

## THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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ONE EMINENTLY TROUBLESOME PORTION of the Scriptures is the so-called "imprecatory psalms." These psalms express the desire for God's vengeance to fall on His (and His people's) enemies and include the use of actual curses, or imprecations. Such psalms naturally evoke a reaction of revulsion in many Christians. For are not Christians to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44), to "bless and not curse" (Rom. 12:14)? How then does one justify calls for the barbaric dashing of infants against a rock (Ps. 137:9) or the washing of one's "feet in the blood of the wicked" (58:10)? Are the imprecatory psalms merely a way of venting rage without really meaning it? Or is cursing enemies the Old Testament way and loving enemies the New Testament way? Has the morality of Scripture evolved? And is it in any way legitimate to use these psalms in Christian life and worship?

The imprecatory psalms have been explained as expressing (a) evil emotions, either to be avoided altogether or to be expressed and relinquished,<sup>1</sup> (b) a morality consonant with the Old Covenant

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<sup>1</sup> For the former position see C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958); and idem, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967). For the latter see Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); and idem, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's, 1986).

This position is questionable on five counts. First, it runs counter to 'the prevailing piety of the psalmists-notably David, the principal author of these psalms. Far from being a man given to rage and revenge, he was quick to exhibit a Christlike spirit toward his enemies-in particular King Saul (e.g., 1 Sam. 24). Although David, "a man after [God's] own heart" (13:14; cf. Acts 13:22), was guilty of sin (adultery, deception, and murder; 2 Sam 11), these acts did not express his pervading character, which was revealed in his repentance (Ps. 51). Therefore, if the imprecatory psalms are considered sinful, their presence in the Davidic psalms contradicts what is known of him elsewhere in Scripture. In fact even in the psalms the utterance of any imprecation comes only after the enemy's repeated return of "evil for good" (35:12-14; 109:5), or after gross (and frequently sustained) injustice (Pss. 58, 79, 137).

but inconsistent with the New,<sup>2</sup> or (c) words appropriately uttered solely from the lips of Christ, and consequently only by His followers through Him.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the purposes that govern the expression of imprecations in the psalms and the principal themes that run repeatedly through them are on the highest ethical plane. These include concern for the honor of God and for the public recognition of His sovereignty (e.g., 59:13; 74:22), concern for the realization of justice in the face of rampant injustice, along with the hope that divine retribution will cause people to seek the Lord (e.g., 58:11; 83:16), an abhorrence of sin (139:21), and a concern for the preservation of the righteous (35:1, 4).

Third, this view is contrary to the inspiration of the psalms. By the testimony of both David and David's greater Son, the psalms were written under divine inspiration (2 Sam. 23:2; Mark 12:36). And Peter's quotation from both Psalms 69 and 109—two of the most notorious of the imprecatory psalms—is introduced by the statement that these Scriptures "had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas" (Acts 1:16, italics added).

Fourth, to explain the imprecatory psalms as outbursts of evil emotion may account for the initial writing of the psalms, but it does not adequately explain why these psalms were included in the Psalter, the book of worship for God's people. Though this does not of itself demand that the things expressed therein are faultless, the sheer quantity of cries for divine vengeance in the Book of Psalms calls into question the view that they are expressing evil emotions. Nor did later copyists and compilers feel any need to expunge such material as unfitting for the Scriptures.

Fifth, this view does not adequately account for imprecations in the New Testament, notably from the lips of the Lord Himself (Mark 11:12-14, 20-21).

<sup>2</sup> For example J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (January-March 1981): 35-45; and Chalmers Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms," *Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903): 537-53. Though both are admirable treatments of this topic, their proposal inadequately accounts for the presence of imprecations in the New Testament and the enduring validity of the Abrahamic promise for church-age believers (Gal. 3:6-29). Also this view runs counter to the internal witness of Scripture and of the Lord Jesus Christ, who asserted that the two "great commandments" given in the Old Covenant are the same two "great commandments" reinforced in the New (Matt. 22:36-40). Thus from Jesus' own testimony the morality of the New Covenant in its highest expression is consistent with that of the Old (cf. Gal. 5:13-14; 6:2; Rom. 13:8-10; 1 John 4:20-21). Moreover, Martin's assertion that the progress of revelation fundamentally alters the Christian's stance toward the enemies of God, since the "distinction between the sin and the sinner was impossible to David as an Old Testament saint" (ibid., 548) insufficiently characterizes the broader theology of Scripture. There it is not only "love the sinner but hate the sin," but also paradoxically "love the sinner but hate the sinner" (cf. Ps. 5:4-6 and 139:19, 21-22 with Matt. 5:44-45). For even according to the New Testament, sinners—not just sin—will be destroyed, suffering the eternal torment of hell (e.g., Mark 9:47-48). See the observations of John L. McKenzie, "The Imprecations of the Psalter," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 111 (1944): 91-93.

<sup>3</sup> For example James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A Bonhoeffer Sermon," trans. Daniel Bloesch, ed. F. Burton Nelson, *Theology Today* 38 (1982): 465-71; and idem, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, trans. James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970). This view is based on the function of David in Scripture as both the genetic and typological forerunner of Christ. In response, however, this scriptural portrayal of David is not meant to disassociate David's words and actions from his person in history. In fact

This article proposes that the imprecatory psalms have a place in the New Testament church by establishing (a) that they root their theology of cursing, of crying out for God's vengeance, in the Torah--principally in the promise of divine vengeance expressed in the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1-43), the principle of divine justice outlined in the *lex talionis* (e.g., 19:16-21), and the assurance of divine cursing as well as blessing in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:2-3); and (b) that this theology is carried largely unchanged through the Scriptures to the end of the New Testament (Rev. 15:2-4; 18:20), thus buttressing its applicability to believers today.

Though some New Testament passages seem to contradict the cry of the imprecatory psalms, other verses confirm it. The tension between "loving" and "cursing" can be harmonized, and must be properly dealt with by God's people in whatever dispensation they are found. As the character of God does not change, so the essence of God's ethical requirements does not change. Therefore, as the imprecatory psalms were at times appropriate on the lips of Old Testament believers, so they are at times appropriate on the lips of New Testament believers as well. Moreover, whereas love and blessing are the characteristic ethic of believers of both testaments, cursing and calling for divine vengeance are their extreme ethic and may be voiced in extreme circumstances, against hardened, deceitful, violent, immoral, unjust sinners. Although Christians must continually seek reconciliation and practice longsuffering, forgiveness, and kindness, times come when justice must be enacted--whether from God directly or through His representatives (in particular, the state and judicial system; Rom. 13:1-4).

But how can it be right for Christians to cry out for divine vengeance and violence,<sup>4</sup> as in the imprecatory psalms? Several

delaying these Davidic psalms of imprecation until the cross of Christ and distancing them from their historical setting and speaker robs them of both their immediate and archetypal significance and power. Neither does it answer the imprecations or cries for divine vengeance in the non-Davidic psalms or in other parts of Scripture--including both testaments. If such are deemed morally legitimate elsewhere, then this proposal offers no genuine solution to the issue of imprecation in the Psalms or in general.

<sup>4</sup> The central issue of divine vengeance presents a problem partly because the promise of such vengeance forms much of the basis on which the psalmists voiced their cries of cursing and partly because of the concept of vengeance itself. To people today the word "vengeance" bears sinful and negative connotations. But to the ancient Israelites the concept of vengeance was tied to the requirements of justice: Where justice was trampled, vengeance was required. Furthermore God's vengeance is inseparably linked to His lovingkindness; it is the other side of His compassion, the (perhaps inevitably) "dark side" of His mercy (Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 62). The Scriptures unequivocally attest that Yahweh has passionately and decisively taken sides for His people in history. He delivers His people; but without

observations from Scripture address this question. First, the vengeance appealed for is not personally enacted; rather God is called on to execute vengeance. Second, these appeals are based on God's covenant promises, most notable of which are these: "The one who curses you, I will curse" (Gen. 12:3), and "I will render vengeance on My adversaries, and I will repay those who hate Me" (Deut. 32:41). And since God has given these promises, His people are not wrong in petitioning Him to fulfill those promises. Third, both testaments record examples of God's people justly calling down curses or crying for vengeance, without any intimation that God disapproved of such sentiments. Fourth, Scripture further records an instance in which God's people in heaven, where there is no sin, cry out for divine vengeance and are comforted by the assurance of its near enactment (Rev. 6:9-11). Since these martyred saints are presumably perfected, their entreaty should not be considered wrong.

Though the Book of Psalms includes almost one hundred verses with imprecations,<sup>5</sup> this article discusses three representative psalms: Psalm 58, an imprecation against a societal enemy; Psalm 137, an imprecation against a national or community enemy; and Psalm 109, an imprecation against a personal enemy. Notably these three psalms contain the harshest language or most severe imprecations against the enemies.

## PSALM 58

### CURSE AGAINST A SOCIETAL ENEMY

In Psalm 58 who is being cursed and what kind of people are they? First, the objects of David's imprecations were the rulers or "judges" within the community--those who were responsible for seeing that justice is properly meted out. This psalm is framed by an ironic inclusion of judicial terms and ideas. The human "you judge" (v. 1) contrasts with the divine "who judges" (v. 11); the hu-

God's vengeance against His enemies, there can be no deliverance for His people (Isa. 35:4; 63:3-4).

<sup>5</sup> The passages in the Psalms that contain imprecations include at least these: 5:10; 6:10; 7:6, 9, 15-16; 9:19-20; 10:15; 17:13; 28:4; 31:17-18; 35:1, 4-6, 8, 19, 24-26; 40:14-15; 52:5; 54:5; 55:9, 15; 56:7; 58:6-10; 59:5, 11-13; 68:1-2, 30; ( 69:22-25, 27-28; 70:2-3; 71:13; 74:11, 22-23; 79:6, 10, 12; 83:9, 11, 13-18; 94:1-2; 104:35; 109:6-15, 17-20, 29; 129:5-8; 137:7-9; 139:19, 21-22; 140:8-11; 141:10; and 143:1.2-a total of ninety-eight verses in thirty-two psalms. However, fourteen psalms may be rightly deemed "imprecatory" (i.e., their characterizing element is imprecations or cries for divine vengeance): Psalms 7, 35, 52, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137, and 140.

man "gods" (v. 1)<sup>6</sup> with the true "God" (v. 11); the lack of human justice "on earth" (v. 2) with the hope of divine justice "on earth" (v. 11); and the human perversion of "righteousness" (v. 1) with the divine vindication of the "righteous" (v. 11).

Second, these individuals are described as unjust, whereas justice should pervade (vv. 1-2), and they are chronically dishonest (v. 3), ferociously violent (vv. 2, 6), and stubbornly wicked and deadly (vv. 3-5). Thus this psalm calls down God's vengeance not on occasional transgressors of God's laws, who harmed out of ignorance or whose abuses were casual rather than premeditated and repetitive, but on those who chronically and violently flaunted their position contrary to God's righteousness.<sup>7</sup> They held positions of governing, legislative, or judicial authority, and they exploited their power for evil and their own ends.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The identity of these "gods" as leaders in the land is supported by a number of textual factors. First, the inclusio of verses 1 and 11 unifies the psalm. Second, in verse 1 the vocative "O sons of men" parallels "O gods." Third, mention of the "wicked" follows in verse 3 and in the same vein as verse 1, suggesting that the two groups are to be equated. Fourth, the "wicked" are manifestly human--they are born (v. 3) and they bleed (v. 10). Fifth, in verse 1 the "gods" are confronted with a crime of speaking, as are the "wicked" in verse 3. Sixth, the "gods," if distinct from the "wicked," mysteriously disappear from the text and escape unscathed; however, if the "gods" are equated with the "wicked," then they do receive their due punishment. See David P. Wright, "Blown Away Like a Bramble: The Dynamics of Analogy in Psalm 58," *Revue biblique* 103 (1996): 219. Cf. Psalm 82 and John 10:34-35.

<sup>7</sup> F. G. Hibbard notes an enlightening illustration in this regard, which occurred in his family: "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" (*The Psalms Chronologically Arranged, with Historical Introductions; and a General Introduction to the Whole Book*, 5th ed. [New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856], 120).

<sup>8</sup> The venom of this psalm is reserved for those who, when they should be protecting the helpless under their care, instead prey on them. Jesus also used harsh language against people such as this. Speaking against the religious leaders of His day, He warned, "Watch out for the teachers of the law.... They devour widows' houses.... Such men will be punished most severely" (Mark 12:38, 40, NIV). It is important to emphasize here that David himself did not seek to exact revenge; he appealed to the God of vengeance. See Roy B. Zuck, "The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1957), 67-70, 74-75.

Thus by vivid imagery and simile David appealed to Yahweh to render these injurious "gods" powerless and even to destroy them if need be (vv. 6-8). The realization of this longed-for vengeance would vindicate and comfort the righteous who had suffered so grievously and would establish Yahweh as the manifest and supreme Judge of the earth (vv. 10-11). For with the prevalence of such societal evil, the honor of God and the survival of His faithful were at stake. The joy of the righteous at the bloody vengeance of God (v. 10) is to be understood against this background.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this expression of exultation over the destruction of the enemies of God and His people is seen throughout Scripture. It begins in the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:43), finds utterance in the Psalms (Ps. 58:10), is proclaimed in the prophets (Jer. 51:48), and climaxes in the Book of Revelation (18:20).

## THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The Pentateuch is the foundational revelation of God not only because it was given first but; also because much of biblical theology is present there in germinal form and then is developed more fully in succeeding portions of Scripture. Not surprisingly, then, the imprecatory psalms base their theology of imprecation in the Torah. And here the principal basis on which David uttered his heated cries for divine vengeance is the covenantal promise of divine vengeance--a promise given its initial and classic articulation in Deuteronomy 32, the "Song of Moses."

In two major elements it is likely that Psalm 58 alludes to the

<sup>9</sup> But how could David--or now, a Christian--pray in such hideous terms? Two points may be noted in response to this question. First, what is voiced here is poetry, and biblical poetry often uses vivid imagery. Where a concept in narrative form may be described dispassionately, in poetry it may well be expressed emotively. H. G. L. Peels perceives that the phraseology of Psalm 58:10b, which seems "so offensive to modern ears, simply intends to employ a powerful image, borrowed from the all too realistic situation of the battlefield following the fight (wading through the blood), to highlight the total destruction of the godless" (*The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* [Leiden: Brill, 1995], 218; cf. Ps. 68:21-23). Moreover, much of Scripture's "immoderate" language is heard from the lips of Jesus Christ Himself. Second, passionate rhetoric naturally and rightly arises out of extreme circumstances. Here in Psalm 58 the invectives hurled one after the other serve to express both the psalmist's sincere desire and, his sense of outrage at the flagrant violations of justice. John Calvin commented 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 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" (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson [reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 2:378).

latter half of the Song of Moses.<sup>10</sup> First, the context out of which David spoke is that of powerlessness in the face of oppression, and he cried out in confidence to God, who could act decisively on behalf of His defeated people. This element runs strongly through the final verses of Deuteronomy 32. When all the power (literally, "hand") 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 draws His sword with His hand to bring vengeance on His enemies (v. 41).

Second, similar words and concepts exist between the two passages. In Psalm 58 David taunted the unjust "gods" (v. 1), asserting that indeed "there is a God who judges on earth" (v. 11); and in Deuteronomy 32 Yahweh taunted the pagan gods (v. 37), asserting that "He alone is God" (v. 39) and that He is the God of justice (v. 4). David likened the wicked oppressors to the venom (non) of a snake and a deaf cobra (זָהָב, Ps. 58:4); and in Deuteronomy 32 Yahweh promised that one of the evils He would heap on His rebellious people would be such venom (תַּמָּת, v. 24).<sup>11</sup> Then later Moses associated the persecutors of God's people with the imagery of venomous (תַּמָּת) serpents and deadly (פְּתָנִים, cobras v. 33). In Psalm 58:10 bloody vengeance is longed for, while in Deuteronomy 32:41-43 graphically bloody vengeance is promised. And in the hope of its realization the righteous are said to "rejoice" (v. 43; Ps. 58:10).<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, this promise of divine vengeance found in Deuteronomy 32 is central to the theology and hope of both testaments of Scripture. It is carried from the Law through the Prophets and the Psalms into the New Testament. Indeed Deuteronomy 32:35 is quoted by the apostle Paul in his discussion of New Testament ethics (Rom. 12:19).<sup>13</sup> And 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 Song of Moses to "avenge the blood of His servants"

<sup>10</sup> Compare also Psalm 79:5-10 with Deuteronomy 32:21-43.

<sup>11</sup> Although this refers ostensibly to a curse of literal snakes, the psalmist borrowed the imagery and used it metaphorically, as even the Song of Moses did in verse 33.

<sup>12</sup> Although the verb *p7* in Deuteronomy 32:43 differs from the verb *not?* in Psalm 58:10, the two are related and are poetically synonymous (cf. Ps. 32:11).

<sup>13</sup> Christians are called to seek the benefit of those who hate them (Rom. 12:14), but when grace is repeatedly spurned, divine vengeance is assured (v. 19; cf. the use of such imagery in Ps. 140:9-10).

(Deut. 32:43). 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 14:19-20, the saints in glory are said to sing "the Song of Moses" and "the Song of the Lamb" (15:3)--a song that proclaims the greatness of God's justice and the consequent worship to arise from the nations (cf. Deut. 32:43). And in the judgments that will occur against eschatological Babylon (reminiscent of Jer. 51:48) comes the call to "rejoice" at this execution of divine retribution (Rev. 18:20).

## PSALM 137

### CURSE AGAINST A NATIONAL OR COMMUNITY ENEMY

Psalm 137 has been understandably styled "the 'psalm of violence' par excellence."<sup>14</sup> Verses 8-9 in particular have been called "the ironical 'bitter beatitudes,'" whose sentiment is "the very reverse of true religion," and "among the most repellant words in scripture."<sup>15</sup> Disturbed by such wishes in the psalm, many Christians have rejected its last three verses altogether as being inappropriate for New Testament believers. Others, in an attempt to maintain the psalmist's piety and that of others who would haltingly echo these words and to avoid the violence inherent in the text have suggested that these words be interpreted allegorically.<sup>16</sup>

However, the psalm's historical context argues against these interpretations. This communal lament is sung from the context of the Babylonian exile--an exile preceded by the horrors of ancient siege warfare. Jerusalem's demise at the hands of the pitiless Babylonians, goaded on by the treacherous Edomites (Obad. 10-16), 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, and the temple of Yahweh. All those things that had rooted Israel's identity as a nation and as the people of God had been either demolished or uprooted.

Siege warfare in the ancient Near East; was frighteningly cruel; and the most brutal and all-too-common practice of conquerors was the dashing of infants against rocks in the fury and totality

<sup>14</sup> Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 46.

<sup>15</sup> R. E. O. White, *A Christian Handbook to the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 200.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 136.

of war's carnage (2 Kings 8:12; 1,15:16). This barbarous slaughter of the most helpless of noncombatants "effected total destruction by making war upon the next generation."<sup>17</sup> The Scriptures make further use of this gruesome picture in judgment oracles against Israel (Hos. 13:15), Jerusalem (Luke 19:44), and Assyria (Nah. 3:10). And most notably this fate is also promised to Babylon (Isa. 13:16).

The abrupt and appalling shriek in Psalm 137:7-9, then, is essentially the "passionate outcry of the powerless demanding justice!"<sup>18</sup> In the face of humanly unpunishable injustice God's chastised people had no other recourse but to turn to Him. And it is to Him that their appeal for strict retaliation in both kind and degree is made and surrendered. But does even this historical background prepare the reader for or justify the sentiment expressed in the emotional climax of the psalm? Indeed these verses raise the question with which the faithful, of both testaments must surely grapple: How could a pious psalmist cry for such violence and revenge that he would call "blessed" those who take up enemy infants and dash them mercilessly against the rocks?

## THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The basis on which the psalmist pleaded for such horrid retribution, though interlaced with extreme emotion, is not the vicious fury of bloodthirsty revenge but the principle of divine justice itself, particularly as it is expressed in the so-called *lex talionis*, stated three times in the Pentateuch (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 fit the crime. Thus rather than being a primitive and barbaric code, this Old Testament statute forms the basis for all civilized justice. It was a law of just recompense,<sup>19</sup> not of private retaliation.<sup>20</sup> Indeed the implementation

<sup>17</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 237. This action serves as a macabre illustration of the depth of human depravity. Sin always destroys, and destroys mercilessly.

<sup>18</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 47.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon J. Wenham observes that the phrase's "eye for an eye" and "tooth for a tooth" were 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)" (*The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the

of this law was in a judicial rather than a personal context.<sup>21</sup>

In addition the psalmist; was probably familiar with the recent prophecy of Jeremiah 50-51 for in both Psalm 137:8 and Jeremiah 51:56 the words "destroy," "recompense," and "repay" occur in relation to the expected judgment against brutal Babylon. Moreover, riot only was the *lex talionis* instituted by God Himself in Israel's law code, but also it was a law "based upon the very nature of God. Yahweh, although a God of love, is also a God of retribution who deals with His creature's trespasses against His holiness on the basis of His retributive justice."<sup>22</sup> This is seen most clearly and poignantly in the necessity of the Cross. Since the nature of God does not change, the principle of divine justice based on that nature, as encased in the *lex talionis*, must also remain constant.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore in Psalm 137:7-9 the psalmist asked Yahweh for exact recompense against the treacherous Edomites and the merciless Babylonians--utter destruction by means of the violent slaughter of the enemy's infants.<sup>24</sup> The cry was for a punishment commensurate with the crime committed. The one who would carry out such justice was called "blessed" (vv. 8-9), for through him 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 are to be received with a measure of sober rejoicing. Indeed, this rejoicing is commanded at the future devastation of

Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 312 [italics his]).

<sup>20</sup> By Jesus' day the *lex talionis*, contrary to its intent, 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 Matthew 5:38-42, however, were given to "shock" His followers back to the original intent of the law, not by explaining its proper use as such, but by prohibiting its perversion--any "rights" of private retaliation--and by inculcating an attitude of longsuffering (see Prov. 20:22; 24:29; Matt. 7:12).

<sup>21</sup> Of the three instances Deuteronomy 19:16-21 makes this most explicit.

<sup>22</sup> Bobby J. Gilbert, "An Exegetical and Theological Study of Psalm 137" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981), 69 (italics his).

<sup>23</sup> The similar "law of sowing and reaping" is evident in several passages (Prov. 26:27; Hos. 8:7; 10:12-13; Gal. 6:7--8), and in Jesus' words, "By your standard of measure it will be measured to you" (Matt. 7:2).

<sup>24</sup> But was this appeal legitimate in light of God's command that children not be put to death for the sins of their fathers (Deut. 24:16)? In answer 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 on the children (Exod. 34:7; cf. God's command for the annihilation of the entire populace of Canaan at the entry of its people there). God has rights that people do not have, for only He is God. Harsh though His justice may appear, believers are called to trust His goodness in the midst of His justice and to accept any concomitant tensions.

Babylon according to the *lex talionis* (Rev. 18:6, 20; cf. Jer. 51:48). Thus the psalmist appealed Yahweh as the Judge to mete out justice according to His own edict. Though Christians in particular are shocked by the request, it falls within the bounds of divine jurisprudence and is divinely promised and divinely enacted. So the principle of judicial retaliation cannot be maligning without at the same time maligning the character of God.

But can Christians legitimately and in good conscience echo this cry? Although Allen insists that the "Christian faith teaches a new way, the pursuit of forgiveness and a call to love," he perceptively asks, "Yet is there forgiveness for a Judas (cf. John 17:12) or for the Antichrist?"<sup>25</sup> As Edom and Babylon were ancient examples of the Antichrist, as were Judas and false teachers in the first century of this era, times may come in which believers may join with their brothers and sisters of past ages and appeal for the devastation of a current manifestation of "Antichrist"--and in language appropriate to the offense. These words may certainly be offered for brothers and sisters in, for example, the Sudan who have experienced widespread rape, murder, mutilation, and enslavement at the hands of a wicked regime. In such circumstances of horrible brutality, where there is the very real temptation to "forget" (Ps. 137:5) or abandon the faith for the sake of one's life and comfort, Psalm 137 appeals to God, the sole source of power in the midst of powerlessness and of hope in the midst of hopelessness.

## PSALM 109

### CURSE AGAINST A PERSONAL ENEMY

This psalm, above all others, has been severely criticized. For example it has been styled "as unabashed a hymn of hate as was ever written."<sup>26</sup> Unquestionably "this is one of the hard places of Scripture, a passage which the soul trembles to read."<sup>27</sup> The yearning for such detailed and appalling retaliation as is found in this psalm is vividly confrontational--particularly in light of the commands to "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44) and to "bless and curse not" (Rom. 12:14). Indeed David<sup>28</sup> imprecated his enemy in a manner starkly

<sup>25</sup> Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 242.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 118.

<sup>27</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (reprint [7 vols. in 31, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 2:436.

<sup>28</sup> By whom were the vehement curses of verses 6-19 voiced--David or his enemy? In modern treatments of the psalm verses 6-19 are often put in quotation marks, as

reminiscent of certain ancient Near Eastern curse formulas.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore this psalm has been sorely misused in the life of the broader Christian community. Calvin records the reprehensible abuse of this psalm in his day in which some people prayed for the death of others in return for a price.<sup>30</sup>

The issue that spawned the denunciations of David was no petty or transient matter. His enemies had returned hatred for his sustained love, and evil for his sustained good (Ps. 109:4-5; cf. J35:11-15, 19; 38:19-20). David was in desperate need (109:16, 22, 31) and had already shown concern for his enemy. However, this concern had been spurned and returned with repeated enmity. Moreover, even in the midst of the enemy's litigations and David's counter imprecations he expressed a measure of concern for the enemy in his prayers (109:4). In light of his enemy's appalling lack of lovingkindness, climaxing in his abuse of the legal system (vv. 2-7, 31), David resorted to his only remaining recourse for rectification.<sup>31</sup>

the words of David's enemy uttered against him. If this is correct, then the offense of the psalm is largely alleviated and a moral dilemma avoided (but this does nothing to alleviate the offense of other imprecatory psalms; cf. also the striking parallel to 109:6-19 in Jer. 18:19-23). This view is not without support. Principally first, whereas 109:6-19 castigates the enemy in the singular, the verses that both precede and follow present the enemy in the plural. And second, the psalms are known to make frequent use of unintroduced quotations, whether brief (e.g., 22:8; 137:3) or lengthy (e.g., 50:7-15).

However, the difficulties with this view outweigh the apparent support. First, whereas the use of nonexplicitly introduced quotations is common in the psalms, they are in general contextually quite clear and readily recognized as such. This is not the case in Psalm 109. Second, the change from the plural to the singular, and back again, is not unknown in the psalms, notably Psalm 55. There this literary phenomenon is utilized by David to single out the crucial element of enmity against him—a friend turned traitor. And this same convention may be at work in Psalm 109 as well. Third, the designation "afflicted and needy," a key phrase synonymous with the pious in the Psalms, is used in both verses 16 and 22, in what appears to be an intentional verbal and emotional tie between the two. Fourth, the exclamations in verses 16-18 (e.g., he "loved cursing," v. 17) are certainly not true of David; even his enemies would find it difficult to label this man in such language. And fifth, this view runs counter to Peter's application of the imprecation in 109:8 as the words of David regarding Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:16, 20). See also Zuck, "The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 42-44.

<sup>29</sup> Psalm 109:18, "So may it enter into his body like water, and into his bones like oil" (author's translation), is redolent of this imprecation embedded in the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon: "[As oil en]ters 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).

<sup>30</sup> John Calvin, "Commentary on the Book of Psalms," trans. James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:276

<sup>31</sup> James 5:1-6 speaks in a similar caustic manner against the rich who had exploited their workers and manipulated the court system to condemn the innocent for

David asked the divine Judge to extend to his enemy the demands of the *lex talionis*.<sup>32</sup> And again, although a known personal enemy<sup>33</sup> was imprecated, David did not react in private revenge, as might be expected in such a circumstance. Instead, he released the retaliatory demands of justice to the One in whose jurisdiction it rightfully lies. He voiced his cry for vengeance to God (vv. 21, 26-29)--a cry that would transform to public praise when divine deliverance was realized (vv. 30-31). Such is the nature of God's acts; vengeance on His enemies means salvation for His people.

## THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

But if Psalm 109 includes the curses of David against a personal enemy, how can these words be justified, particularly the curse passed down to the enemy's children (vv. 10-15)? In addition to the principle expressed in the *lex talionis*, the basis on which David could justifiably call down such terrible curses was the promise of God to curse those who cursed His people: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses [from קלל] you I will curse [from אָרַךְ]" (Gen. 12:3). The Abrahamic Covenant, of which this promise is a part, assured God's blessing on those who would bless Abraham's faith-descendants and cursing on those who would treat them with contempt.<sup>34</sup> David, then, appealed to God to do as He had promised, to curse those who had so mistreated him.<sup>35</sup>

their own gain. Although not identical to the character of the imprecatory psalms, verses 1-11 do reveal a similar ethic, namely, that it is appropriate at times for the righteous to proclaim, cry out for, or even call down the judgment of God on severe or violent oppressors, while at the same time remaining steadfast in suffering, relinquishing the enactment of that judgment to the divine Judge.

<sup>32</sup> Psalm 109:2a is answered by verses 6a and 7a; verse 4a is answered by verses 6b and 20a; verse 16a mirrors verse 12a; verse 16b corresponds to the curses in verses 8-12; verses 17-18 exhibit point and counterpoint; and verse 18a is paralleled by the plea in verse 29a. The imprecations wished on the enemy in verses 8-15 characterize the crimes the enemy himself had committed (vv. 16-20).

<sup>33</sup> Other psalms that were voiced against known--and even named--personal enemies are 7, 52, 54, 56, and 59.

<sup>34</sup> Laney argues that the cries for judgment in the imprecatory psalms uttered in accord with the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant, "are appeals for Yahweh to carry out His judgment against those who would curse the nation" ("A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 42 [italics added]). As such, they are "inappropriate for a church-age believer" to express (ibid.). However, the emphasis in the Abrahamic Covenant of Genesis 12:2-3 is not so much on the nation Israel as it is on all the people of God. This is made clear not only in Galatians 3, but also in the curses of the Sinaitic Covenant promised against rebellious Israel. The faith of Abraham, not the nation Israel, is the cardinal mark of identity (Rom. 2:28-29; Gen. 12--22).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Exodus 23:22. The Hittite treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub includes a similar prescription: "With my friend you shall be friend, and with my en-

Literary echoes of Genesis 12:3 occur in Psalm 109. Most directly, in verse 28 the enemy's cursing (from לָלַץ) is contrasted with Yahweh's blessing (cf. vv. 1.7-18). In addition David's imprecations allude to earlier cursing formulas in the Mosaic Covenant (which builds on the Abrahamic Covenant). For instance verse 9, "Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow," makes explicit appeal to talionic justice in harking back to the words of Yahweh to the Israelites in Exodus 22:22-23, "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless" (cf. Deut. 27:19). In essence David was reminding God to be true to His promise.

But is this covenant promise of divine cursing relevant to Christians? The New Testament affirms the enduring validity of the Abrahamic promise for those who embrace Christ through faith (cf. Gal. 3:6-29). "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants-heirs according to promise" (v. 29). And if one is an heir of the Abrahamic Covenant, one inherits both its promise of blessing as well as its promise of cursing.<sup>36</sup> This dual-edged promise, moreover, was not merely a spiritual abstraction; it applied as well to the physical life of God's people in their times of extremity. For example, when Jesus first sent out the Twelve, He instructed them that if they were welcomed into a home, they were to let their peace remain on it; 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.<sup>37</sup> This action, though voiceless, was an implicit imprecation (Matt. 10:11-15; cf. 2 Tim. 4:14).

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 (cf. Luke 18:1-8). In its function in the community of faith, then, this psalm is the cry of the child of God who has no other recourse for justice—when no other aid is available for the

emy you shall be enemy" (James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969], 204).

<sup>36</sup> Although Paul articulated the blessing of the covenant, which the Gentiles inherit through faith in Christ, as that of life, of sonship, of the Spirit (Gal. 3:14, 26; 4:4-7), this was not meant to exclude the more "physical" elements of the Abrahamic Covenant. Rather, it was for the sake of emphasizing the fundamental issues of the promise in the progress of revelation—which issues are most germane to his argument here.

<sup>37</sup> That is, God (through His disciples) would bless those who blessed them, and would curse those who cursed them (cf. Gen. 12:3).

redress of grievous personal wrongs, when the abuses of one's enemies have reached the extent that the question of theodicy is evoked, when the name of God and the enduring faith of His people are at stake. From such a context this prayer was first offered, and in such a context it may be voiced again.<sup>38</sup>

## IMPRECATIONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

After such a barrage of imprecations and pleas for divine vengeance against one's enemies (who are also God's enemies), the demands of Jesus and His apostles are at first startling. These injunctions initially seem to counter and even overthrow the ethics of that "harsher age" as expressed in the imprecatory psalms. However, the New Testament too is interspersed with imprecations.

## APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), that grounding expression of Christian ethics, He commanded His followers, "Love your enemies" (5:44). Matthew 5:17-48 is replete with radical statements that seem to contradict the Old Testament; yet these contradictions are more apparent than real. Jesus introduced His several internalized and intensified "restatements" with the words, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (v. 17). He did not set Himself up as a rival to the Old Testament; He did not disparage or discredit what had come before. Rather, the Old Testament propelled people toward Christ, is summed up in Christ, and must be interpreted through Christ (cf. Luke 24:27, 44-45; John 5:39-40, 46).

In Matthew 5:21-47<sup>39</sup> Jesus affirmed the Old Testament by reiterating by means of hyperbole the original intent of several commands, contrary to the prevailing pharisaical and scribal understanding of them. This He did by plunging to the heart of the matter--the intent and implications of the commands, climaxed by His words in verses 43-45, 48. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so

<sup>38</sup> Walter Brueggemann suggests that the cry of this psalm could be, for example, "the voice of a woman who is victimized by rape, who surely knows the kind of rage and indignation and does not need 'due process' to know the proper outcome.... For such as these, the rage must be carried to heaven, because there is no other court of appeal. 'Love of neighbor' surely means to go to court with the neighbor who is grieved" (*The Message of the Psalms*, 87).

<sup>39</sup> These restatements of Christ are framed by an inclusio of "impossible righteousness" (5:20, 48)--a reminder that the demands of God are impossible apart from divine enabling and may be truly obeyed only by relying on God and His grace.

that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.... Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Jesus' words "You shall love your neighbor" are a quotation from Leviticus 19:18-words that come directly after a prohibition against revenge or a personal grudge, and that are considered the second greatest commandment by Jesus' own testimony (Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31). The words "hate your enemy," however, are not found in the Old Testament. Yet there is a likely representation of the mindset behind this quotation in the Rule of the Qumran Community (1QS).<sup>40</sup> Apparently many people in Jesus' day had come to believe that when the Old Testament commanded the love of one's neighbor, that command implied the hatred of one's enemy. This understanding is given expression in the apocryphal book of Sirach 12:7, "Give to the good man, but do not help the sinner."<sup>41</sup>

When Jesus said, "Love your enemies," He shockingly asserted the unthinkable: that believers are to "love" those they "hate" (or who hate them). This does not discount that they are yet one's enemy; but in a sense one's enemy becomes his neighbor.<sup>42</sup> Even in Leviticus 19 "neighbor" is broader than its immediate parallel, "brother," and it includes everyone within one's bounds (even resident aliens, who were in some sense "the enemy"). In Leviticus 19 both fellow Israelites and resident foreigners were to be loved in like manner--"as yourself" (vv. 19:18, 34).<sup>43</sup> Jesus, then, rather

<sup>40</sup> This document begins with the resolve of the members "to love all the Sons of Light--each according to his lot in the counsel of God, and to hate all the Sons of Darkness--each according to his guilt at the vengeance of God" (1QS 1:9-11). This hatred was such that it involved even the withholding of compassion from the (1QS 10:20-21) (James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Rule of the Community and Related Documents*, vol. 1 of *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994], 6-7, 46-47).

<sup>41</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version*, expanded ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 143.

<sup>42</sup> In Matthew 5:43-48 Jesus defined "enemy" in such a way as to include both those who are foes in the customary politico-national sense, but also those against whom enmity may exist among one's own people (who in Lev. 19:18 are considered one's "neighbor"). Indeed this latter element is His point of emphasis. Also in the introduction to and parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, Jesus expanded the concept of "neighbor." In this parable Jesus emphasized that the heart of the command "Love your neighbor" implies, at least to a certain extent, "love your enemy." One's "neighbor" may be his "enemy"; for the one who is in need, and whose need may be met, is one's neighbor--whoever he may be. And this expression of indiscriminate kindness is essentially "love" in action.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," with verse 34

than presenting a novel (or imposing even a foreign) interpretation on the passage, was both distilling and radicalizing the essence of the Old Testament teaching in this regard.

In addition, in certain instances the Old Testament unquestionably commands kindness toward enemies. For example Proverbs 25:21-22 states, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you."<sup>44</sup> And this command was carried out by Elisha, who counseled the Israelite king to feed rather than kill the enemy Arameans (2 Kings 6:18-23), and by Naaman's Israelite slave girl, who sought the welfare of her enemy master, the Aramean army commander (5:1-3). While it must be granted that the specific command "love your enemies" is not in the Old Testament,<sup>45</sup> the concept "cannot be confined to the words themselves. When enemies are fed and cared for, rather than killed or mistreated, then in effect love for the enemy is being practiced."<sup>46</sup>

However, how can a Christian love his enemies while he voices such barbaric pleas as expressed in the imprecatory psalms? In extreme circumstances even Jesus did not shirk from uttering excoriating woes (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24; 23:13-39)<sup>47</sup> and pronouncing imprecations (Mark 11:12-14, 20-21)--all against hardened unbelief. Yet one cannot accuse Him of acting out of accord with His own radical dictum.<sup>48</sup> By Jesus' own example love for one's enemy

"and you shall love him [the foreigner in your midst] as yourself." Verse 34 includes the foreigner who may also be an enemy (cf. Lev. 19:33 and Exod. 23:9, in which the natural reaction to such a foreigner would be "mistreatment" and "oppression," and Exod. 23:22-23, in which God specified which enemy nations were to be destroyed when the Israelites entered Canaan).

<sup>44</sup> Paul quoted Proverbs 25:22 in Romans 12:20 (cf. also Exod. 23:4-5).

<sup>45</sup> Zuck, "The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 76.

<sup>46</sup> William Klassen, *Love of Enemies* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 28. As is repeatedly illustrated in Scripture, loving one's enemies is shown primarily by deeds of kindness to them.

<sup>47</sup> Though not identical to imprecation, the cry of "woe" in the ancient Near East bore a measure of semantic overlap--and in certain contexts it took on "all the characteristics of a curse" (Waldemar Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972], 3). See also Zechariah 11:17 and Luke 6:20-26.

<sup>48</sup> The ultimate expression of enemy love, and of blessing those who persecute and curse, are the words Jesus Himself voiced from the cross--the height of human cruelty--regarding the ones who had nailed him there: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). This may be compared to the creative tension in the differing responses to degrees of enmity Paul wrote about. Of Alexander, a hardened enemy of Paul and the gospel, the apostle solemnly affirmed,

means showing him or her sustained and indiscriminate kindness. However, if the enemy's cup of iniquity has become full, this love is overtaken by the demands of justice and divine vengeance. Jesus' approach in this regard was strikingly similar to the approach of the psalmists who penned such harsh words. Notable among them is David, who showed kindness toward those who were his enemies, and for his repeated kindness received abuse (Pss. 35:12-17; 109:4-5). In the broader view, then, rather than being completely incompatible, enemy love and enemy imprecation strangely complement each other.<sup>49</sup> And the imprecatory psalms illustrate the appropriate time for the cry of vengeance.

### INSTANCES OF IMPRECATION

An instance of imprecation from Jesus' lips is recorded in Mark 11:14. On the way to the temple courts He cursed a fig tree that had all the appearance of vitality but no fruit. As both the near context and the larger development of the Gospel make clear (Mark 11-13), this cursing of the fig tree was an imprecation against faithless and fruitless Israel, who had so stubbornly rejected Him.<sup>50</sup> This rejection culminated in the Crucifixion, and Christ's imprecation climaxed in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The curse of Christ marks the distinct end of one era and the beginning of another: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" (11:14; cf. Matt. 21:19). Immediately following His curse Christ moved into the temple precincts where, in lieu of the expected pu-

"The Lord will repay him according to his deeds" (2 Tim. 4:14), whereas concerning those who had abandoned Paul in his time of trial and need he pleaded, "May it not be counted against them" (v. 16)--reminiscent of the dying words of the Lord Jesus.

<sup>49</sup> The resolution is found in the phrase: "Be quick to bless and slow to curse." Just as God is slow to anger (Exod. 34:6; Nah. 1:3), so too believers should be slow to anger (James 1:19). Yet in extreme circumstances God expressed anger (Nah. 1:2; Mark 3:5), and so in extreme circumstances believers may express anger without sinning (Eph. 4:26).

<sup>50</sup> In the Old Testament the fig tree was frequently associated with the nation Israel. When fruitful, it betokened divine blessing on Israel; yet when withered, it served as "a vivid emblem of God's active punishment of his people" (William R. Telford., *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree: A Redaction-critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig-tree Pericope in Mark's Gospel and Its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1980], 135 [italics his]). In certain passages, moreover, God's judgment against Israel's fig trees is associated with her rabid idolatry and perversion of worship. Of particular note is Hosea 9:10-17, in which Yahweh spoke of Israel's beginnings as "the earliest fruit on the fig tree" (v. 10), but because of their gross iniquity God said He would "drive them out of My house" (the temple, v. 15). And they who were named "Ephraim" (i.e., "fruitfulness") were instead "withered" and bore no fruit (v. 16). Mark's readers would have readily understood Christ's cursing of the barren fig tree as a judgment against Israel, and especially against her religious center, the temple (cf. also Mal. 3:1-5; 4:6).

rity of worship, He found the basest form of corruption: greed. After Jesus purged the temple, Peter took notice of this same tree and marveled at the effect of Christ's curse: "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered!" (Mark 11:21). As the context strongly intimates, this curse of Christ was not directed against the fig tree as such, as much as it was directed (for His disciples' benefit) against His unrepentant people as a sign of their divine visitation in judgment. This is marked by the intentional crafting of this pericope as an *inclusio* to the temple cleansing (vv. 12-21)--the dramatic locus of the rejection of Christ by His people and of His people by Christ (cf. vv. 14, 18). At His approach to the temple, then, in its state of acute corruption, and in view of the patent and repeated rejection of Him by the leaders of His people, this curse was called down by Christ.

In addition, in Galatians 1:8-9 (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22) Paul uttered what is unquestionably a curse of the severest magnitude: that of eternal damnation. "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed [*ἀνάθεμα ἔστω*]. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!"

In the Septuagint the term *ἀνάθεμα* was used to translate the Hebrew *קִרְיָה*--a term associated with the Israelite "holy wars" whatever was so designated was dedicated to Yahweh for total destruction. Paul's use of the term likewise refers to being brought under the divine curse--here the curse of eternal condemnation.<sup>51</sup> The intended recipients of Paul's imprecation were perverting the gospel of grace by enslaving it to the rigors of legalism. Those who seek to undermine the ground and sustenance of the Christian's salvation truly merit the harshest of denunciations, for the name of Christ is at stake (cf. Gal. 5:12; 2 Pet. 2:14; Jude 11-13).

Furthermore when Simon the Sorcerer<sup>52</sup> sought to purchase from Peter the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter uttered the caustic curse, "May your silver perish with you" (Acts 8:20). Yet, however severe, this apostolic curse was to be carried out only if there was

<sup>51</sup> This connotation is confirmed by Romans 9:3, where Paul startlingly expressed the desire to become "accursed ... from Christ [*ἀνάθεμα ... ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ*]" if that would result in the salvation of his people.

<sup>52</sup> In Acts 13:9-11 Paul, "filled with the Holy Spirit," evidently uttered an imprecation of blindness against another sorcerer, Elymas (reminiscent of Deut. 28:28-29), in accord with the principle embodied in the *lei: talionis*. Since Elymas had sought to keep the proconsul in spiritual blindness, Elymas was cursed with physical blindness.

continued sin and impenitence. This is evidenced by the exchange that followed, in which Peter voiced a plea for repentance along with the offer of release: "Repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you" (v. 22). Even in the midst of such imprecation--whether by a psalmist or an apostle--there is implicit or explicit the hope of repentance and restoration.<sup>53</sup>

Additionally Revelation 6:10 records the cry of martyred saints. "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" This harks back to the divine promise in the Song of Moses to "avenge the blood of His servants" (Deut. 32:43), and is a plea characteristic of the imprecatory psalms (cf. Pss. 58:10-11; 79:5, 10; 94::1, 3). Moreover much that follows in the Book of Revelation is God's response to the martyrs' cry (e.g., Rev. 15:3, "the Song of Moses"; 16:6; 18:20, 24; and 19:1-2, "Hallelujah! . . . He has avenged the blood of His bondservants"). Significantly the condition of these martyred saints, having moved on to their heavenly abode, "guarantees the absence of any selfish motives in their prayer life."<sup>54</sup> What is striking about their petition, however, is the consequent justification of similar prayers uttered by the saints on earth. If it is praiseworthy for perfected saints to pray in this way, then it is appropriate for believers now.

## CONCLUSION

This article has sought to demonstrate that at times it is legitimate for God's people to utter prayers of imprecation or pleas for divine vengeance--like those in the Psalms--against the recalcitrant enemies of God and of His people. This is based on the psalms' theology of imprecation in the Torah, and on the presence of this theology carried essentially unchanged to the end of the canon.

<sup>53</sup> As Derek Kidner observes, "For all their appearance of implacability they are to be taken as conditional. . . . Their full force was for the obdurate; upon repentance they would become 'a curse that is causeless', which, as Proverbs 26:2 assures us, does not alight" (*Psalms 1-72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973], 30).

<sup>54</sup> Robert L. Thomas, "The Imprecatory Prayers of the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126 (1969): 130. Thomas is not justified, however, in further asserting that the martyred saints are able to pray this way (as are the psalmists) because they had been given some special revelation as to "which persons are reprobate, a knowledge possessed only in divine perspective" (*ibid.*, 129-30). This merely evades the issue. Jesus Himself encouraged His followers, practically speaking, to identify the "reprobate" when He said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16).

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