CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have attempted to demonstrate that the utterance of imprecations (including the appeal for divine vengeance) against the recalcitrant enemies of God and his people—as is found in the Imprecatory Psalms—is consistent with the ethics of the Old Testament and finds corresponding (albeit somewhat lessened) echo in the New. This thesis is rooted (1) in the establishment of the psalms’ theology of imprecation in the very essence of the Torah—especially seen in the promise of divine vengeance expressed in the Song of Moses, the principle of divine justice outlined in the lex talionis, and the assurance of divine cursing as well as blessing articulated in the inaugural covenant of God with his people; and (2) in the presence of this theology carried, in essence, unchanged through to the end of the Christian Canon, and likewise utilized as the foundation for the infrequent imprecations in the New Testament.

Moreover, in addressing the issue of imprecations in the psalms vis-à-vis the ethics of both Old and New Testaments, certain factors were initially noted: (1) The vengeance appealed for by the pious in the Imprecatory Psalms was never personally enacted; rather the appeal was ever explicitly or implicitly addressed to God, and the realization of that vengeance was relinquished to him alone. (2) The characteristically impassioned imprecatory pleas were based on the covenant promises of God—most notable
of which are: “he who curses you, I will curse” (Gen 12:3), and “vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Deut 32:35). (3) Both testaments record examples of God’s people on earth calling down curses or crying for vengeance without any literary or theological intimation of divine disapproval at the expression of such sentiments. Rather, in their limited and appropriate circumstance, such utterances are presented as justified and commendable. Indeed, Scripture records an instance in which God’s saints in heaven, thus presumably perfected, appeal for divine vengeance in language reminiscent of certain of the Imprecatory Psalms, and are comforted by the assurance of its near enactment (Rev 6:9-11).

In addressing the issue of imprecation in the psalms in particular, and as they relate to the imprecations of the New Testament, it is important to take note of the contexts out of which such imprecations were uttered, for they were invariably of an extreme nature. Indeed, the utterance of any imprecation in the psalms comes only after the enemy’s repeated return of evil for good or after gross, vicious, or sustained injustice. The objects of the psalmists’ imprecations have characteristically displayed abuse of power, oppression of the helpless, and unthinkable and unpunishable evil. It is out of such circumstances that the plea of the righteous arises for the God of the covenant and the God of justice to make himself known.

In addition, it was observed that the essential moral principle of both testaments has remained constant, by the testimony of Christ himself. This overarching divine demand and characteristic ethic of God’s people, based upon the character and activity of God, is love: an unreserved love of God and of one’s neighbor. However, the implications latent in this latter command, in particular, are unwrapped and even
intensified in the early teachings of Christ: “love your neighbor” becomes also explicitly “love your enemies.” This is tied, in large measure, to the era of fulfillment and the transition of God’s people from a centralized to a decentralized entity. In the Old Testament, God’s people were surrounded by enemy nations: the necessity of their survival and the fulfillment of God’s promises required a prevailing posture of caution. But with the coming of Christ as the culmination of the ages and the outpouring of the Spirit as the climax of promise has come a more explicit embrace of enemy-love and enduring abuse, coupled with the opening of the nations to the gospel of grace.

In this, there is the ready recognition of a degree of difference in emphasis between the testaments: in the New Testament there is a lesser stress on imprecation and the enactment of temporal judgments combined with more frequent and explicit calls for kindness in anticipation of the eschatological judgment along with a more overt identification of fundamental enmities at the spiritual level. The New Testament evidences conspicuously fewer imprecations, and the imagery of those which exist (save, notably, the imprecatory sentiments in the Book of Revelation), are markedly muffled. The horridly explicit and characteristic calls, such as “smash their teeth in their mouths,” are largely (though not entirely) absent from the New Testament. But this degree of difference in the progress of the testaments is a difference in degree, rather than a difference in kind. In principle, “loving” and “blessing” is the dominant mood of the New Testament, as it is of the Old as well (albeit in a more subdued fashion). However, the imprecatory passages of both Old and New Testaments supplement this general tone, articulating the minor—yet complementary—ethic evidenced in instances of extremity. Indeed, the New Testament still
finds a legitimate place for imprecation, based upon the same elements as serve to justify
the imprecations in the Psalms. Thus, enemy-love and enemy-imprecation are
harmonizable tensions found through both testaments and must be properly dealt with by
God’s people in whatever dispensation they appear.

In pursuing the preceding thesis, I sought to establish the plausibility that the
sentiment expressed in the Imprecatory Psalms, in the face of sustained injustice, hardened
enmity, and gross oppression, is consistent with the ethics both of the Old and New
Testaments, while at the same time recognizing that the New Testament evidences a certain
progress in the outworking of that essentially equivalent ethic.

In the first chapter of the dissertation, I broached the nature of the problem of
the Imprecatory Psalms vis-à-vis Christian ethics: What is the reconciliation between the
graphic and prolific curses against enemies in the psalms and the Christian calls to “love
your enemies” and to “bless, and curse not”? Secondly, I noted the breadth of definition
associated with the term “imprecation” as it is found in the psalms. The Imprecatory
Psalms as a class refer to those psalms whose characterizing element is the entreaty for ill to
fall upon the enemies of God and his people, expressed in a direct or indirect appeal for
divine vengeance, including the use of what are often considered imprecations proper.
Thirdly, I sought to assuage somewhat the stigma attached to the concept of vengeance
itself; for the vengeance of God on his enemies is the necessary obverse of the deliverance
of his people from their enemies. Fourthly, due to the prevalence of imprecations in the
psalms, it was requisite to limit my inquiry for the purposes of this dissertation to three of
the most vividly harsh and notorious of the Imprecatory Psalms—each representative of one
of the three spheres of cursing found within their corpus, so that if an answer may satisfactorily be discovered for these, then an answer may appropriately be offered for all.

After addressing these introductory issues, I developed the thesis by first investigating the principal solutions proffered to explain the relation of the Imprecatory Psalms and Christian ethics, and evaluated their legitimacy in light of the Scriptures of both testaments. The Imprecatory Psalms have been chiefly explained by one of the following. (1) They are expressions of evil emotions—either to be utterly avoided or expressed to God and relinquished there. However, this position fails to account adequately for the inspiration of the Imprecatory Psalms, the profusion of such imprecations in the psalms along with the incorporation of such psalms into the canon, the prevailing piety of the psalmists and the characteristically elevated ethics promoted, the legitimacy of their utterance in light of their Old Testament theological foundations, and the presence of similar imprecations in the New Testament. (2) They evidence a morality consonant with the character of the Old Covenant but are nonetheless inconsistent with the ethos of the New Epoch. However, this position falters by overly restricting the definition of love and minimizing the fundamental ethical continuity between the testaments in the outworking of progressive revelation, and by insufficiently accounting for the enduring validity of the Abrahamic promise and the implications on trans-temporal essential ethics inherent in the unchanging character of God, along with the presence of personalized imprecations in the New Testament. (3) They are words appropriately uttered solely from the lips of Christ in relation to his work on the cross, and consequently only by his followers through him. However, this position overstates David's position and function
as the type of Christ, understates the reality of the historical situations which evoke the utterances, and evades the issue of non-Davidic Imprecatory Psalms and of non-Davidic imprecations in general. Having found these views unsatisfactory for their varying reasons, the need for a satisfactory solution remained.

I then sought to station the Imprecatory Psalms in their ancient Near Eastern context, in which cursing was an every-day facet of life. Curses were characteristically utilized in treaties, and are found in numerous burial inscriptions and incantations. In addition, in the ancient Near East the distinction was made between a legitimate curse and an illegitimate curse: the latter were found, for example, in witch’s incantations, and the former in suzerain-vassal treaties and the imprecations of the psalmists. Moreover, the fulfillment of the legitimate curse was ceded to the god under whose jurisdiction it lay or to whom appeal was made. Thus, for the faithful Israelite, the effect and fulfillment of an imprecation would depend solely on the character and activity of God.

The major focus of the dissertation entailed the exploration of the three harshest psalms of imprecation, along with an investigation into the biblical and theological foundations upon which their cries were uttered. The cries of Psalm 58 arise out of a context of societal desperation, in which those in positions of judicial authority have exploited their power for evil and their own ends, chronically and violently flaunting their position contrary to God’s righteousness. Rather than protecting the helpless under their care, they have instead persecuted and preyed upon them. The psalmist’s imprecations evidently find their motivation in the promise of divine vengeance, as classically articulated in Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses. Elements of this Song,
including the joy of the righteous at the realization of divine vengeance, are likewise carried through the canon to the end of the New Testament (e.g., Rev 15:3; 18:20; 19:1-2). Psalm 137 is sung from the context of the Babylonian exile—a religio-national exile preceded by the unspeakable horrors and cruelties of ancient siege warfare. The primary basis of its appalling beatitudes is the principle of divine justice as expressed in the lex talionis—a law not of private retaliation but of just recompense, indeed a law which serves as the basis for any civilized judicial system. This appeal for talionic justice likewise finds expression throughout the Scriptures, even to the end of the New Testament (e.g., 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 18:6). The litany of curses seen in Psalm 109 arise out of a situation of desperate need, and after the return of vicious hatred for sustained love and grave evil for sustained good. Thus, David makes appeal to the covenant promise of God, initially expressed in Genesis 12:3, with its assurance of divine cursing on those who would curse his people. And the Abrahamic promise remains tacitly intact into the New Testament as well (e.g., Gal 1:8-9; 3:6-29).

Lastly, the categorical and apparently contradictory statements of the New Testament—particularly the command of Jesus to “love your enemies” (Matt 5:44) and of Paul to “bless and curse not” (Rom 12:14)—were examined vis-à-vis the imprecations in the psalms, coupled with an attempt to account for like imprecations in the New Testament. The radical command of Christ was seen not to be in utter opposition to the requirements of the Old Testament: he came not to abolish but to fulfill (Matt 5:17). Rather, it was a startling intensification of the love command previously revealed in Leviticus 19. But Jesus explicitly broadens the designation of “neighbor” to include “enemy.” Enemy-love is
essentially the readiness to show indiscriminate kindness, patterned after the example of
the heavenly Father. Paul's blanket requirement of blessing, to the utter exclusion of
cursing, was given to reveal the characteristic Christian ethic, in the context and under the
heading of "genuine love" (Rom 12:9-21). The broader resolution of the quandary aroused
by this command in relation to the Imprecatory Psalms and even Pauline imprecations is
found in the phrase: "be quick to bless, and slow to curse." Lastly, although fewer in
frequency and generally less vivid in imagery, there are nonetheless several discrete
instances of New Testament imprecations which suffer no textual hint of divine
disparagement. Of notable first mention is the curse of Christ, near the culmination of his
ministry, against a fig tree as an evident imprecation against a faithless and fruitless Israel
which had so stubbornly rejected their Messiah (Mark 11:14). It was a curse realized in the
imminent desolation of Jerusalem. Secondly, the apostles uttered imprecations on several
occasions—the two most significant being the Pauline and Petrine curses of condemnation
on those who sought to pervert the gospel of Christ (Gal 1:8-9; Acts 8:20; directed against
the Judaizers of Galatia and Simon the Sorcerer, respectively). Finally, there is the
conspicuous presence of an impassioned appeal for divine vengeance from the lips of
martyred saints in heaven which bears a striking semblance to certain imprecations in the
psalms (Rev 6:10). The New Testament data thus speaks in two directions. (1) The ethic of
enemy-love and blessing is indeed intensified, and the implications of that ethic are more
extensively explored and applied. (2) And yet the manifest presence of justified
imprecations also insists that, in some fashion, the utterance of imprecation comports with
this elevated ethic of enemy-love and blessing (as it did in the Imprecatory Psalms).
Thus, whereas “love and blessing” is the dominant tone and characteristic ethic of the believer of both testaments, “cursing and calling for divine vengeance” is the believer’s extreme ethic—legitimately utilized in extreme circumstances, against the hardened deceitful, violent, immoral, unjust. Although Christians are called continually to seek reconciliation and practice longsuffering, forgiveness, and kindness (after the pattern of God), there comes a point in time in which justice must be enacted—whether from God directly or through his representatives (of note being the state and its judicial system). This response is likewise patterned after the example of God. For instance, the inhabitants of Canaan experienced the longsuffering of God’s grace for four hundred years, after which their “iniquity became complete” and judgment demonstratively fell. Likewise also, the Israelites of the Exodus, after repeated rebellion and unbelief, were finally barred from the Promised Land. Moreover, a similar pattern is found modeled both by Christ and by the pious in the Scriptures.

Though there are passages, particularly in the New Testament, which appear initially to contradict—and thus supercede—the “immoderate” appeal of the Imprecatory Psalms, there are also those which serve to confirm it. The frequently encountered antinomy of “loving” and “cursing” one’s enemies is mysterious, yet harmonizable; properly understood, these concepts complement rather than contradict one another. Indeed, in the Scriptures of both testaments two reactions toward enmity are exampled: the one characteristic of God and of his people, and the other evidenced in extreme instances: against sustained injustice, hardened enmity, and gross oppression. The pattern divinely exhibited is that of repeated grace; and God’s people are indeed to image him. Yet grace repeatedly
spurned impels punishment; and at such a juncture as this God’s people in both testaments— in principle— are justified in calling for divine justice and appealing to divine vengeance.