g., Isa 34:8).

Regarding the troublesome מָלֵא מִּנְּף: although the form evidenced in the MT is most naturally construed as a Pi’el perfect 3ms, “and he repays”—manifestly a difficult reading, it is perhaps better to understand it as an exceptional pointing of the Pi’el infinitive absolute (in lieu of the expected מָלֵא מִּנְּף; cf. GKC, 143). Other proposals have been proffered: BDB lists this as an otherwise unknown substantive, “recompense”; and the editor of BHS suggests reading the recognized noun form מָלֵא מִּנְּף in its place (cf. Hos 9:7). However, neither of these can adequately account for the readings attested in the early versions. The LXX translates the larger phrase as εἰς ἡμέραν ἐκδικήσεως αὐτοποιωσώσω (“in the day of vengeance, I will repay”; cf. also both Rom 12:19 and Heb 10:30, which quote: Ἰμών ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ αὐτοποιωσώσω). In doing so, it either understood מָלֵא מִּנְּף as a verbal form—possibly the Pi’el infinitive absolute or an interpretive rendering of the Pi’el perfect 3ms (cf. Mal 2:16, in which the literal reading, “he hates divorce,” is generally translated, as implied by the context and conventions of translation, “I hate divorce”)—or translated from a Vorlage which contained the Pi’el imperfect 1cs מָלֵא מִּנְּף. However, although there are numerous instances of confusion between מ and various other Hebrew letters in the square script, there are no extant examples of confusion between the מ and other, making it difficult, in this latter option, to explain the origin of the MT. Cf., e.g., P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship: Old Testament Series, ed. Gene M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 45-47.
33 Their [i.e., the heathen oppressors’] wine is the venom of serpents, the cruel poison of cobras.

45 This line is absent from the Massoretic tradition, and is thus left unpointed.

46 For a text-critical discussion of Deut 32:43 in its entirety, refer to Appendix B.

47 Although the text is notoriously ambiguous, it is contextually best to see the reference to “them” and “their” switching from rebellious Israel to her pagan oppressors at v. 31 (“for their rock is not like our Rock”), and then back to Israel again at v. 36 (“Yahweh will vindicate his people”). Holmyard observes that “Deut 32:30-31 makes a transition from ‘their rock’ to ‘our Rock,’ both expressions designating Israel’s God. In 32:31 ‘their Rock [sic]’ refers to the enemy’s
Vengeance is mine, I will repay. In due time their [i.e., the oppressors’] foot will slip; for the day of their disaster is near and their doom comes swiftly.’

Surely, Yahweh will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees that their power is gone and none remains—bond or free.

Then he will say, ‘Where are their [i.e., his rebellious people’s] gods, the rock in whom they took refuge?

See now that I, I am he, and there are no gods besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand.

Surely, I lift my hand to heaven and declare: As I live forever,

when I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me.

I will make my arrows drunk with blood and my sword will devour flesh—drunk with the blood of the slain and the captives, with the long-haired heads of the enemy.’

god. Thus the reference of the third person plural suffix changes between the verses, because Israelites are no longer ‘them’ but ‘us.’ This change leaves the third person plural pronouns free to designate the enemy in 32:31, as it does also in 32:32-33.” Harold R. Holmyard III, “Mosaic Eschatology in Isaiah, Especially Chapters 1, 28-33” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992), 64-65.

48 Although the primary nuance of הָיָה in this passage is that of “vindication” (cf. the immediate parallelism and the focal element in vv. 41-43), there is a certain purposeful contextual ambiguity, embracing the nuance of “judgment,” based upon the presence of God’s enemies even among God’s people (cf. vv. 36-38). Yahweh will principally punish the heathen who oppress Israel, but also secondarily he will punish the wicked in Israel who oppress the righteous. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, trans. James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 487-88. This secondary sense is evidenced in Ps 50:4 (cf. vv. 16ff), which borrows the language of Deut 32:1, 36: “He calls to the heavens above, and to the earth, to judge His people (וָיָֽהְבָּהּ).”
43 Rejoice, O nations, with his people, and let all the gods worship him. Surely, the blood of his servants he will avenge; he will take vengeance on his adversaries and make atonement for the land of his people.

There are several points at which it is likely that Psalm 58 broadly alludes to the latter half of the Song of Moses as the literary and theological quarry of its cry.49 Firstly, the psalm arose out of a faith context and was to be used in the worshiping community. Thus, the divine vengeance itself, so earnestly longed for, must have been addressed in prior revelation in such a manner as to convey that the righteous might expect such from their covenant God. And from the temporal standpoint of David, the consummate articulation of this promised divine vengeance is found in Deuteronomy 32.

Secondly, the social context out of which the psalmist speaks is that of powerlessness in the face of oppression, and he cries out in confidence to the God who can

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49 Chisholm has codified a set of criteria for plausibly establishing the existence of allusion: “Sometimes a speaker or author will use a key word or phrase to allude to an earlier text of Scripture as part of his or her rhetorical strategy. . . . The verbal connection between the passages must be precise, the word or phrase involved must not be used so frequently that it qualifies as an idiom, there should be a thematic link between the two texts, and, ideally at least, there should be other contextual linguistic links between the passages.” Robert B. Chisolm Jr., From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 52. It would appear from the ensuing discussion regarding the realization of promised vengeance, along with the broader concepts and specific terminology common to the passages, that the connection between Ps 58 (cf. Ps 79) and Deut 32 largely corresponds to his criteria. Support for this contention is found in Chisolm’s own recognition of the likely link between Hos 10:8 and Gen 3:18. He proffers a probable allusion based solely upon the broad context of judgment and the use of the precise phrase “thorns and thistles” (רְדָבֶד; יִרְדָּן), found in these two passages alone. Ibid., 53. Furthermore, Fishbane also finds “intertextual allusion” similar to that endorsed above. He contends that “a close reading of the closing chapters of the Book of Exodus discloses unmistakable echoes of the language of Genesis 1:1–2:4a.” Michael Fishbane, Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts, 2d ed. (Oxford: One World, 1998), 12. He then compares Gen 1:31; 2:1, 2, 3 with Exod 39:43, 32; 40:33; 39:43, respectively. Such a connection is indeed subtly evident, even though the contexts and actors differ somewhat. Such is similarly the case in the echo of Deut 32 in Ps 58.
indeed act decisively on behalf of his defeated people. This very element runs strongly through the final verses of the Song of Moses: when all the power (literally “hand,” הָanda) of his rebellious people is gone because of their heathen oppressors (v. 36), God demonstrates the power of his hand, from which none can deliver (v. 39). He lifts it to heaven with a self-imposed oath (v. 40), and grasps his sword with his hand to wreak vengeance on his enemies (v. 41).

And thirdly, although there is not a consistently precise identity of terminology, there is the conspicuous similarity of verbiage and linkage of concepts between the two passages, making it probable that the psalmist was aware of the Song as he uttered his cry, and subtly invoked its promise. In Psalm 58, David taunts the unjust “gods” (v. 2), asserting that indeed “there is a God (ג֦וֹיָם) who judges in the earth” (v. 12); likewise in Deuteronomy 32, Yahweh taunts the pagan gods (v. 37), asserting that “there are no gods (נְאָוְהוֹ) besides me” (v. 39) and that he is the God of justice (v. 4).50 In Psalm 58, David likens the wicked oppressors51 to venomous (צאתנ) snakes and deaf cobras (קרוב) (v. 5);52 likewise in Deuteronomy 32, Yahweh associates the persecutors of his people with the

50 Cf. the use of מְפָס here with the recurrence of the root מְפָס in Ps 58:2, 12.

51 In Deut 32, the enemies who suffer the vengeance of God are ostensibly heathen oppressors; Ps 58 utilizes the language and tone, expanding it to include ungodly oppressors in general—even if they are among God’s own people. Similar usage and expansion is seen in Isa 1, in which Yahweh addresses rebellious Israel in the language of, and evident allusion to, Deut 32: “heavens, earth” (cf. Deut 32:1 with Isa 1:2), “corrupt children” (cf. Deut 32:5 with Isa 1:4), “Sodom, Gomorrah” (cf. Deut 32:32 with Isa 1:9-10), and “avenged on my enemies, foes” (cf. Deut 32:41-43 with Isa 1:24). Cf. also Ps 50:4, 7, 16-17, 22.

52 Here, the psalmist is borrowing the imagery of such poisonous snakes and using it metaphorically, as even the Song of Moses in its later development does (compare the ostensibly literal use of the image in Deut 32:24 with the manifestly metaphorical use in Deut 32:33).
imagery of venomous (תְאוֹרָה) serpents and deadly cobras (כַּפְרְנוּי) (v. 33).53 Lastly, in Psalm 58:11 bloody vengeance (מִקָּנָה) is longed for, while in Deuteronomy 32:41-43 it is such graphically bloody vengeance (מִקָּנָה) that is promised. And in the hope of its realization, the righteous are said to “rejoice” (Ps 58:11; Deut 32:43).54

There are also others of the Imprecatory Psalms which hark back to the language and imagery of the latter part of this Song as the theological foundation and justification for their cries for vengeance. Psalm 94 begins with an appeal to the “God of vengeance” to repay the evil oppressors (vv. 1-2). But even more germane, and most overt in its allusion to Deuteronomy 32, is Psalm 79. After laying before Yahweh Israel’s hopeless and helpless situation, the psalmist Asaph locates the cause of their calamities in the anger and jealousy of Yahweh against his people for their sins (vv. 5, 8). He then pleads for compassion and forgiveness (vv. 8-9) and for the outpouring of divine wrath instead on the ungodly nations who have wreaked such havoc (vv. 6-7). This pattern is that which we find in Deuteronomy 32. In vv. 21-22, Yahweh is provoked to jealousy and anger against his people by their stubborn rebellions against him. Out of this jealous wrath, Yahweh promises to send various evils against them, including the ravages of the nations (vv. 23-33).55 But at the point of their powerlessness, Yahweh promises compassion, vindication,
and vengeance (vv. 34-43). Psalm 79:10 makes the most explicit comparison, however. It pointedly requests of Yahweh that “the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants” \(\text{כְּפֶה} \text{תִּמְצָא} \text{יָדָא} \text{מַדָּא} \text{טָמוּ} \text{ןָה} \text{וֹ} \text{ן} \text{הָאָדָא} \) be known among the “nations.” This is the promise of Deuteronomy 32:43, which calls on the “nations” to rejoice, for Yahweh “avenges the blood of his servants” \(\text{דָּמָא} \text{יָבִיבָא} \) \(\text{יָמָא} \).

Moreover, far from being an isolated and peripheral portion of Old Testament biblical theology, this promise of divine vengeance found in Deuteronomy 32 is central to the theology and hope of Scripture—both Old and New Testaments alike. It is carried from the Law through the Prophets\(^56\) and the Psalms into the New Testament through to the end of the Christian canon. Indeed, Deuteronomy 32:35 is quoted by the apostle Paul in Romans 12:19 in his justification of New Testament ethics.\(^57\) In addition, in Revelation 6:9-11, both the cry of the saints in heaven for this vengeance and the context out of which they cry—their martyrdom, bluntly hark back to the promise of God in the latter portion of the Song of Moses to “avenge the blood of his servants” (Deut 32:43).

9 And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they held on to. 10 They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, O Master, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ 11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait yet a little longer, until (the number of) their fellow servants and brothers who were about to be killed, as they had been, was completed.

\(^56\) “The prophets stressed ‘the day of the Lord’s vengeance’ (Isa 38:8; 61:2; 63:4) as times in history when the Lord sets the record straight. This was Jeremiah’s view of the fall of Jerusalem. Since in the course of history the record can never be totally straight the prophetic eschaton or final day of the Lord’s vengeance is called for.” Elmer B. Smick, “םִּבּ,” TWOT, 2:599.

\(^57\) The larger context of Rom 12:19-20, particularly as it relates to this thesis, is addressed in Appendix C.
Moreover, this eschatological tie is made explicit in Revelation 15:2-4, in which, at the close of the ages and following the bloody vengeance described in Revelation 14:19-20, the saints in glory are said to sing “the Song of Moses\(^{58}\) and the Song of the Lamb” (15:3)—a song which proclaims the greatness of God’s justice revealed, and the consequent worship to arise from the nations (cf. Deut 32:43).

\(^{58}\) There is vigorous debate as to the intended identity of “the Song of Moses.” By literary tie and thematic reference, it is likely that allusion to both Deut 32 and Exod 15 is intended (cf. G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999], 793)—although Deut 32 bears the weight of primary emphasis. (1) The former is more typically known as such than the latter (cf. the repeated reference to Moses’ “song” in Deut 31:19, 21-22, 30; 32:44). However, Exod 15 is designated as a song of Moses (15:1), and Moses is explicitly styled God’s “servant” directly preceding in Exod 14:31 (cf. Rev 15:3a). (2) There are distinct verbal and conceptual parallels between Rev 15:3b-4 and Deut 32:3-4. Of particular note is the divine designation “just and true” (Rev 15:3; cf. the “true and just” judgments of God in Rev 16:7), alluding to Deut 32:4. Indeed, Thomas—who himself advocates primary allusion to Exod 15—admits that “the verbal recollections of Exodus 15 are not as specific” as those of Deut 32. Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 235. However, there is literary allusion to Exod 15:11 in Rev 15:3b-4. (3) There is further thematic correspondence between the plagues sparked by God’s wrath in Rev and Deut 32:22-25. However, the plagues of Rev 16 clearly hark back to the plagues on Egypt as a prelude to the Exodus: sores (v. 2), blood (vv. 3-6), darkness (v. 10), frogs (v. 13), and hail (v. 21). (4) Yet, it bears noting that the principal issue of both the preceding as well as the present and succeeding contexts is the cry for (Rev 6), and the coming of (esp. Rev 15-19), the promised divine vengeance—which is also the premier issue of the latter portion of the Song in Deut 32, but not of Exod 15 (cf., e.g., the reference in Rev 16:6 to requiting the shed blood of the saints with Deut 32:43). It is of interest as well how the Book of Revelation binds the Song of Moses to that of the Lamb, for as the book progresses to its climax it is the Lamb who was slain who returns as the avenging Hero (cf. Rev 5 and 19). Beale avers that Rev 15:3-4 is a hymn of victory, in which “the saints praise the Lamb’s victory as the typological fulfillment of that to which the Red Sea victory pointed” (i.e., referring to Exod 15). Beale, The Book of Revelation, 792. However, Ford observes that the saints’ song “is not one of triumph such as is found in Exod 15; it is more like Deut 32.” J. Massyngberde Ford, Revelation, Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, vol. 38 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 257. Likewise, Knight views the Song of Moses/Song of the Lamb as referring back to Deut 32. George A. F. Knight, The Song of Moses: A Theological Quarry (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 139.
And I saw . . . those who had been victorious over the beast and over his image and over the number of his name . . . holding harps (given them) by God. 3 And they were singing the Song of Moses the servant of God and the Song of the Lamb:

‘Great and marvelous are your works,
    O Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
    O King of the nations.
4 Who does not (now) fear (you), O Lord,
    and glorify your name,
who alone is holy?
All the nations will come
    and worship before you,
for your judgments have been revealed.’

And amidst the extended judgments—those which occur against eschatological Babylon (reminiscent of Jer 51:48)—comes the call to “rejoice” at this execution of divine retribution (Rev 18:20; cf. Deut 32:43).

The Song of Moses is sung in a covenant context, and the promise of vengeance is founded upon the reality that God has entered into covenant with his people. Although the Song of Moses was intended fundamentally to be a “witness against” Israel upon her breach of covenant with Yahweh (Deut 31:19, 21, 28), it was also given as a song of hope (Deut 32:36, 43)—that Yahweh will not abandon his people regardless of their faithlessness, but will come to their aid, avenge their blood, and take vengeance on his enemies.59 The

59 Cf. footnotes 47, 48, and 51 above. The covenant lawsuit pattern (ריב) is the central form in Deut 32. This is evidenced by the official summons to the witnesses in v. 1, the indictment in vv. 15-18, and the verdict of the Judge in vv. 19-29. G. Ernest Wright, “The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32,” in Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 43. This primary lawsuit form, however, was expanded in the final verses to include “hymnic themes drawn from Holy War traditions. Thus theRib became a mode of confession, the hymnic portions resolving the tension into an expression of hope and faith in God for deliverance.” Ibid., 66. Thus this Song is, as Wright recognizes, “a ‘broken’ Rib, that is, a specific cultic form adapted and expanded by other themes to serve a more generalized purpose in confession and praise.” Ibid., 40-41.
cry for vengeance then arises out of this context and appeals to the terms of the covenant, which included this promise of vengeance against the enemies of God and his people—a promise applicable not solely to the Israel of the Old Covenant but also to the inheritors of the New Covenant, as affirmed by Revelation 6:10.60

**Psalm 137**

_Curse against a national or community enemy._

1. על ח動物 כל
   שופם Бог ביב
   כלתמא עבודה

2. על עקרם תחנה
   כלתא תמן

3. כים שאלון
   שופים דבר שיר
   והולמים שפתה
   שיר לקי משיר ציו
   איכ נשיר את שיר יוה
   ועל א人大常委
   אם אשחרת ירושלם
   השם יתמך

4. תקיבים לשים חפי
   אם לא אחלקיך
   על ראש שפתה
   יבר יהוה שם אדום
   את ים ירושלם
   הפלרימ צי ציו
   עד שתומר ביה
   בעה בבל ויהוה
   אוכילך שפחתך לך
   אוכילך שפחתך למה
   איכ שכלך אל מפלט

60 Cf. the use of Deut 32 for the assurance of divine vengeance in Rom 12:19, Heb 10:30, and Rev 15:3.
1 By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat and we wept,
when we remembered Zion.
2 On the poplars in her midst
we hung our lyres.
3 For there they demanded of us—
our captors, song;
and our slave-drivers,
“Sing for us one of the songs of Zion!”
4 How can we sing Yahweh’s song
on foreign soil?
5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget . . . !

61 Or possibly, “tormentors/mockers.” יָלֵךְ is a troublesome hapax legomenon.
The ancient versions understood it variously: the LXX renders it as καὶ οἱ ἀπαγαγόντες ἦμᾶς, “and those who led us away” (i.e., as prisoners; cf. Kellermann’s translation: “die uns weggeführt hatten.” Ulrich Kellermann, “Psalm 137,” ZAW 90 [1978]: 44); and the Targum clarifies it with בְּזוֹדַה וּבְזוֹדַה “and those who plundered us.” Allen rightly observes that the word play between here and וּלְכַל יָלֵךְ “we hung” in v. 2 appears to support its consonantal integrity and thus to discourage emendations reconstructed from these versions—which may be nothing more than guesses based upon the context. Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 21 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 236. Koehler and Baumgartner admit that no verbal derivation for this term is certain, suggesting an otherwise unknown root יָלֵךְ. *HALOT*, 4:100. In this, they tentatively side with Guillaume, who compared the term in question (presumed √ יָלֵךְ) with its classical Arabic cognate *talla* IV, “to bind or drag away,” referring to those who drive their beasts hard and mercilessly. Thus, the יָלֵךְ here would signify “the harsh, pitiless slave-drivers who drove the prisoners they had plundered hundreds of miles eastward to distant Babylon.” Alfred Guillaume, “The Meaning of יָלֵךְ in Psalm 137 3,” *JBL* 75 (1956): 144. In this scenario, although the early versions apparently did not understand the precise nuance of the Hebrew term, they rendered its meaning well. Contrast Kraus and Allen, who alike suggest a derivation from the verb יָלֵךְ, “to howl, wail”—signifying “tormentors.” Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 501; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 236. Alternatively, Koehler and Baumgartner suggest that this term could refer to “those that make a mockery of us” (וּלְכֵל יָלֵךְ). *HALOT*, 4:100.

62 The lack of an explicit object to יָשֶׁפַה יָמִינִי (frequently supplied in translations: e.g., “its skill”) has led some to suppose that there was an inadvertent scribal error in the transmission of the text, involving the transposition of letters—the most promising of which (in lieu of the alternative יָשֶׁפַה, “may it fail”) has been made by Eitan. He asserts, supported by the Arabic cognate, that the MT’s יָשֶׁפַה “represents a mere metathesis of יָשַּׁפֶח from an archaic verb יָשָׁפָךְ, ‘to be paralyzed, lame.’ . . . Now, when the identity of this יָשֶׁפַה as a hapax legomenon had been forgotten, any copyist could not but confuse its root with that of יָשָׁפָךְ, precisely on account of the original assonance with it.” Israel Eitan, “An Identification of tiškah!yəmînî, Psalm 137 5,” *JBL*
6 May my tongue cling to my palate
    if I do not remember you,
    if I do not lift up Jerusalem
    as my chief joy.

7 Remember, O Yahweh, against63 the Edomites—
    the day of Jerusalem.64
They cried, “Raze her, raze her—
    down to her foundation!”

8 O Daughter of Babylon, (doomed to be) devastated.65
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.\textsuperscript{66}

The beautifully crafted—yet disturbing—Psalm 137\textsuperscript{67} has been understandably
dubbed “the ‘psalm of violence’ par excellence, and, at least in its full text, to be rejected by
Christians.”\textsuperscript{68} For are not Christians schooled in the law of Christ to “love your enemies,
do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat
you,” and “turn the other cheek” (Luke 6:27-29)? And have they not been steeped in his
words from the cross, the height of human cruelty and maltreatment: “Father, forgive them

\textsuperscript{66} The reference here to “the cliff” (םלָּשָׁן) seems at first incongruous when juxtaposed
with judgment upon Babylon, for, as Osgood notes, “Babylonia is a perfectly flat alluvial country
where no hill, nor stone, nor rock, nor cliff is to be found.” Consequently, he interprets the
description as a “metaphor of Babylon’s being hurled from her exaltation in pride and power,
for the literal interpretation is ridiculous.” Howard Osgood, “Dashing the Little Ones against the
Rock,” PTR 1 (1903): 35. However, the terminology was probably chosen, not because of its
geographical precision, but because of its known association in prophetic judgment oracles both
with—notably—Edom (Obad 3) and Babylon (Jer 51:25, in which God promises to roll Babylon off
“the cliffs,” מַסְפַּכַּים). Thus, it is imagery which had become somewhat stereotypical, indicating a
judgment of utter destruction. Moreover, it is likely that such language was utilized intentionally
because it expresses what was experienced by the Judeans at the hands of the Babylonians. Cf.
Allen, Psalms 101–150, 237. In addition, although מַסְפַּכַּים more commonly refers to a cliff or sharp
crag, it is also used of the broad, bare foundation rock of the soon-to-be-leveled city of Tyre in Ezek
26:4, 14—proving the term’s relative plasticity and implying its applicability here.

\textsuperscript{67} Aletti and Troublet note a certain chiastic fashioning apparent in Psalm 137,
wherein repeated reference to Zion/Jerusalem in vv. 1-7 is framed in vv. 1 and 8 by reference to
Babylon. Jean-Noël Aletti and Jacques Trublet, Approche poétique et théologique des Psaumes: Analyses

\textsuperscript{68} Zenger, A God of Vengeance?, 46.
...” (Luke 23:34)? The words of vv. 8-9 in particular have been coined “the ironical ‘bitter beatitudes,’” whose sentiment is “the very reverse of true religion,” and “among the most repellant words in scripture”\(^69\)—a frightfully cruel outcry of “blind hate and vulgar rage.”\(^70\) Many Christians of a supposedly milder age, scandalized by such a wish contained therein, have jettisoned the last three verses of this psalm from the worship of the church and the life of the faithful altogether—a solution which runs counter to the usefulness and inspiration of Scripture.\(^71\) Others of like mind have sought to salvage these verses by relegating them to that age before the cross—now antithetical to what Christians are called to be. Bright, for example, claims that the composer of Psalm 137 “is typical of that man in every age who is godly and devoted to the things of God,” yet who responds “from a pre-Christian perspective and in a not-yet-Christian spirit”—a man, indeed, “to whom the gospel must come as a strange thing. We know this man well: there is more than a little of him in most of us.”\(^72\)

Alternatively, in a seeming attempt to maintain the psalmist’s piety (and that of all the later faithful who would—even haltingly—echo these words) and yet to avoid the

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\(^{70}\) Weiser, The Psalms, 796.

\(^{71}\) As Kidner rightly avers: “to cut this witness out of the Old Testament would be to impair its value as revelation.” Derek Kidner, Psalms 73–150, TOTC, ed. D. J. Wiseman (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 461. However, he believes that the revelatory value of these verses is localized principally in disclosing the sinfulness of man and the necessity of the cross.

inherent violence in the text, some have urged an allegorical interpretation of these words.

For instance, Lewis has mused:

Of the cursing Psalms I suppose most of us make our own moral allegories. . . . We know the proper object of utter hostility—wickedness, especially our own. . . . From this point of view I can use even the horrible passage in 137 about dashing the Babylonian babies against the stones. I know things in the inner world which are like babies; the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments, which may one day become dipsomania or settled hatred, but which woo us and wheedle us with special pleadings and seem so tiny, so helpless that in resisting them we feel we are being cruel to animals. They begin whimpering to us ‘I don’t ask much, but’, or ‘I had at least hoped’, or ‘you owe yourself some consideration’. Against all such pretty infants (the dears have such winning ways) the advice of the Psalm is the best. Knock the little bastards' brains out. And ‘blessed’ is he who can, for it’s easier said than done.73

And in a more corporeal vein, Osgood sought to remove the offense of vv. 8-9 by arguing that the Hebrew יִֽ给宝宝 referred more to relationship than to age, and so viewed the “children” of Babylon as her adult progeny who chose and followed in her sins.74

Noble (and poignant) though these sentiments be, looking at the psalm in light of its historical context, however, lends itself to an understanding contrary to the “higher morality” and “allegorical” interpretations common in Western Christianity. This communal lament is sung from the context of the Babylonian exile—an exile preceded by

73 C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 136. Fifteen centuries earlier, the eminent Augustine, in his commentary on the Psalms, likewise asked: "What are the little ones of Babylon? Evil desires at their birth. For there are, who have to fight with inveterate lusts. When lust is born, before evil habit giveth it strength against thee, when lust is little, by no means let it gain the strength of evil habit; when it is little, dash it. But thou fearest, lest though dashed it die not; 'Dash it against the Rock; and that Rock is Christ.'" Augustin [sic], Saint Augustin: Expositions on the Book of Psalms, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 8, trans. J. E. Tweed, T. Scratton, H. M. Wilkins, C. Marriott, and H. Walford (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 632.

the unthinkable horrors of ancient siege warfare. Jerusalem’s demise at the hands of the pitiless Babylonians, goaded on by the treacherous Edomites, was a national atrocity that both virtually wiped out and deported the community of faith. Moreover, in her demise were destroyed the bastions of that faith: the Davidic monarch, the chosen city, the temple of Yahweh. All those things which had rooted Israel’s identity as a nation and—more specifically—as the people of God had been either demolished or uprooted.

Siege warfare in the ancient Near East was frighteningly cruel. For example, in the Vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon, many of the consequences promised in the event of covenant disloyalty bespeak these horrors of the siege:

May Shamash plow up your cities with an iron plow.
Just as this ewe is cut open and the flesh of its young placed in its mouth, so may he (Shamash?) make you eat in your hunger the flesh of your brothers, your sons, and your daughters.

Just as honey is sweet, so may the blood of your women, your sons and daughters taste sweet in your mouths.

Just as honeycomb is pierced through and through with holes, so may holes be pierced through and through in your flesh, the flesh of your women, your brothers, your sons and daughters while you are alive.

In addition to these cruelties, the most brutal—and all too common—practice of city conquerors was the dashing of infants against the rocks in the fury and totality of war’s

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75 Cf. the horrors promised by God in the curses of Deut 28:53-57. In addition, the Assyrian king Sennacherib speaks in his annals of besieging several cities, one of which was Ekron: “I assaulted Ekron and killed the officials and patricians who had committed the crime and hung their bodies on poles surrounding the city.” ANET, 288.

76 ANET, 539-40.
carnage. This barbarous slaughter of the most helpless of non-combatants “effected total destruction by making war upon the next generation.” The Scriptures make further use of this graphic and gruesome picture in its judgment oracles against rebellious Israel (Hos 14:1 [Eng 13:16]), Jerusalem (Luke 19:44), and cruel Assyria (Nah 3:10). And, most notably here, it is a fate promised as well to Babylon (Isa 13:16).

The abrupt and appalling shriek emanating from vv. 7-9, then, may be distilled as the “passionate outcry of the powerless demanding justice!” Indeed, in the face of such blatant and humanly unpunishable injustice, the ravages of a wicked regime, God’s chastised people had no other recourse but to turn to Yahweh and plead for his justice. In the midst of their helplessness and humiliation, he was “their only hope for a righteous and just sentence of condemnation.” And it is to Yahweh that Judah’s appeal for strict retaliation in both kind and degree is made—and surrendered. In such circumstances of all-too-real and horrible brutality, where there is the very real temptation to “forget” (cf. vv.

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77 The Scriptures document this practice committed against Israel not only implicitly in Ps 137, but also explicitly in 2 Kgs 8:9-12 and Amos 1:13. Sadly, however, even Israel learned these savage ways (2 Kgs 15:14, 16).

78 Allen, Psalms 101–150, 237. It serves as a macabre illustration of the depth of human depravity revealed when the restraining hand of God is released. Sin always destroys, and destroys mercilessly.

79 Zenger, A God of Vengeance?, 47.


81 Though implicit in the veiled imprecations of vv. 8-9, such an appeal and surrender of vengeance is made explicit in v. 7.
5-6) or to utterly abandon the faith for the sake of one’s life and comfort, this psalm explodes upwards to the sole source of power in the midst of powerlessness, and hope in the midst of hopelessness. As Gilbert summarizes, the possibility, indeed, the necessity of such an appeal for retaliatory justice in the midst of blatant injustice “is the predominant theological teaching of this psalm.” But does even this context justify the sentiment expressed in the emotional climax of the psalm? How could the supposedly pious psalmist ring out a cry for such violence and revenge that he would call “blessed” those who take up enemy infants and dash them mercilessly against the rocks—a death none ought lightly visualize?

Theological foundation. The basis upon which the psalmist pleads for such horrid retribution, though interlaced with extreme emotion, is not the base and vicious fury of bloodthirsty revenge but the principle of divine justice itself, particularly as it is expressed in the so-called lex talionis, thrice iterated in the Torah—again, that seedbed of all subsequent theology (cf. Exod 21:22-25; Lev 24:17-22; Deut 19:16-21). Rather than serving as a sanction for personal vengeance, this Old Testament command actually protected against the excesses of revenge. Essentially, it was designed to ensure justice—that the punishment would indeed fit the crime. Thus, rather than being a primitive and barbaric

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83 The question is all the more relevant since Ps 137 was considered worthy to be retained in the book of worship for God’s people of the Old Covenant and was embraced into the canon of the New Testament church as well.
code, this Old Testament statute forms the basis for all civilized justice. It was not a law of private retaliation, but a law of just recompense.

Furthermore, the evidence of Scripture is heavily weighted that the implementation of this *lex talionis* was in a judicial, rather than personal, context. Of the three instances, Deuteronomy 19:16-21 makes this most explicit:

16 If a malevolent witness should rise up against a man to accuse him of a crime, then the two men involved in the dispute are to stand before Yahweh, before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. 17 Then the judges are to investigate the matter completely, and if the witness is found to be a false witness, falsely accusing his brother, 19 then you are to do to him as he intended to do to his brother, and so you will purge the evil from your midst. 20 The rest will hear and be afraid, and

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84 By the time of Jesus’ day, and contrary to its intent, the *lex talionis* had indeed become a “law of retaliation,” sanctioning that mindset of revenge rendered by the phrase, “Do unto others as they have done unto you.” Jesus’ words in Matt 5:38-42, however, were given to “shock” his followers back to a recovery of the original intent of the law (cf. Matt 5:17, in which Jesus says that he did not come to abolish the Old Testament, but to fulfill it), not by explaining its proper use *per se*, but by prohibiting its perversion—any “rights” of private retaliation—and by inculcating an attitude of “longsuffering.” John Wenham agrees that it is “a misunderstanding of the Sermon on the Mount to imagine that our Lord is repudiating the principle of civil justice, or undercutting the authority of the Old Testament.” Rather, “the whole passage is concerned with misinterpretations of the Old Testament, not with any supposedly sub-standard regulations. The *lex talionis* . . . was being used as an instrument of personal revenge. Our Lord says that the citizen of the kingdom is to have an utter disregard for his own rights . . . . He must love his enemies and harbour no desire for vengeance in his heart. That is a very different matter from telling a judge not to administer justice.” John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 94-95.

85 As Gordon Wenham insightfully observes, the phrase *eye for eye*, etc. was likely “just a formula. In most cases in Israel it was not applied literally. It meant that compensation appropriate to the loss incurred must be paid out. Thus if a slave lost an eye, he was given his freedom (Exod. 21:26). The man who killed an ox had to pay its owner enough for him to buy another (Lev. 24:18). Only in the case of premeditated murder was such compensation forbidden (Num. 35:16ff.). Then the principle of *life for life* must be literally enforced, because man is made in the image of God (Gen. 9:5-6).” Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 312. It is this principle of just recompense, embodied in the *lex talionis*, which forms the foundation in any period for any civilized judicial system.
never again will this evil thing be done in your midst. 21 Your eye must show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Additionally, in Leviticus 24:17-21, the chiastically fashioned lex talonis in expanded form is nestled amidst a pericope (vv. 10-23) in which appropriate judgment for blasphemy was placed before Yahweh, awaiting his sentence. The divine verdict then forms the stage from which Yahweh reiterated the principle of justice by which his people were to be governed. That principle had first been uttered in Exodus 21:22-25. Even there, the punishment for personal injury was to be placed before both the wronged party and “the judges” ( לפנים ) for appropriate judgment (v. 22). And as the canon continued, the restriction on personal (as opposed to judicial) retaliation was made even more explicit. Indeed, it was as strictly forbidden in the Old Covenant as it is in the New. Proverbs 24:29 warns: “Do not say, ‘Just as he did to me, so I will do to him; I will pay that man back for what he has done’” (cf. Prov 20:22).87 Jesus himself likewise summed up the Law and the Prophets in words reminiscent of these: “In all things, then, whatever you would like people to do to you, so also you do to them” (Matt 7:12).

Moreover, the psalmist was evidently familiar with the barely-elapsed prophecy of Jeremiah 50–51, and had taken its promise of divine retribution to heart when he

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86 Note how Lev 24:17 parallels v. 21b, as do vv. 18 and 21a, and vv. 19 and 20:

17: "לأسر צער כל מות מות ימוה:"
18: "ומכת כל מות מחמת שמים torque:"
19: "ולא כר צער כל מות כל חמה:"
20: "שבר מות צער כל מות כל חמה:"
21a: "ומכת כל מות מחמת שמים:"
21b: "ומכת כל מות ימוה:"

87 “Do not say, ‘I’ll pay you back for this wrong!’ Wait for Yahweh, and he will deliver you.”
uttered his impassioned plea. This tie is most pronounced in the comparison between Psalm 137:8 and Jeremiah 51:56, for in both verses the roots שד and שד respectively occur together in relation to the expected judgment against brutal Babylon:

O Daughter of Babylon, (doomed to be) devastated, 
blessed is he who repays you 
what you deserve for what you did to us! (Ps 137:8).

Indeed, a devastator will come against Babylon, 
For Yahweh is a God of recompense; 
he will surely repay! (Jer 51:56).

As such, then, this psalm is as much a response to Scripture as it is to events. Further striking parallels include: (1) the designation “Daughter of Babylon” (cf. Jer 50:42; 51:33 with Ps 137:8); (2) the depiction of her demise by the image of being rolled off “the cliffs” (מלע) — she who once was the invincible destroying mountain will soon be so no more (cf. Jer 51:25 with Ps 137:9); and (3) the ironic use of the violent term “shatter” (קם) — she who once was used of Yahweh to “shatter” the nations will soon find her little ones likewise “shattered” (cf. its repeated use in Jer 51:20-23 with Ps 137:9).

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88 Note the repeated use of שד in Jer 51:48, 53, 55, 56.

89 Cf. Kidner, Psalms 73–150, 460.
In addition, Jeremiah 50–51 skillfully and repeatedly weaves together the twin themes of the promise of divine vengeance and the principle of divine justice—or, the promise of vengeance in kind (Jer 50:15, 28-29; 51:6, 11, 24, 35, 36, 49, 56). The former is classically expressed in the Song of Moses (Deut 32:35), the latter in the lex talionis. And this dual-edged promise, well encapsulated in Jeremiah 51:6: “For it is the time of Yahweh’s vengeance; he will repay her what she deserves!”

Thus, in Psalm 137:7-9 the psalmist asks Yahweh for exact recompense against the treacherous Edomites and the merciless Babylonians—utter destruction as depicted by,

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90 This violent vengeance to be enacted against deserving Babylon is by the word of Yahweh, which indicates an essential “rightness” to it.

91 Note also reference to the “day” of Babylon’s judgment (cf. Jer 50:27, 31; 51:2; Deut 32:35), and the divinely uttered oath (cf. Jer 51:14; Deut 32:40-41).

92 Ps 79:12 cries out: “Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the reproach they have hurled at you, O Lord!” This appears on the surface to be a savage appeal to super-retaliation, and has been named “an echo of the viciousness of Lamech (Gen 4:24).” Walter Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 72. However, this plea for sevenfold recompense is actually an image borrowed from the lips of Yahweh himself. In Gen 4:15, Yahweh promises the murderer Cain that anyone who killed him would himself receive “seven times” vengeance. And, more germane to the context of Ps 79, in Lev 26 Yahweh repeatedly promises sevenfold punishment for stubborn covenant breaking (Lev 26:18, 21, 24, 28). Whether this sevenfold lex talionis is to be construed as (1) a figure for sure and full punishment, (2) literary convention (hyperbole), or (3) starkly literal, it must be questioned carefully, for the psalmist is harking back to language initiated by Yahweh himself, and uttered for the highest cause: the sake of his honor.
and actually enacted in, the violent slaughter of the enemy’s infants. The cry is for a punishment commensurate with the crime committed. Here the crime was the height of barbarity and ought be repaid in kind. As has been hinted, “a feeling of universal love is admirable, but it must not be divorced from a keen sense of justice.”93 The appeal is made to Yahweh to fulfill that justice as expressed in the *lex talionis*; the vehicle for its fulfillment is called “blessed,” for through her justice would be realized, the honor of God would be upheld, and a certain measure of the world gone wrong would be righted. Such matters as these are not to be received by the righteous with regret, but with a measure of—albeit in a sense sober—rejoicing. Indeed, this very measure of rejoicing is *commanded* at the culmination of the New Testament canon of both heaven and God’s saints over the future devastation of anti-typical Babylon according to the requirements of this same *lex talionis* (Rev 18:6, 20): “Give back to her just as she has given, and pay her back double for what she has done. . . . Rejoice over her, O heaven and saints and apostles and prophets! 94 For God has judged her for the way she treated you.”

But the question may yet be asked, “Was the psalmist’s appeal to the *lex talionis* legitimate—particularly in light of God’s command that children not be put to death for the sins of their fathers (Deut 24:16), when that is indirectly what is being asked for

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94 Cf. Rev 18:20 with Jer 51:48, “Then they will shout for joy [נְדוּד] over Babylon—heaven and earth and all that is in them.”
here?" 95 In response, it must be noted that Deuteronomy 24:16 refers to judicial sentence to be carried out by men; God, on the other hand, retains the prerogative to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children (Exod 34:7). The most conspicuous example of this is when, after God’s longsuffering over their sin, he commanded the annihilation of the entire populace of Canaan at the entry of his people there. God has rights that man cannot have, for only he is God. Harsh and revolting though his justice may appear, the believer is called to trust his goodness even in the midst of his justice and accept any concomitant tensions.

Thus, in line with the ethics of the Old Covenant (as of the New), 96 the psalmist in 137:7-9 appeals to Yahweh as the judge supreme to mete out justice according to his own edict. And since, in God’s economy, there was to be no ransom allowed for murder (cf. Num 35:31), the psalmist cries out for the divine judgment of compensatory bloodshed. Although the appalling request is both shocking and horrifying—for it scales the reaches of revulsion—it does indeed fall within the bounds of divine jurisprudence and is both a sentence divinely promised (cf. Isa 13:16; Jer 50–51) and divinely enacted. Thus, the principle itself of strict judicial retaliation cannot be maligned without at the same time

95 If the cry of the psalmist had been merely that of repayment in a kind left unspecified, there would probably be minimal objection raised to the psalm. The offense, however, comes rightly through this implicit and barbaric request.

96 There are certain passages in the New Testament which unmistakably echo the essence of the lex talionis. For example, Paul’s curse of Elymas the sorcerer found in Acts 13:6-12 derives from this principle: Elymas had sought to keep the proconsul in spiritual blindness, so he was cursed with physical blindness. Likewise, Paul’s confidence regarding the antagonistic Alexander (2 Tim 4:14) is clearly based upon the lex talionis. And perhaps most notable in its conspicuous commendation of this law is Rev 18. The principle of the lex talionis is the theme which pervades the passage, and at its divine enactment against eschatological Babylon, an attitude of rejoicing is exacted from both saint and angel alike (Rev 18:20).
maligning the character of God who both established and promised it. As such, then, the
psalmist bears no guilt for his cry, though its jarring effect remains.

Psalm 109

_Curse against a personal enemy._

1: לְמַטְנֵת לֵלֹא מַמָּודֶר
al-tb‘al ma-m@fet: Cfr, ish ve-hemetha
2: צֶלָּל פַּתָּא
debra‘ etz lelo‘a shekar
3: דְּבֵר בֵּית שַׁמְּאַה סְבוּבָּא
n‘el‘hama‘e‘ ha‘em
4: מָשָׁה אָהַבְתָה יְשַׁמְּנֵי
einim tep‘al: inshwi‘ za‘er matmeta
5: נַשְׁמַי צֶלָּל צֶלָּל אתבָּה
estawa mat‘at heb‘i: mtsadul le‘ll\[0.8ex]
6: מַקְסִד לֵלֹא יִשָּׁש
eqash‘im le‘ll\[0.8ex]
7: בְּחֵקֲשָׁמֶנוּ בָּאָרְשָׁי
evehal‘a mat‘at heb‘i: v‘it qesim
8: וִי יִשֶּׁשְׁמֶנֶּה
ti‘yi‘shemln: mtsadul ve‘la
evehal‘a mat‘at heb‘i
9: זְרַע בְּנֵי חַוֹּים
evehal‘a al‘amote: ve‘la
10: וַעֲנֵי צְנָה בְּנֵי שַׁאֲלָא
evehal‘a al‘amote: ve‘la
11: יִקְּשֶׁה מוֹשֶׁה לָכֶל אָשָׁר לְ

97 Although the context well supports either reading, I emend the text on the basis of
the LXX, in lieu of the MT: וַעֲנֵי צְנָה, “and may they seek (i.e., beg).” The LXX reading,
ejklhqlhtwsan, apparently witnesses to a Vorlage which contained נַשְׁמַי צֶלָּל (for similar
constructions, cf. Exod 12:39; Job 30:5). The MT reading plausibly arose by confusion of
ה—ם (although record of such confusion between these letters is absent from the discussions of both
McCarter, _Textual Criticism_, and Tov, _Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible_) and inadvertent attraction
to the preceding יִקְּשֶׁה מָשָׁה לָכֶל אָשָׁר לְ as a more direct parallelism.
Consonant with the context, and contrary to the MT (which reads the wayyiqtol form וַּהֲקָבָּה, I emend to the simple yiqtol form מִלָּהֵם—a textual variation which involves alteration of the Massoretic pointing but no change in the consonantal text. This is in accord with the witness of the LXX, which reads the future καὶ ἦκει αὐτῷ. The Vorlage of the LXX read the same as the proto-MT, but the Greek translators interpreted the form differently than the Massoretes. Moreover, it is plausible that the jussive יָהַת of v. 19 informs how the previous verses are largely to be construed (and that the wayyiqtol forms of v. 17 arose by attraction to the forms of vv. 16b, 17a, and 18a).

Cf. the LXX’s καὶ μακροθυμήσεται δι’ αὐτοῦ, and note 98 above.

Cautiously repointing the Massoretic wayyiqtol form to a yiqtol with coordinate waw, interpreted as jussive in force, in keeping with the context (cf. note 98 above). Although this nuance is not reflected in the LXX, which reads καὶ ἐισῆλθεν, it is supported by the NRSV, TEV, NEB, JB, and KJV (the NIV dissents at this point). Moreover, the imagery used in this imprecation is similar to certain cursing formulae of the ancient Near East (cf. note 110 below).
For the director of music; a psalm of David.

O God whom I praise, do not be silent!

101 Tentatively emending the MT in accord with both the surrounding parallelism and the LXX: οἱ ἐπαναστασάντοι μοι αἰχμαλώτησαν. Cf. Kraus, Psalms 60–150, 337; Allen, Psalms 101–150, 75. The MT, if maintained (ךֵּּדָּם), may be translated variously: “When they rise up, they will be put to shame” (if the perfect is deemed temporally coordinate to the wayyiqtol; cf. GKC, 312-13), or “Let them rise up and be put to shame” (if the perfect is deemed preceptive). Cf. Mitchell J. Dahood, Psalms III: 101–150, Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 109.

102 Thus, this psalm was intended for Temple worship. This has led some to conclude that the frightening curses of vv. 6-19 must be the recollection of curses against David by his enemies rather than the curses of David himself. However, by the example of other psalms (e.g., notably Ps 88), much more was appropriately brought before God in community worship than current sensibilities generally allow.

103 Literally, “O God of my praise”—a construction pregnant with connotation. In this brief phrase, the psalmist appeals to the God whom he has praised in the past, and, at the same time, expresses his confidence “that God will help him again, and that he will be his praise once again.” A. A. Anderson, The Book of Psalms, vol. 2, New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Ronald E. Clements and Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 759.
2 For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the treacherous have opened against me; they have spoken against me with deceitful tongues.

3 With words of hatred they have surrounded me, and have attacked me without cause.

4 In return for my love they accuse me, though I continue to pray (for them). 104

5 They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my love.

6 Appoint a wicked man against him, and let an accuser stand at his right hand! 105

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.

16 For he never remembered to show lovingkindness,

104 Translating interpretively, as suited to the context. The frugal Hebrew is literally: “but I, a prayer,”—i.e., “I am characterized by prayer” (or “I am a man of prayer”). Kraus unnecessarily believes the text here to be corrupt, and suggests an emendation “in a direct and analogous association with v. 4a: ‘אֱלֹּהִים הַקְּדוֹשִּׁים לְּּפָּנַי.”” Kraus, Psalms 60–150, 337. Allen properly notes, however, that although the Hebrew expression is compressed, it is “not without parallel.” Allen, Psalms 101–150, 72. Cf. Ps 120:7, “I am (a man of) peace” (אֵֽשֶׁר-שָׂלֹם).

105 The setting envisaged is that of a courtroom, in which David desires his oppressor to stand trial for his crimes before a harsh prosecutor and merciless judge, in accord with the harshness and lack of mercy he displayed, and to be found guilty (for certain parallels with the imagery of this Psalm, cf. Zech 3).

106 Literally, “their memory,” but with obvious reference to the villain’s descendants, rather than his sins, being cut off by Yahweh.
but persecuted the poor and needy and disheartened to their death. 107

17 He loved cursing—so may it come on him; and he found no pleasure in blessing—so may it be far from him. 108

18 He clothed himself with cursing as his coat; 109 so may it enter into his body like water and into his bones like oil. 110

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.

21 But you, O Yahweh my Lord, deal with me according to your name; 112 because your lovingkindness is so good, deliver me.

22 For I am poor and needy, and my heart is pierced within me.

107 Or, more literally, “(with intent) to kill.” Although frequently emended principally on the basis of the Syriac to ܡܕܐ, “to death,” the text makes sense as it stands if parsed as the emphatic lamed intensifying the polel verb ܡܡ. This verbal conjugation properly expresses the aim or endeavor to perform an action—especially with hostile intent. Dahood, *Psalms III: 101–150*, 105-06.

108 Calvin translates v. 17 similarly, with jussive intent: “As he loved cursing, so let it come upon him: as he did not take delight in blessing, so let it be far from him.” Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 4:283. He further explains that, although the words are in the past tense (in the MT), “it is necessary to translate them as expressive of a wish or desire; for David continues to pray that his enemy may be visited with the same unparalleled ills which he had inflicted upon others” (cf. v. 16). Ibid., 284. Various English versions likewise translate this and the following verses as bearing a jussive nuance. Among them are the NIV, NRSV, TEV, NEB, JB, and KJV.

109 I.e., cursing had become a common—even characteristic—activity.

110 Cf. this curse with the following imprecation embedded in the vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon: “[As oil enters your flesh, just so may they cause this curse to enter into your flesh.” D. J. Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1958), 78.

111 Literally, “This, the payment of my accusers from Yahweh.” This verbless phrase continues the jussive appeal of v. 19 (cf. NIV, NRSV, TEV, NEB, JB, KJV), yet also appears to embody all the curses of the preceding verses as a prelude to the climactic, “But You” (v. 21).

112 The appeal to Yahweh’s “name” is an appeal to his character, especially his inestimable “lovingkindness,” as evidenced by the parallel phrase.
23 Like a lengthening shadow, I fade away;  
   I am shaken off like a locust.\footnote{113}
24 My knees give way from fasting,  
   and my body has lost all its fat.\footnote{114}
25 I have become an object of reproach to them;\footnote{115}  
   when they see me, they shake their heads.
26 Help me, O Yahweh my God;  
   save me according to your lovingkindness.
27 And let them know that this is your hand\footnote{116}—  
   that you, O Yahweh, have done it.
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.
30 With my mouth I will greatly extol Yahweh;  
   and in the midst of the multitude I will praise him.
31 For he stands at the right hand of the needy,  
   to save his life from those who would condemn him.\footnote{117}

This individual lament, above all other psalms of imprecation, has been severely maligned. It has been labeled, for example, “the ‘Imprecatory’ Psalm \textit{par excellence},”\footnote{118} a

\footnote{113}{The imagery is that of the quick movement to dislodge the insect from one’s body.}
\footnote{114}{I.e., the psalmist’s body had become gaunt from fasting and trouble.}
\footnote{115}{Referring to the psalmist’s accusers (cf. v. 20).}
\footnote{116}{In Semitic thought, the “hand” is a graphic symbol of power. And in reference to God, it is characteristically an image of divine deliverance (as clarified in the parallel line; cf. Deut 32:36, 39-41).}
\footnote{117}{Literally, “to save (him) from those who judge (i.e., condemn) his life.”}
\footnote{118}{Joseph Hammond, “An Apology for the Vindictive Psalm (Psalm cix),” \textit{Expositor} 2 (1875): 325.}
"pregnant missile of evil,"\textsuperscript{119} a "raw undisciplined song of hate,"\textsuperscript{120} and "as unabashed a hymn of hate as was ever written"\textsuperscript{121}—and perhaps rightly so. Unquestionably, "this is one of the hard places of Scripture, a passage which the soul trembles to read."\textsuperscript{122} The yearning for such detailed and appalling retaliation as is found in this psalm is vividly confrontational—particularly vis-à-vis the Christian call to "love your enemies" (Matt 5:44) and to "bless and curse not" (Rom 12:14). Indeed, David imprecates his enemy in a manner starkly reminiscent of certain ancient Near Eastern curse formulas. For example, compare Psalm 109:8, "May his days be few," with the curse of Esarhaddon, "May he never grant you . . . attainment of old age."\textsuperscript{123} Furthermore, this psalm has been sorely misused in the life of the broader Christian community. For instance, Calvin records the reprehensible abuse of this psalm in his day—the practice of praying people to death for a price: "How detestable a piece of sacrilege is it on the part of the monks, and especially the Franciscan friars, to pervert this psalm by employing it to countenance the most nefarious purposes! If a man harbour malice against a neighbour, it is quite a common thing for him

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{119} Ragnar C. Teigen, “Can Anything Good Come From a Curse?” Lutheran Quarterly 26 (1974): 49.
\item\textsuperscript{120} Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms, 83.
\item\textsuperscript{121} C. S. Lewis, Christian Reflections, 118. And he adds that the psalmist “was doubtless a hot-blooded barbarian.”
\item\textsuperscript{123} Wiseman, The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon, 60. Cf. also Ps 109:18, “He wore cursing as his coat, so may it enter into his body like water and into his bones like oil,” with Esarhaddon’s, “[As oil enters your flesh, just so may] they cause this curse to enter into your flesh.” Ibid., 78.
\end{footnotes}
to engage one of these wicked wretches to curse him, which he would do by daily repeating
this psalm. I know a lady in France who hired a parcel of these friars to curse her own [sic]
and only son in these words.”

The initial question, however, that must be asked in regard to this psalm is this:
“From whose lips do the vehement curses of vv. 6-19 escape—David’s or his enemy’s?” In
modern treatments of the psalm, vv. 6-19 are often put in quotation marks, as being the
words of David’s enemy uttered against him. If this can be demonstrated to be the
exegetically preferred interpretation, then the offense of the psalm is largely alleviated, and
a moral dilemma avoided. This view is not without significant support, chief among
which are the following: (1) The psalms are known to make frequent use of unintroduced
quotations—whether brief (e.g., Pss 22:9; 137:3) or lengthy (e.g., Ps 50:7-15). (2) Further-
more, whereas vv. 6-19 castigate the enemy in the singular, the verses which both precede
and follow present the enemy in the plural. Indeed, no less than Artur Weiser asserts that
“the change from the plural in vv. 1-5 and 20ff. to the singular in vv. 6-19 is satisfactorily
accounted for only if vv. 6-19 are interpreted as a quotation of the imprecations directed
against the psalmist.” (3) Additionally, the structure of v. 20, in particular, is atypical and

124 Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, 4:276.

125 E.g., NRSV; Allen, Psalms 101–150, 70-71; Kraus, Psalms 60–150, 335-36. An
alternative approach is propounded by Jacquet (cf. JB), who argues that vv. 6-15 represent the
enemies’ curses against David, and that vv. 16ff. are the curse of David about them. Louis Jacquet,
Belgium: Duculot, 1979), 184-85.

126 This explanation does nothing, however, to alleviate the offense of the other
Imprecatory Psalms.

127 Weiser, The Psalms, 691.
thus internally highlighted. Its verbless construction differs from the verses preceding, where jussives had prevailed, and is introduced by the emphatic and anaphoric ṣāhu.

Moreover, the initial phrase bears a certain measure of ambiguity, since the noun Ṣâleḥ may be rendered “work” as well as “reward” (cf., e.g., Ps 28:5 and Jer 31:16). If the former meaning is construed, the verse may arguably be a summary statement of what the enemy wanted done to David. Furthermore, v. 20 is juxtaposed to the ḥāli at the beginning of v. 21, which clearly indicates that a change has taken place. As Kraus argues, after the petitioner in the previous verses has revealed the enemy’s curses to Yahweh, he then turns to Yahweh with: “But you.”128 (4) Lastly, vv. 6-19 appear to be set in a framework of repeated terms. Of particular note are: (הוֹד), “evil,” in vv. 5, 20; terms from the stem ḫăr, “to speak,” in vv. 2-3, 20; and the repeated verb ṣānaš, “to accuse,” in vv. 4, 20. To these observations Allen asks: “Is not this repetition the psalmist’s own signal that first he is about to quote the words of accusation and then has finished quoting them?”129

However, in the balance, the difficulties with this view outweigh the apparent support: (1) Whereas the use of non-explicitly introduced quotations is common in the psalms, they are in general contextually quite clear and readily recognized as such. This is not the case with Psalm 109. (2) Moreover, the change from the plural to the singular, and back again, is also not unknown to the psalms—notably Psalm 55. There this literary phenomenon is utilized by David to single out the crux element of enmity against him—a

128 Kraus, Psalms 60–150, 338.

129 Allen, Psalms 101–150, 73.
friend turned traitor. And this same convention may be at work in Psalm 109 as well. (3) Also, the effect of v. 20, as introduced by the apparently stark and abrupt הָרָע, may likely be such that it gathers up all the foregoing curses in a fist and delivers them in a single pugilistic stroke\textsuperscript{130} as the forceful prelude to the climactic and structurally disjunctive התַּנְתָּן of v. 21. In addition, the inclusion of יָּהָוֶה, explicitly "from Yahweh," at the end of the initial phrase renders the interpretation of הַלֵּפַט as “work” the less likely. It is rather a contextual indicator of divine recompense. (4) Lastly, the motive for which the verbal inclusios are framed may be explained as either simply expressions of literary craftsmanship,\textsuperscript{131} or as a means of giving “complete contextual justification for a curse by the psalmist in vv. 6-19.”\textsuperscript{132}

Further factors which serve to buttress the contention that the imprecations of vv. 6-19 are uttered by David against his enemies include: (1) The designation “poor and needy” (ויָנֵּֽיבְּצָא יִֽנוֹֽי), a key phrase synonymous with the “pious” in the psalms,\textsuperscript{133} is used


\textsuperscript{131} Supplementary to the repetitions observed by Allen above (item 4, p. 132), additional note may be made of the repeated terms from the stem טָרַשׁ, “to judge/condemn” (vv. 7, 31), as well as the stationing of an accuser versus the presence of Yahweh at the “right hand” (vv. 6, 31). Significantly, these instances do not frame vv. 6-19, and thus serve somewhat to mollify Allen’s assertion.

\textsuperscript{132} Wright, “Ritual Analogy in Psalm 109,” 394.

\textsuperscript{133} As Drijvers observes, these “(poor and) needy” in the Psalms “are the humble and pious Israelites from all classes of society . . . men who through suffering and affliction were tested and matured, who through their suffering and trials had found proper submissive relation to Yahweh.” Pius Drijvers, The Psalms: Their Structure and Meaning (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 131.
both in vv. 16 and 22 (cf. like use of אֲבֵיָה in v. 31) in what appears to be an intentional verbal and emotional tie between the two.

For he [i.e., the psalmist’s enemy] never remembered to show lovingkindness, but persecuted the poor and needy and disheartened to their death (109:16).

For I [i.e., the psalmist] am poor and needy, and my heart is pierced within me (109:22).

(2) It is also textually plausible that there is further imprecation in vv. 28b-29, albeit in less vitriolic language (cf., e.g., NRSV, NEB). If this is so, and vv. 6-19 are in essence ignoble, how is it to be satisfactorily reckoned? (3) Moreover, the exclamations of vv. 16-18 (e.g., “He loved cursing”) are certainly not true of David; even his enemies would find it difficult to label this man in such language. However, they were true of certain of his enemies (e.g., Shimei—2 Sam 16:5-13). (4) Additionally, in various other psalms David unquestionably imprecates his enemies (e.g., Pss 35:4-8; 58:7-10; 69:23-29), so that the quotation hypothesis does not, in fact, remove the essential moral difficulty found herein—to say nothing of other scathing imprecations on the lips of the pious found throughout Scripture. Most of these have been left in the canon without divine disparagement or comment of condemnation. And, although this divine silence does not speak unequivocally, it does yet speak. In particular, compare the striking parallel to Psalm 109:6-
19 found in Jeremiah 18:19-23.134 (5) And lastly, this hypothesis runs counter to the understanding of the apostles, for in Acts 1:16, 20, Peter explicitly applies the imprecation in Psalm 109:8 as the words of David concerning Judas Iscariot.135

The issue that spawns the denunciations of David is no petty or transient matter, but the return of hatred for his sustained love, of evil for his sustained good (Ps 109:4-5).136 David was in a position of desperate need (cf. Ps 109:16, 22, 31) and had

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134 Jeremiah 18:19-23, in its majority, reads:

19 Pay attention to me, Yahweh;  
    listen to the voice of those who contend with me!

20 Should evil be repaid for good?  
    Yet they have dug a pit for me.  
    Remember that I stood before you  
    to speak well on their behalf;  
    to turn your wrath from them.

21 Therefore, give their children over to famine;  
    and hand them over to the power of the sword.
    Let their wives be made childless and widows;

23 But you know, Yahweh,  
    all their plots to kill me.
    Do not atone for their iniquity  
    or blot out their sin from before you.  
    Let them be overthrown before you;  
    deal with them in the time of your anger.
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135 In this, there is implicit commendation of the initial utterance. Indeed, as Peter relates, it was the Holy Spirit who spoke these things through David (Acts 1:16). In addition, the typological application of this psalm to the close associate-turned-traitor places the curses of Ps 109 in their appropriate context and usage.

136 This theme is elsewhere repeated in the Imprecatory Psalms, fleshed out in greater detail. Ps 35:11-15, 19 (cf. Ps 38:20-21) recites:

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11 Malevolent witnesses rise up;  
    they question me about things I do not know.

12 They repay me evil for good—  
    what bereavement to my soul!
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already shown a pattern of enemy-love. However, this love had been both spurned and returned with repeated enmity. Moreover, even in the midst of the enemy’s litigations and David’s counter-imprecations, David apparently continued to example a measure of concern for the enemy in his prayers (Ps 109:4). In light of his enemy’s appalling lack of lovingkindness, climaxing in his abuse of the legal system, David resorts to his only remaining recourse for rectification.

David appeals to the divine Judge of all the earth, who will indeed act justly (cf. Gen 18:25) that this lack and abuse of the enemy be measured back to him in full accord

13 Yet I, when they were sick, clothed myself in sackcloth, I humbled myself in fasting; but my prayers returned to me unanswered.
14 I paced back and forth as though for my friend or brother; I bowed my head in grief as though mourning for my mother.
15 But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee . . . .
19 Let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my enemies; let not those who hate me without cause (maliciously) wink the eye.

As Spurgeon comments: “We could all pray for the conversion of our worst enemy, and David would have done the same; but viewing the adversaries of the Lord, and doers of iniquity, AS SUCH, AND AS INCORRIGIBLE we cannot wish them well; on the contrary, we desire their overthrow, and destruction. The gentlest hearts burn with indignation when they hear of barbarities to women and children, of crafty plots for ruining the innocent, of cruel oppression of helpless orphans, and gratuitous ingratitude to the good and gentle. A curse upon the perpetrators of the atrocities in Turdey [sic] may not be less virtuous than a blessing upon the righteous.” Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, 5:157.

This thread of of Yahweh as the basis of deliverance from his plight (109:21, 26).

Cf. the language of the court: accusation and condemnation abused (Ps 109:2-4, 31) and appealed to (Ps 109:6-7, 31).
with the demands of *lex talionis*:\textsuperscript{140} (1) Psalm 109:2, “For the mouth of the wicked (לְעָשָׁה) . . .
. [has] opened against me,” is answered by Psalm 109:6, “Appoint a wicked man (לְעָשָׁה) against him,” and Psalm 109:7, “When he is tried, let him be found guilty (לְעָשָׁה).” (2)
Psalm 109:4, “In return for my love they accuse me (רָשָׁת),” is answered by Psalm 109:6, “Let an accuser (כָּרָן) stand at his right hand,” and Psalm 109:20, “May this be Yahweh’s payment to my accusers (כָּרָן).” (3) Psalm 109:16, “He never remembered to show lovingkindness (דָּבָט),” is answered by Psalm 109:12, “Let there be no one to extend lovingkindness (דָּבָט) to him.” (4) Psalm 109:16, “He persecuted the poor and needy and disheartened to their death,” is answered by the imprecations which invoke such a state upon the oppressor (Ps 109:8-15). (5) Psalm 109:17, “He loved cursing,” is answered immediately by “so may it come on him” (cf. likewise throughout vv. 17-19). His talionic appeal informs our understanding of the evils of his enemy: those horrific imprecations wished upon the enemy in vv. 8-15 characterize the very crimes the enemy himself had committed\textsuperscript{141} (cf. vv. 16-20). (6) And Psalm 109:18, “He clothed himself (כָּרָן) with cursing,” is countered by the plea in Psalm 109:29 that the psalmist’s “accusers be clothed (כָּרָן) with disgrace.”

\textsuperscript{140} David speaks as the innocent sufferer, in the language of the judicial court, and in accord with the standard of justice and punishment it must uphold.

\textsuperscript{141} Cf. Drijvers (*The Psalms*, 119), who views the imprecations of Ps 109:8-15 as repetitions of “the words and threats” of the psalmist’s enemy.
And again, although it is noticeably a known personal enemy\textsuperscript{142} who is imprecated, David does not react in private revenge as would be expected in such a circumstance, but rather releases the retaliatory demands of justice to the one under whose jurisdiction it rightfully lies (cf. Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19).\textsuperscript{143} He brings his hurt and hurtful cry for vengeance to God (Ps 109:1, 21, 26ff)—a cry which will transform to public praise when divine deliverance is realized (Ps 109:30-31).\textsuperscript{144} Such is the nature of God’s acts: vengeance upon his enemies is salvation for his people. God has taken sides in his covenant, and he has bound himself to remain faithful to it.

\textit{Theological foundation.} But if these are to be construed as the genuine words of David against a personal enemy, how can these vivid and explicit curses be justified—particularly the curse passed down to the offender’s children? (cf. especially vv. 10, 12-15). In addition to the divine principle expressed in the \textit{lex talionis} dealt with earlier, the basis upon which David could justifiably call down such terrible curses upon those who had so

\textsuperscript{142} Notice the presence of other Imprecatory Psalms voiced ostensibly by David against known personal enemies (e.g., Ps 54:7, concerning the Ziphites; Ps 56:8, regarding the Philistines and his many other enemies; and Ps 59:6, 12-14, uttered against the men of Saul sent to kill him).

\textsuperscript{143} As such, it is not a psalm to be relegated to the partially revealed religion or supposed “inferior ethics” of the Old Testament—for the ethics of both testaments are in essence the same, and the revelation of both proceeds from one and the same God who does not change. Nor can it be solely explained by the Old Testament’s focus on the outworking of divine justice in the temporal sphere while the Christian awaits the eschatological Day. In the Scriptures it is but a matter both of emphasis and the progress of revelation, for the Old Testament holds forth in germinal form the same hope of eschatological judgment as the New (e.g., Isa 66:22-24); and the New Testament assumes the same expectation of temporal justice as the Old (e.g., Rom 1:18ff; 13:3-4).

\textsuperscript{144} As such, it is an expression of the psalmist’s confidence in divine action on his behalf.
malevolently treated him was the covenantal promise of God to curse those who cursed his people, as is found initially and principally in Genesis 12:3.\footnote{The Imprecatory Psalms base their theology of cursing in the Torah, the foundational revelation of God. And although the psalmist here does not quote from Gen 12:3 per se, he nonetheless evidently invokes the theology classically expressed therein—the divine promise to curse those who curse his people. This promise of divine blessing and cursing was to operate at both the individual and corporate levels: the promise was given to Abram and yet was to apply to the entirety of his descendants—all who would enter that covenant by faith. Later allusions to this promise were likewise applied both individually and corporately. For the former sense, cf. Gen 27:29, in the blessing of Jacob by Isaac—acquired by deception, yet binding nonetheless: \begin{center} בָּרוּךְ שֶׁמֶנָּו בְּלֵּבֶן בְּנֵי אָבִרְךָ, Emissary of the covenant.\end{center} \begin{center} חַיָּבִים שֶׁמָּנָה בְּלֵּבֶן בְּנֵי אָבִרְךָ, \end{center} “Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you.” For the latter cf. Num 24:9, from the lips of Balaam, hired by Balak to curse the encroaching nation of Israel, but frustrated by the will of Yahweh to bless instead: \begin{center} בָּרוּךְ שֶׁמֶנָּה בְּלֵּבֶן בְּנֵי אָבִרְךָ, \end{center} “Blessed be those who bless you, and cursed be those who curse you” (cf. also Exod 23:22; Deut 30:7). This dual application runs apparently through the prophets as well: cf., e.g., the personal imprecations in Jer 18:18-23; the judgments against various surrounding nations for their sins against Israel and (notably) for the sins of Israel against their own people (specifically the righteous and the needy) in Amos 1-2; and the judgments promised against Edom in Obad 8-15.}

\footnote{Both הַקָּלִל and אָרֹר mean “to curse,” although the former often bears the nuance “to disdain,” whereas the latter is characteristically solemn and judicial (cf. chapter 3, note 71). Thus, the promise of cursing iterated in Gen 12:3 bespeaks that “those who in the future would view Abraham and all that his faith and life represented as contemptible would find that they would come under God’s judicial curse. To curse Abraham would be almost equivalent to cursing God.” Allan M. Harman, “The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter,” RTR 54 (1995): 68.}

\footnote{Laney rightly recognizes that the cries for judgment in the Imprecatory Psalms are uttered in accordance with the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant. But he further avers that}

The Abrahamic Covenant, of which this promise is a part, assured divine blessing on those who would bless the faith-descendants of Abraham, and divine cursing (אָרֹר) on those who would treat them with contempt (קָלִל).\footnote{Laney rightly recognizes that the cries for judgment in the Imprecatory Psalms are uttered in accordance with the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant. But he further avers that} Though perhaps a “dangerous” concept,
because of the implications for imprecation, this passage portrays that the enemies of Israel are the enemies of God, that “the despisers of Israel are the despisers of God.” David, then, was taking hold of this danger. In an intense manner he made appeal to God, in a form familiar in the ancient Near East, to do as he had promised: to curse those who had so mistreated him.

Literary echoes of Genesis 12:3 are found in this psalm. Psalm 109:17 utilizes the term הָלְיַפִּים for the cursing of the enemy, in contrast with הָלָה בִּגְדָה (cf. v. 18). Likewise, and most directly, in Psalm 109:28 the enemy’s cursing (הָלְיַפִּים הַלְיַפִּים) is contrasted with Yahweh’s blessing (יִרְבָּה הָלָה). In addition, distinct allusion to earlier cursing formulas established in the Mosaic Covenant (which builds upon the Abrahamic) are expressed in David’s imprecations. In essence, he is reminding God to be true to his promise to curse—and to curse specifically as he had promised. For instance, Psalm 109:9, “May his children...
be fatherless and his wife a widow” makes explicit appeal to talionic justice in harking back to the words of Yahweh in Exodus 22:21-23, “Do not oppress any widow or the fatherless. For if you oppress them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. Then my anger will burn, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.” Moreover, Psalm 109:14, “May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before Yahweh” (and related curses uttered in reference to the descendants of the offender) recalls the promise of Yahweh to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their children (Exod 20:5-6; 34:7). Thus, David is calling upon God to act as he had promised—in literal, though horrid, detail. As Peels similarly observes, such imprecatory prayers are heard from within the context of the covenant relationship between God and his people. “The covenant is threatened by the fury of the godless. It is not they who are being killed but the righteous, and nobody intervenes. When in this situation the psalmist raises an imprecatory prayer to God and pleads for the punishment of the enemy, he ties in with God’s own covenant curse upon the godless.”

150 Cf. the context of the psalm in its entirety with the curse of Deut 27:19, “Cursed be the one who perverts justice due the alien, the fatherless, and the widow.”

151 Exod 20:5-6, in its majority, reads: “I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth [generation] of those who hate me, but showing lovingkindness to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Likewise, the fuller text of Exod 34:7 reveals that Yahweh maintains “lovingkindness for a thousand [generations], forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth [generation].” Thus, his justice, though harsh, pales in comparison to his lovingkindness.

152 Peels, The Vengeance of God, 240. This same principle is reinforced by Christ himself. In Luke 18:1-8, Jesus utilizes the example of a widow pleading for vengeance against her adversary (v. 3) as the consolation for his own covenant “elect” in their situations of extremity (v. 7).
Hence, Psalm 109 is a harsh and explicit appeal to the Lord of the covenant to remain true to his promise to curse those who curse his people—a promise which commenced with Abraham (Gen 12:3) and remained tacitly intact into the New Testament as well153 (e.g., Gal 3).154 Indeed, this psalm is the cry of the child of God who has no other recourse for justice—where no other aid is available for the redress of grievous personal wrongs, where the abuses of one’s enemies have reached the extent that the question of theodicy is evoked, where the name of God and the enduring faith of his people are at stake. It is from such a context that this prayer was first offered.

153 The dual-edged promise of the Abrahamic Covenant, as it finds its echo in the New Testament era, was not merely a spiritual abstraction. In limited instances, it applied as well to the corporeal life of God’s people in their times of extremity. E.g., in Matt 10:11-15, when Jesus first sent out his twelve disciples, he instructed them that, if they were welcomed into a home, they were to let their peace remain on it (i.e., God, through his disciples, would bless those who blessed them, cf. Gen 12:3); but, if they were refused, they were to shake the dust off their feet as a sign of peace’s antithesis—the curse of coming judgment (i.e., God, through his disciples, would curse those who cursed them, cf. Gen 12:3). This dramatization, though voiceless, was yet a veiled or implicit imprecation (cf. the similar post-cross example of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:51). Carson considers that “for the disciples to do this to Jewish homes and towns would be a symbolic way of saying that the emissaries of Messiah now view those places as pagan, polluted, and liable to judgment.” D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 246. Such a prophetic symbolic action is “a form of the divine word. It is . . . a visible word, and shares all the qualities which distinguish the divine word.” J. Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 172. As Wenham comments: “His command to his disciples, to shake off the dust from their feet as a testimony to those who would not receive their message, is a symbolic act of solemn cursing.” And he further notes that “the disciples’ curse is a most solemn warning of the day of judgment.” Wenham, The Goodness of God, 157. This serves to illustrate that, in the Scriptures, there is often found a measure of semantic overlap or “blending” between the categories of “curse” and “announcement of judgment/warning/woe.” It is the context which informs the intent. Cf., e.g., Jesus’ curse of the fig tree in Mark 11:12-21 as an evident announcement of judgment, yet which is specifically referred to in the text as a curse. Likewise, Peter’s curse in Acts 8:20-22 is stated in explicitly imprecatory terms, although its intent is that of a grave warning. Furthermore, in Deut 28, the curses of the covenant are spoken of in terms of what will happen upon breach of the covenant, as opposed to being couched in imprecatory language. For further discussion of the relation between woe and curse, cf. Appendix A.

154 Cf. discussion above in chap. 2, pp. 45-47.