

A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms

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Included in the Psalter are various psalms containing appeals for God to pour out His wrath on the psalmist's enemies. These psalms are commonly classified "imprecatory psalms" for the imprecation forms a chief element in the psalm. These psalms have been problematic for Bible teachers and preachers because of the difficulty in reconciling them with Christian thought. Barnes comments on this problem.

. . . perhaps there is no part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible objection to the belief that the psalms are the productions of inspired men than the spirit of revenge which they sometimes seem to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness which the writers seem to manifest.¹

The purposes of this article are to define an "imprecation," identify the imprecatory psalms, pinpoint the problem that interpreters have with such psalms, recount proposed solutions to the difficulty, and present a suggested solution to this problem.

The Definition of Imprecation

An "imprecation" is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God. The morning prayer of Moses was an imprecation that the enemies of Yahweh, who were Moses' enemies as well, would be scattered and flee from His presence (Num. 10:35). The Song of Deborah

and Barak concludes with an imprecation that Yahweh's enemies might perish (Judg. 5:31). Jeremiah the prophet used repeated imprecations against his enemies (Jer. 11:20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21-23; 20:12). Such imprecations are not limited to the Old Testament, but are found in the New Testament as well (Rev. 6:9-10). Other portions of the New Testament are considered by some to contain imprecations (Acts 13:10-11; 23:3; 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9; 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:14), but while these verses contain a curse element, they do not have a specific prayer to the Lord that the judgment would be carried out.² Imprecations from the Psalms, however, are quoted in the New Testament (Acts 1:20; Pss. 69:25; 109:8). Crucial to the definition of an imprecation is that it (a) must be an invocation--a prayer or address to God, and (b) must contain a request that one's enemies or the enemies of Yahweh be judged and justly punished.

The Identification of the Imprecatory Psalms

While many imprecations are in the Book of Psalms,³ it is evident that in some psalms the imprecations form the chief element. These "imprecatory psalms" have been said to contain "expressions calling for divine judgment to fall upon the Psalmist's enemy,"⁴ which would involve not only the enemy's personal destruction but also the overthrow of his family and the crushing of all hope for his future. Leupold states that the term "imprecatory psalms" is used to designate "those psalms in which the writer prays that God may afflict the evildoer and punish him according to his just deserts."⁵ Harrison remarks that these psalms constitute "a reply to the national enemies" and a call to God "to exercise retribution."⁶ In the imprecatory psalms the imprecation, instead of being a minor element, is greatly multiplied until it becomes a major element or leading feature. An imprecatory psalm, then, is one in which the imprecation is a major element or leading feature of the psalm.

Although opinion varies as to the number and identity of the imprecatory psalms, at least these nine may be included, based on the preceding definition: Psalms 7; 35; 58; 59; 69; 83; 109; 137; and 139. A reading of these psalms reveals that the imprecatory element is a leading feature of each psalm and is crucial to the psalmist's argument. All these imprecatory psalms are Davidic except for Psalm 83, which is attributed to Asaph, and Psalm 137, which is exilic.

The Problem with the Imprecatory Psalms

The basic problem with the imprecatory psalms is an ethical one. Vos asks, "How can it be right to wish or pray for the destruction or doom of others as is done in the Imprecatory Psalms? . . . Is it right for a Christian to use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and if so, in what sense can he make the Psalms his own?"⁷ Beardslee also calls attention to the ethical problem of these psalms.

In our private reading we can scarcely understand why they should find a place in a book otherwise so universally fitted to stimulate devotional life. In the public service of the church they are passed in silence by the preacher as having in them nothing calculated to educate and elevate the moral character of the people.⁸

The problem with the imprecatory psalms, or more correctly, the interpreter's problem with them, is how an apparent spirit of vengeance can be reconciled with the precepts of the New Testament and Jesus' command to "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Essentially three problems are confronted: (1) How can the presence of these imprecations in the Hebrew hymnal be explained? (2) Do they have application to the life and worship of Christians? (3) Can these heart cries for vengeance and retribution be as inspired as the other portions of the Book of Psalms which magnify and elevate God's character? Evangelicals must answer the second and third questions in the affirmative, and then begin to deal with the first question--the ethical or moral problem of the psalms of imprecation.

The Unsatisfactory Solutions

Many possible solutions to the problem of the imprecatory psalms have been formulated. A brief review and evaluation of some major suggestions is necessary before setting forth a fresh approach to dealing with the ethical problem.⁹

THE IMPRECATIONS BY DAVID'S ENEMIES

It has been suggested that the imprecations in Psalm 109:6-20 are not the utterance of David against his enemies, but are the fierce cursing of David's enemies against David himself.¹⁰ To adhere to this solution one must insert the participle אִמַּר

("saying ") at the end of verse 5 so that the imprecation would appear to be sourced in the mouths of David's persecutors. Justification for this solution is based on the insertion of an implied participle in Psalm 2:2 in the Authorized Version to explain the quotation in 2:3 which obviously must be attributed to the psalmist's enemies.

However, this proposed solution is very strained. The transition from verse 5 to verse 6 in Psalm 109 does not give any intimation that the words pass from David's prayer to an imprecation by his enemies, and the alleged "quotation" (vv. 6-20) is far longer than the single verse of Psalm 2. Also this solution would certainly not work in Psalms 7; 35; 58; 59; 69; 83; 137; or 139, where the imprecation is against a plurality of the psalmist's enemies. This view must therefore be rejected as an inadequate explanation.

THE EXPRESSION OF DAVID'S OWN SENTIMENTS

A second solution offered is that in these imprecations David is uttering the sentiments of his own heart and not those of the Holy Spirit. This view is taken by Kittel who considers the imprecatory psalms to have originated from mean-spirited individuals who thought only of conquest and revenge. The presence of these psalms in the Hebrew Psalter witnesses to the fact that at one time they were accredited to God.¹¹ The suggestion is made that if David had been a better man, he would not have uttered such perverse thoughts. This view, however, overlooks the biblical record of David's character as a man who did not indulge in a spirit of personal revenge (1 Sam. 24:1-7; 26:5). Also the New Testament reveals that David wrote the psalms under the personal and direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit ("who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Thy servant, didst say . . ." [Acts 4:25], and "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" [2 Peter 1:21]). To dissect a psalm or any portion of Scripture into inspired and uninspired sections is a fundamental error, and therefore an unacceptable solution to the problem of the imprecatory psalms.

THE INFERIOR PRINCIPLE OF SPIRITUAL LIFE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Still another view offered is that the inspiring principle underlying the spiritual life of the Old Testament differs from that of the New.¹² It is suggested that since David lived prior to the full light of the truth about spirituality, as developed in the

New Testament, broad ethical teaching and practice should not be expected from him. However, while those in the present dispensation of grace do enjoy the benefits and spiritual life provided by the teachings of Jesus, the Mosaic covenant did provide David with adequate guidelines for ethical conduct. Hatred for one's neighbors is forbidden in the Old Testament, as is vengeance (Deut. 32:35), while love is commanded (Lev. 19:17-18). This solution to the problem of the imprecatory psalms is inadequate because it underestimates the Old Testament's provision of ethical guidelines. Christians do enjoy the benefits of progressive revelation, but that progress is not from error to truth; instead, it is a progression from incomplete revelation to a more full and complete revelation or divine disclosure.

THE IMPRECATIONS AGAINST DAVID'S SPIRITUAL FOES

It has also been suggested that the imprecatory psalms are the psalmist's *spiritual* antagonists rather than human personages. According to this view evil spiritual influences are personified as evil men. Mowinckel suggests that the imprecations in these psalms are curses uttered in the name of God who is a sure defense against the powers of darkness and is able to defy and overthrow the hosts of evil which stir themselves up against His servants.¹³ This solution introduces an unfortunate subjectivity and indefiniteness to the meaning of the biblical language. How is one to determine when to make the transition from a literal to a spiritual interpretation of a particular passage? Also if the psalmist's enemies are evil principles and forces of darkness, it is strange that their families should be mentioned in Psalm 109. Many of the psalms were written in a time of oppression from enemies like Doeg the Edomite (Ps. 52:1; 1 Sam. 21:7) and Shimei (2 Sam. 16:5-8), and it is therefore difficult to believe that David would have had nonphysical enemies in mind.

THE IMPRECATIONS ARE PROPHETIC

Another proposed solution to the problem is that the imprecatory psalms are to be understood as prophetic. The psalmist was not only a poet, but was also a prophet declaring what would happen to the ungodly. This is one of the solutions offered by Barnes, and was held by Augustine, Calvin, and Spurgeon.¹⁴ This view throws the responsibility for the imprecation on God, and thus relieves the psalmist from the charge of speaking out of a spirit of bitterness or revenge. It is pointed out by advocates of

this view that the imprecations are quoted in the New Testament (Pss. 69:25 and 109:8 in Acts 1:20; and Ps. 69:22-23 in Rom. 11:9-10), and that therefore all the imprecations are prophetic. Against this view is the fact that the imperfect form of the verb is sometimes preceded by an imperative, in which case the imperfect form is translated as a jussive (Ps. 69:25-26).¹⁵ The imprecation in such a case is not a simple declaration of what will happen, but is a wish or prayer that it may happen. In Psalm 137 the imprecation involves the third person in such a way as to show that the speaker is not simply uttering the divine will as a prophet, but is expressing his own feeling as a man. Psalm 137:8-9 is an expression of the personal satisfaction the psalmist will feel when judgment overtakes the wrongdoers.

THE HUMANITY OF THE PSALMIST

A recent view of Psalm 137 is that it simply expresses the full humanity of the psalmist who loved Zion but who hated his foes passionately. According to Bright, the psalmist is "God's wholly committed man, yet a man who is estranged from God's spirit."¹⁶ Bright asserts that the psalm must not be read and received as God's Word for today in and of itself, but that it must be read in light of the gospel. The psalmist expresses a conclusion which is "unworthy and sub-Christian," but he records the frustration of the whole man who must be confronted by Christ. The psalmist's thoughts are not approved, but are understood to be an expression of humanity's need for Christ. While Bright deals only with Psalm 137, presumably he would also apply this principle of interpretation to the other imprecatory psalms. While this view does offer an application of these psalms to Christians, it does not adequately explain the inspiration of Psalm 137 and the reason for its inclusion in the Psalter. This view appears to deny the divine authorship of the imprecatory psalms in an arbitrary attempt to distinguish between that which is the expression of humanity and that which is the expression of the Spirit. Such a dichotomy fails to grasp the unity of the divine and human authors of Scripture (cf. Acts 4:25).

Steps toward a Satisfactory Solution

Having investigated several unsatisfactory solutions to the ethical problem of the imprecatory psalms, several factors toward a satisfactory solution may now be considered.

THE PURPOSES OF THE IMPRECATIONS

An awareness of the ethical and revelational purposes of the imprecatory judgments will enable one to understand better the imprecatory psalms. Six purposes are evident.

1. One major purpose of the judgments against evildoers is to establish the righteous. As God judges the wicked, He is also invoked to establish the righteous (Ps. 7:8-9). A concern for righteousness and the righteous is foundational to the imprecation found in Psalm 7:6-11.

2. A second purpose of the imprecatory judgments is that God may be praised when the psalmist is delivered (Pss. 7:17: 35:18, 28). Closely related to this is the anticipation of rejoicing when the psalmist sees the vindication taking place (58:10).

3. A third purpose in requesting judgment against the wicked is that men will see the reward of the righteous and recognize that it is God who judges the earth (58:11). Both the righteous and the wicked will know that God is concerned with justice and that He executes judgment on the earth.

4. The imprecatory judgments are also designed to demonstrate to everyone that God is sovereign. David prayed that his enemies would be destroyed so that men from the ends of the earth may know that God rules in Jacob (59:13).

5. A fifth purpose of the imprecatory judgments is to prevent the wicked from enjoying the same blessings as the righteous. David prays that those who persist in wickedness may be blotted out of the book of life (the register of the living), that is, may be judged by physical death (69:28).

6. A sixth purpose of the imprecatory judgments is to cause the wicked to seek the Lord. Asaph prays that God would judge and humiliate His enemies so that they would seek His name and acknowledge Him as the sovereign God (83:16-18).

These purposes of the imprecations give a divine perspective to the seemingly human cries for judgment. It would appear that the high ethical and revelational purposes of the imprecatory psalms clear them of the charge of being sourced in the bitter spirit of a bloodthirsty, carnal man.

THE COVENANTAL BASIS FOR A CURSE ON ISRAEL'S ENEMIES

The fundamental ground on which one may justify the imprecations in the Psalms is the covenantal basis for a curse on Israel's enemies. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3) promised blessing on those who blessed Abraham's posterity, and

cursing (אָרַר) on those who would curse (קָלַל). Abraham's posterity. Because of the unconditional nature of the covenant, its promises and provisions remain in force throughout Israel's existence as a nation. Balaam is an example of one who received judgment for cursing Israel (Num. 22-24; 31:16). Actually Balaam was unable to curse Israel, and he fell under God's judgment because of his attack on Israel by undermining the spiritual life of the nation (31:8). All the Midianites except for the little ones and the virgin girls were slain because of their part in the attack against the spiritual life of Israel (31:1-18). Truly those who had cursed were cursed!

On the basis of the unconditional Abrahamic covenant, David had a perfect right, as the representative of the nation, to pray that God would effect what He had promised--cursing on those who cursed or attacked Israel. David's enemies were a great threat to the well-being of Israel! The cries for judgment in the imprecatory psalms are appeals for Yahweh to carry out His judgment against those who would curse the nation--judgment in accordance with the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE IMPRECATOR

The attitude of the psalmist is a key consideration in seeking to interpret and appreciate the imprecatory psalms. While the psalmist might appear to be a bloodthirsty and vindictive avenger, a closer examination demonstrates that this is not the case. Four significant points must be taken into consideration.

1. It is significant that David never prayed that he may be permitted to take vengeance on his enemies, but always that God would become his avenger. David's prayer was always that Yahweh would rise against his adversaries (Pss. 7:6; 35:1; 58:6; 59:5) and overthrow, smite, and destroy as the psalmist's own Avenger. The power and right to avenge belonged to God (Deut. 32:35), and David, realizing that a crisis had come, simply requested that God use judgmental retribution for His own glory and for the deliverance of His servant.

2. It is also important to distinguish between "vindication" and "vindictiveness." The psalmist's passion was for justice, and the imprecatory psalms are not sourced in personal vindictiveness or bitter malice that seeks revenge. David was capable of generosity under personal attack (2 Sam. 16:11; 19:16-23), yet no ruler was more deeply stirred to anger by unscrupulous ac-

tions even when they appeared to favor his cause. What David pleaded for in his imprecations was that justice be done and that right be vindicated. He simply asked for the judgmental intervention which any victim of injustice deserved. David's concern was for vindication—justice--a concern which also the New Testament upholds (e.g. Luke 18:1-8).

3. David's concept of kingship sheds considerable light on the attitude of the imprecator. The king of Israel was God's chosen man (Deut. 17:15), sitting on an earthly throne as God's representative. David had great respect for the anointed king and refused to stretch forth his hand against Yahweh's anointed (1 Sam. 24:10; 26:11). To have done so would have been not only treason but also utter sacrilege and disregard for the theocratic office. When the office of king was conferred on David, he then regarded himself and everything that concerned him in light of his official relationship to God and the theocratic government. As the representative of God to the people, an attack on the king--the theocratic official--differed in no way from an attack on Yahweh! David saw attacks against him as attacks on the name of Yahweh. He thus prayed for the destruction of the wicked, not out of personal revenge, but out of his zeal for God and His kingdom.

4. It is also helpful to see that the imprecations in the Book of Psalms reflect an Old Testament saint's abhorrence of sin and evil. Those against whom the imprecations were directed were not the private enemies of David, but those who opposed God and His cause. Divine judgment was called down on those who were the very incarnation of wickedness. David's heart was sensitive to sin (Pss. 51:3, 9; 139:23-24), and out of his abhorrence for sin and evil he appealed to God for justice and the execution of judgment on the wicked.

Conclusion

The imprecatory psalms present to the Bible student the problem of reconciling the apparent spirit of vengeance with the precepts of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus. The key to solving this ethical problem is to understand that the imprecations are grounded in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3), in which God promised to curse those who cursed Abraham's descendants. The psalmist, then, merely appealed for God to fulfill His covenant promise to Israel. It is also helpful to

note that the imprecations were motivated by a desire to promote righteousness (Ps. 7:6-11), to demonstrate God's sovereignty (58:11; 59:13), to cause the wicked to seek the Lord (83:16-18), and to provide an opportunity for the righteous to praise God (7:17; 35:18, 28). Therefore out of zeal for God and abhorrence of sin the psalmist called on God to punish the wicked and to vindicate His righteousness.

In light of the fact that the Abrahamic covenant reflects God's promise to Abraham and his descendants, it would be inappropriate for a church-age believer to call down God's judgment on the wicked. One can appreciate the Old Testament setting of the imprecatory psalms and teach and preach from them. However, like the ceremonial dietary laws of the Old Testament, the imprecations in the Psalms should not be applied to church-age saints. This is clear from Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:14, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not." Paul admonished the Romans, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (12:19). Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4:14 indicate that he practiced what he preached. Rather than calling down divine wrath on Alexander the coppersmith, Paul simply stated, "The Lord will repay him according to his deeds." And John makes it clear that God in the future will judge the wicked for their sin (Rev. 20:11-15).

Notes

1 Albert Barnes, *Notes, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical on the Book of Psalms*, 3 vols. (London: Blackie & Son, 1868), 1: xxv-xxvi.

2 The cry of the martyred tribulation saints in Revelation 6:10 for God's vengeance, while similar to the psalmist's imprecations, is not applicable to the church age.

3 Psalms 5:10; 6:10; 9 9; 10:2, 15; 17:13a; 28:4; 31:17b-18; 40:14-15; 55:9, 15; 68:1-2; 70:2-3; 71:13; 79:6, 10, 12; 94:1; 97:7; 104:35; 129:5-6; 140:9-11; 141:10; 143:12.

4 J. W. Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8 (1897), p. 491.

5 H. C. Leupold, *The Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), p. 18.

6 Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), p. 997.

7 Johannes G. Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," *Westminster Theological Journal* 4 (May 1942), p. 123.

8 Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms," p. 491.

9 For an overview of other solutions that have been proposed see Roy B. Zuck, "The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1957), pp. 45-58.

10 Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms," pp. 491-92.

- 11 G. Kittel. *The Scientific Study of the Old Testament*. p. 143. quoted in G. S. Gunn, *God in the Psalms* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1965), p. 102.
- 12 Beardslee. "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms," p. 496.
- 13 Sigmund Mowinckel. *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*. trasp. D. R. Ap-Thomas. 2 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:44-52.
- 14 Barnes. *The Book of Psalms*. 1: xxx.
- 15 E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2d English ed. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press. 1910), p. 322.
- 16 John Bright. *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1967), p. 238.

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