

ABSTRACT

THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

by

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In this dissertation, I attempt plausibly 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. There is indeed a degree of difference in the progress of the testaments, but it is a difference in degree not a difference in kind. Thus, it is argued that 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 sustained injustice, hardened enmity, and gross oppression.

This thesis is developed in four discrete sections: (1) an evaluation of the principal solutions proffered with regard to the Imprecatory Psalms and Christian ethics; (2) an investigation into the broader ancient Near Eastern practice of imprecation; (3) an exploration of the three harshest psalms of imprecation (Pss 58, 137, 109) and the theological foundations upon which their cries were uttered; and (4) an examination of the apparently contradictory statements of the New Testament (“love your enemies” and “bless and curse not”) coupled with the continued presence of imprecations.

THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS
AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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the Faculty of the Department of
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by
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Accepted by the Faculty of the Dallas Theological Seminary in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy.

Examining Committee

To my beloved wife, Lorri
and our dear children
Tiffanie, Hannah, and JohnEzra

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ABBREVIATIONS

AER	<i>American Ecclesiastical Review</i>
ANET	J. B. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i> , 3d ed
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BHS	<i>Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur ZAW
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DCH	D. J. A. Clines (ed.), <i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i>
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
FN	<i>Filologia Neotestamentaria</i>
GKC	Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, ed. E. Kautzsch, tr. A. E. Cowley, 2d ed
HALOT	L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, <i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , Revised ed
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary

JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JB	A. Jones (ed.), <i>Jerusalem Bible</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament—Supplement Series
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KJV	King James Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	W. van Gemeren (ed.), <i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
PTR	<i>Princeton Theological Review</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>

RevQ	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
RTR	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TDOT	G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TEV	Today's English Version
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TWOT	R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer Jr., and B. K. Waltke (eds.), <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Facing the Problem

There is hardly an area of biblical theology more troublesome to the Christian conscience than that expressed in the so-called Imprecatory Psalms—those psalms whose characterizing element is the desire for God’s just vengeance to fall upon his and his people’s enemies, including the use of more formal curses or imprecations. These psalms naturally evoke a reaction of revulsion to Christians schooled in the “law of Christ”; the venom these psalms exude collides abrasively with their sweeter instincts. For are not Christians called to “love your enemies” (Matt 5:44), to “bless and not curse” (Rom 12:14)? How, then, can such calls for the barbaric “dashing of infants against the rocks” (Ps 137:9), the “bathing of feet in the blood of the wicked” (Ps 58:10), the “curse passed down to the offender’s children” (Ps 109:10-15) be justified?¹ Are the Imprecatory Psalms merely a way of venting one’s rage without really meaning it? Has the morality of Scripture evolved? Or is cursing enemies the Old Testament way and loving enemies the New Testament way? And is there any legitimate echo of the substance of these psalms in the New Testament?

¹ Partly based upon a negative reaction to the invectives hurled against their enemies by the psalmists, Gunkel asserts: “the opinion that the Old Testament is a safe guide to true religion and morality cannot any longer be maintained.” Hermann Gunkel, *What Remains of the Old Testament and Other Essays*, trans. A. K. Dallas (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), 16.

There have been a few modern treatments of the Imprecatory Psalms vis-à-vis their relation to biblical theology and the New Testament. However these treatments have been, in large measure, cursory, and the proposed solutions have been, in my view, theologically inadequate.² The Imprecatory Psalms have been unsatisfactorily explained chiefly as expressing (1) evil emotions—whether to be suppressed or expressed (e.g., Lewis,³ Brueggemann⁴), (2) a morality consonant with the Old Covenant but inconsistent with the New (e.g., Zuck,⁵ Laney⁶), or (3) words appropriately uttered solely from the lips of Christ, and consequently only by his followers through him and his cross (e.g., Adams,⁷ Bonhoeffer⁸).

² The reasons for their respective inadequacy will be dealt with below. Chiefly and summarily, a theologically adequate reconciliation of the Imprecatory Psalms with Christian ethics must deal fairly with the entirety of scriptural revelation.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958). Idem, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967).

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984). Idem, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1986).

⁵ Roy Ben Zuck, "The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1957).

⁶ J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *BSac* 138 (1981): 35-45.

⁷ James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1991).

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A Bonhoeffer Sermon," trans. Daniel Bloesch, ed. F. Burton Nelson, *Theology Today* 38 (1982): 465-71. Idem, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, trans. James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970).

In contrast, I will seek to establish that the sentiment expressed in the Imprecatory Psalms is consistent with the ethics both of the Old and New Testaments,⁹ while at the same time recognizing that the New Testament evidences a certain progress in the outworking of that essentially equivalent ethic. This I will do by plausibly demonstrating that the Imprecatory Psalms root their theology of cursing and crying out for God's vengeance¹⁰ in the Torah—principally the Song of Moses (Deut 32), the *lex talionis* (e.g., Deut 19), and the covenant of God with his people (e.g., Gen 12)—and that this theology is carried essentially unchanged through the expanse of the canon to the end of the New Testament (e.g., Rev 15:2-4; 18:20). And yet, there is indeed 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.¹¹ This is to be expected, for the new era is the age of “grace upon grace” (John 1:16), inaugurated in the coming of Christ.

But this is a difference in degree, rather than a difference in kind. In the progress of revelation, the New Testament reflects a development, not in morality *per se*,

⁹ Therefore, the Imprecatory Psalms—or their like tenor—were at times appropriate on the lips of both Old and New Testament believers.

¹⁰ Both of these elements are included as characteristic of an imprecatory psalm (cf., e.g., Pss 58, 79, 109, 137).

¹¹ The New Testament evidences markedly fewer imprecations, and the imagery of those which exist (save, notably, the imprecatory sentiments in the Book of Revelation), are markedly muffled. For example, the horridly explicit and characteristic calls, such as “smash their teeth in their mouths!” (Ps 58:7), are conspicuously absent from the New Testament.

but in the way the divinely ordained ethic is to be lived out in daily life: it becomes a matter of emphasis, which is a matter of significance. Steadfast endurance under unjust suffering for the sake of Christ and after the pattern of Christ, entrusting both temporal and eschatological judgment to God, becomes a more predominant theme in the New Testament,¹² whereas it is more restrained in the Old. And yet, the New Testament still finds a legitimate place for imprecation, based upon the same elements as serve to justify the imprecations in the Psalms.

The Breadth of Definition

As stated in the introductory paragraph, the Imprecatory Psalms as a class refer to those psalms whose characterizing element is the impassioned plea for divine vengeance to fall upon the enemies of God and his people, including the use of what may be considered more formal curses or imprecations proper. By consensus of those works consulted for use in this dissertation, the above represents the breadth of definition involved in the use of the term “imprecation”—particularly in the context of the Imprecatory Psalms, but also in the related passages of both Old and New Testaments. Laney’s definition serves as a

¹² The New Testament epistle of 1 Peter, for example, which addresses Christians in the context of persecution and advocates endurance in the midst of suffering, speaks nothing of imprecating one’s enemies. Rather, it heralds the importance of patiently awaiting the return of Christ the Judge. This is significant, in that it starkly underscores what is to be considered the characteristic Christian approach to persecution and oppression—indeed, the characteristic Christian ethic. For example, 1 Pet 2:18-23 adjures Christian slaves to endure unjust beatings, based upon the example of Christ, entrusting their lives and the realization of justice to the God of justice. It is the life of blessing and endurance which is to characterize the Christian life (cf. 1 Pet 3:9; 4:12-19). To this the epistle speaks. And in principle, this is the dominant mood of the New Testament, and also (albeit in a more subdued tone) of the Old as well. However, the imprecatory passages of both Old and New Testaments supplement this general tenor, articulating the minor—yet complementary—ethic evidenced in instances of extremity.

characteristic example: “An ‘imprecation’ is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one’s enemies, or the enemies of God.”¹³ Zuck describes such imprecations simply and broadly as “prayers for the destruction of enemies”;¹⁴ and Brueggemann addresses the issue in terms of a “*yearning for vengeance*.”¹⁵ Vos recognizes this definitional breadth and tension when he proffers that “these Psalms are indeed imprecatory if this term be understood in its proper sense of invoking a judgment, calamity or curse”¹⁶ — whether done so directly (e.g., Ps 137:7) or indirectly (e.g., Ps 137:8-9).¹⁷ Thus, such an understanding will be presumed in the ensuing discussions. So, for instance, although the

¹³ Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” 35.

¹⁴ Zuck, “The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 6.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 57.

¹⁶ Johannes G. Vos, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” *WTJ* 4 (1942): 123. Zenger prefers to refer to these “psalms of cursing” as “psalms of enmity,” averring that the common label “invites misunderstanding—because they do not curse; they present passionate lament, petition, and desires before God.” Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), viii. Now, although he overstates the issue, Zenger’s observational assertion nonetheless serves as a helpful corrective.

¹⁷ The gruesome cries of Psalm 137:8-9 are not technically imprecations, as narrowly defined, but are nonetheless universally recognized as the infamous exemplars of imprecations—as such are commonly defined. These verses are a wish addressed to Babylon directly (although indirectly to God, as the context elucidates) and express the desire for calamity to befall her. This breadth of definition, including the element of wish or threat, is likewise reflected in Webster’s explanation of the curse as a “pronouncement of doom to evil fate or vengeance,” or a “prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon one; an imprecation; malediction.” Furthermore, such a curse “implies the desire or threat of evil, declared solemnly or upon oath.” Of the synonymous terms listed in the preceding definition, an imprecation “denotes an invocation of evil or calamity”; and a malediction “is a more general term for bitter reproach or proclamation of evil against some one.” William Allan Nielson et al., eds., *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d ed., unabridged (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, Publishers, 1944), 648.

bold and poignant appeal for divine recompense voiced in Psalm 137 differs markedly from the detailed litany of curses rehearsed in Psalm 109, both are universally recognized as imprecations and Imprecatory Psalms—indeed, they are the premier examples.

The Stigma of Vengeance

The central issue of divine vengeance¹⁸ presents an initial stigma partly because the promise of such vengeance forms much of the basis upon which the psalmists voice their cries of cursing¹⁹ and partly because of the concept of vengeance itself.²⁰ To the modern ear, the word “vengeance” evokes images of malice and revenge; by its very nature

¹⁸ To my knowledge, the only detailed monograph on the subject of divine vengeance in the Scriptures is H. G. L. Peels, *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*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, ed. A. S. Van der Woude, vol. 31 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). His thoroughness and depth make this an invaluable work. Cf. also Joel Noel Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 17 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993).

¹⁹ More will be said in this regard under the discussion surrounding Psalm 58.

²⁰ McKeating is one who expresses his offense at the presentation of divine vengeance in the Old Testament. He asks: “Why the stress on the vengeful character of God? Does God require in man a nobility and a charity which He Himself is not prepared to display? There is plenty of evidence for the idea that God is one whose vengeance is quite inescapable, and who pursues vengeance even where a mere man would let the matter rest. . . . When the Israelite refrains from taking vengeance he thinks of himself as deliberately acting *unlike* God. Man ought to refrain from taking vengeance precisely because God *will* do so. God, therefore, though it appears that He approves of men forgiving one another, does not do it Himself, or not so readily. . . . The argument of the New Testament, ‘Be merciful, as your Father in heaven,’ . . . [has] no place in the Old. . . . It is at this point, the perception that there is an analogy between human and divine behaviour, and that human forgiveness should be an imitation of that of God, that the New Testament forgiveness concept develops away from that of the Old.” Henry McKeating, “Vengeance is Mine: A Study of the Pursuit of Vengeance in the Old Testament,” *ExpTim* 74 (1963): 243-45. However, his analysis runs counter to the self-testimony of the character of God as found in, e.g., Exodus 34:6-7, ignores the eschatological realization of divine vengeance heralded throughout the New Testament (notably 2 Thess 1; Rev 16-19), and sets up an antithetical and adversarial relationship between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New, who are one and the same.

it bears sinful and negative connotations. Thus, in this mindset, vengeance—whether human or divine—is in no sense to be construed as virtuous. But to the ancient Israelite, and through the pages of Scripture, the concept of vengeance is tied to the requirements of justice.²¹ Where justice is trampled, vengeance is required.²² Specifically, in the presentation of the canon, the enactment of God’s vengeance is coupled with his character as just and holy and his claim as world sovereign.²³ Indeed, the Scriptures do not equivocate in their proclamation of Yahweh not only as Warrior, but also as Judge and King. As Peels assesses, in his justification of Yahweh’s vengeance: “If it is said of this God, who is King, that He avenges himself, this can no longer be considered to be indicative of an evil humour, a tyrannical capriciousness, or an eruption of rancour. God’s vengeance is kingly vengeance. If He takes vengeance, He does so as the highest authority exercising punishing justice. The vengeance of God is the action of God-as-King in the realization of his sovereign rule. This action is directed against those who offend God’s majesty through transgression against his honour, his justice or his people.”²⁴

²¹ Peels notes that the biblical concept of vengeance “is determined by the notion of legitimate, righteous, even necessary enactment of justice by a legitimate authority.” Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, 265.

²² So, for instance, note the frequent pairing of נָקָם, “vengeance,” with גְּמוּלָה or שְׁלֹמָה, “recompense”—paying back what is deserved (e.g., Isa 34:8; 35:4).

²³ Cf., e.g., Deut 32:34-43; Pss 58:10-11; 94:1-2; Isa 34:1-2; 59:15b-20; Luke 18:1-8; Rev 6:10; 16:5-7; 18:4-8, 20; 19:1-2.

²⁴ Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, 278.

Furthermore, the observation of Mendenhall holds true: the significance of divine vengeance derives primarily from the relationship between the recipient of that vengeance and God. “To the rebel it is punishment, but to the God-fearer, it is salvation.”²⁵ God’s vengeance is inseparably linked to his lovingkindness;²⁶ it is the other side of his compassion, the (perhaps inevitably) “dark side” of his mercy.²⁷ The Scriptures are unequivocal in affirming that God is by no means an indifferent Being, but one who has passionately and decisively taken sides *for* his people in history.²⁸ And if he is to save his people from sin, oppression, and injustice, then he must exact vengeance upon his enemies—the enemies of his people.

This understanding of divine vengeance is borne out, for example, by the depictions of Yahweh’s execution of vengeance against Edom²⁹ in the Book of Isaiah. There one finds that the language of vengeance is the language of violence—of slaughter

²⁵ G. E. Mendenhall, “The Old Testament Concept of Vengeance,” *JBL* 68 (1949): viii-ix. Thompson concurs: “The term *vengeance* (*nāqām*) denotes the zeal of God in the discharge of justice. To the repentant, God’s zeal issues in forgiveness and salvation. To the unrepentant and the rebel, God’s zeal issues in judgment.” J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, TOTC, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), 302.

²⁶ Though “lovingkindness” is an archaic rendering of the Hebrew **רַחֲמִים**, I believe it reflects much of the richness inherent in the term.

²⁷ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 62.

²⁸ However, the culmination of this dual relationship comes only in the eschaton.

²⁹ Edom is used in Isaiah 34 as typical of the nations (cf. 34:2 with 34:5), the prime exhibit of the enemies of Israel. She is nearer geographically and ethnically than the great Babylon; and her kinship to Israel makes the affront of her enmity the more severe.

and sacrifice, of holy war³⁰ and jealous rage.³¹ And consequently, the imagery of vengeance is the gruesome imagery of gore: “Yahweh’s sword is all bloody, it is gorged with fat” (Isa 34:6). Lest Yahweh become relegated, however, to the company of pagan and bloodthirsty deities, it is imperative to note the stated purpose of this violence against the wicked: “to contend for Zion” (Isa 34:8). This point is reiterated in the following chapter, which speaks of the paradise of the redeemed arising out of the carnage against the wicked: “Behold, your God, *he will come with vengeance; with divine recompense he will come, and he will save you*” (Isa 35:4; cf. 63:3-4). Yahweh is a God who saves his people; but without God’s vengeance *against* his enemies, there can be no salvation *for* his people. The ramifications of this are weighty. As Swartzbach observes: without a clear understanding of the significance of divine vengeance, “there is no way of comprehending the nature of the Christian God, for we can never speak of the ‘love’ and ‘justice’ of God without reflecting upon his ‘wrath’ and ‘vengeance.’”³² And Kraus likewise echoes:

The “vengeance” for which Israel hopes is God’s judgment in response to the scorn and mockery of the enemy nations. The prayer is that Yahweh will not allow his enemies free rein or let their rage go unanswered. It is expected that Yahweh will

³⁰ Cf. Isa 34:2, 5. In the language of “holy war,” whatever was labeled **קָרָם** was dedicated to God almost invariably for the purpose of utter annihilation.

³¹ Cf. the imagery that culminates in Isa 34:8. From the prophet’s perspective, divine jealousy expressed on behalf of his covenant Bride is a virtue.

³² Raymond H. Swartzbach, “A Biblical Study of the Word ‘Vengeance,’” *Interpretation* 6 (1952): 457. Smick elaborates: “The Bible balances the fury of God’s vengeance against the sinner with the greatness of his mercy on those whom he redeems from sin. God’s vengeance must never be viewed apart from his purpose to show mercy. He is not *only* the God of wrath, but must be the God of wrath in order for his mercy to have meaning. Apart from God himself the focus of the OT is not on the objects of his vengeance but on the objects of his mercy.” Elmer B. Smick, “**נָקָם**,” *TWOT*, 2:599.

manifest his power in the world of the nations. Not alone in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament as well there is a certainty that this will not take place in an invisible, ideal realm of retribution, but in the reality of this world. Therefore there rings out a cry for revenge and for God's judgment in the face of the unbearable suffering and torment of God's people, on down to the Revelation of John (6:10). To set up a polarity of love and vengeance would involve a total misunderstanding of biblical truth.³³

But the question may yet be asked: How can it be right for an Old or New Testament believer to cry out for divine vengeance and violence, as exemplified in the Imprecatory Psalms? Several observations from Scripture cohere to address this question: (1) The vengeance appealed for by the pious in the Psalms is not personally enacted; rather it is called upon from God. (2) This appeal is based upon the covenant promises of God,³⁴ 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). And if God has so promised, then it would seemingly not be wrong for his people to petition him (even passionately) for the fulfillment of these promises.³⁵ (3) Scripture records, through both testaments, examples of God's people on

³³ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 67.

³⁴ As Surburg notes, "The imprecations and maledictions in the Psalter may be understood to ask God to do with the ungodly and wicked exactly what the Bible says that God has done . . . is doing, and will do." Raymond F. Surburg, "The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms," *Springfielder* 39 (1975): 99.

³⁵ Dabney notes that "righteous retribution is one of the glories of the divine character. If it is right that God should desire to exercise it, then it cannot be wrong for his people to desire him to exercise it." Robert L. Dabney, "The Christian's Duty Towards His Enemies," in *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 1 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 715. Similarly, Beardslee notes that as the soul comes to stand where God stands, as it becomes progressively conformed to the image of its Creator (Col 3:10), it will feel as God feels and speak as God speaks. Thus, not only will there be a deep abhorrence of sin, but there will also be a righteous indignation against the willful and persistent wrongdoer. J. W. Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8 (1897): 504.

earth justly calling down curses or crying for vengeance without any literary or theological intimation of divine disapproval at the expression of such sentiments. Indeed, the implication is that, in its appropriate place, such utterances are commendable (cf. the Imprecatory Psalms, and the Pauline and Petrine curses of Gal 1:8-9 and Acts 8:20, respectively). (4) 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). And since these martyred saints are presumably perfected, their entreaty would then be presumably "right."

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. Indeed, when one examines the way of God, of Christ, and of God's people from a canonical approach, one finds this dual reaction toward enmity exemplified: the one reaction characteristic of the divine and Christian life, and the other exhibited in extreme instances. For example, (1) the pattern of God found in Scripture is that of repeated grace; but then comes the point of judgment. The inhabitants of Canaan experienced this extended grace followed by decisive judgment when, after four hundred years, their "iniquity became complete" (cf. Gen 15:16); likewise also, the Israelites of the Exodus, after repeated rebellion and unbelief, were finally barred from the Promised Land (cf. Num 14);³⁶ and the generation of the Exile found out what life was like

³⁶ See especially Num 14:22-23, in which the Israelites are said to have tested Yahweh "ten times" and thus treated him with contempt.

when, after two hundred years of his longsuffering, God's hand of grace was released and justice given her due (cf. Hosea).³⁷ There is longsuffering to God's grace, but there is also judgment (cf. the balance between the two in that supreme revelation of the character of God, Exod 34:6-7).³⁸ (2) The pattern of Christ is also that of repeated grace; but then comes the point of judgment.³⁹ In the closing chapters of the canon, both God and Christ are revealed as the Divine Avenger (Rev 6:9-17; 18:21-19:2; 19:11-16); and after the bloody winepress of God's wrath is trampled (Rev 14:19-20),⁴⁰ the saints in heaven sing the Song

³⁷ After enduring two centuries of the worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, as instituted by Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:26-13:2), and of the increasing compromise to pagan ways and the worship of Baal, as instituted by Ahab (1 Kgs 16:30-33), God said, in essence, "No further!" For example, Hosea 8:1 speaks of Israel's imminent destruction by the image of a "vulture (poised) over the house of Yahweh" (8:1); her "days of punishment/recompense have come" (9:7), in which God will "remember their wickedness" (8:13; 9:7; cf. Jer 14:10; contrast with Jer 31:34, in which God promises to "remember their sin no more"); their sins have reached the point where God has "hated/rejected" them (9:15, 17); because of which they will be subject to the depth of human depravity—"their little ones dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open" (14:1 [Heb.]); they will "return to Egypt" (8:13; 9:3; 11:5)—that shocking reversal of their redemption story (though even here hope is held out, 11:11); they will no longer be shown compassion (1:6), no longer be called "my people" (1:9, and Yahweh will no longer be their "I Am")—though even here hope is held out (2:1-3; 2:16-25 [Heb.]; chapter 3). For similar expression of the severity of God toward his people for their stubborn sin, cf. Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11. In each of these, Yahweh tells Jeremiah *not* to pray for them.

³⁸ "Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness, maintaining lovingkindness to thousands, and forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. Yet he by no means leaves the guilty unpunished"

³⁹ Indeed, if the fullness of the character of Christ is to be known, the prime exhibit in Heb 12:2-3 of enduring the cross and opposition from sinful men must be expanded to include his symbolic curse on the nation who rejected him (Mark 11:12-21)—a curse realized in that generation in the desolation of Jerusalem.

⁴⁰ This is a judgment in which Christ, the "Son of Man," participates (Rev 14:14-16).

of Moses and the Song of the Lamb (Rev 15:3-4).⁴¹ The same Christ who said, “Love your enemies,” will return one day in vengeance to destroy those who are recalcitrant. (3) So also, the pattern of God’s people is to be that of repeated grace; but there may also come a point in time when judgment must be called for (i.e., the voicing of imprecations), and the righteous will delight to see it accomplished (cf., e.g., Ps 58:11-12; Rev 18:20).

Although in the New Testament the allowable extent of temporal enmity is lessened and the expected extent of temporal kindness is heightened, the tension between the characteristic ethic and the extreme ethic of the Christian toward evil continues. For although Christians are called to continually seek reconciliation and practice longsuffering, forgiveness, and kindness (after the pattern of God, notably portrayed in Matt 5:44-45 and Luke 6:35-36),⁴² there comes a point in time in which justice must be enacted—whether from God directly or through his representatives (in particular the State and its judicial system, cf. Rom 13:1-4).

Narrowing the Field

To address the entirety of the imprecations in the Psalms would require a treatment too voluminous for the constraints of this dissertation. Indeed, the passages in

⁴¹ Notice here how the Song of Moses—the song of divine vengeance—is equated in some measure with the Song of Christ the Lamb.

⁴² The radical demands of love Jesus places on his followers are patterned after the example of God: “Love your enemies . . . so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:44-45); and “Love your enemies . . . and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and evil. Be compassionate, just as also your Father is compassionate” (Luke 6:35-36).

the Psalms which contain an element of imprecation, or the desire for divine vengeance, are quite numerous,⁴³ including at least: 5:11; 6:11; 7:7, 10, 16-17; 9:20-21; 10:15; 17:13; 28:4; 31:18-19; 35:1, 4-6, 8, 19, 24-26; 40:15-16; 52:7; 54:7; 55:10, 16; 56:8; 58:7-11; 59:6, 12-14; 68:2-3, 31; 69:23-26, 28-29; 70:3-4; 71:13; 74:11, 22-23; 79:6, 10, 12; 83:10, 12, 14-19; 94:1-2; 104:35; 109:6-15, 17-20, 29; 129:5-8; 137:7-9; 139:19, 21-22; 140:9-12; 141:10; 143:12. This covers ninety-eight verses in thirty-two psalms. However, those psalms which may be rightly deemed “imprecatory” (i.e., whose characterizing element is the imprecations or cries for divine vengeance found in them) are better limited to fourteen: Psalms 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137, 139, and 140. Yet, even to address each of these extensively would be to overextend the limits of this inquiry.

Therefore, I will be addressing the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms and their relation to Christian ethics via primarily three psalms, each representing one of the three spheres of cursing found within the larger corpus of Imprecatory Psalms: (1) Psalm 58—imprecation against a societal enemy, (2) Psalm 137—imprecation against a national or community enemy, and (3) Psalm 109—imprecation against a personal enemy. All the other Imprecatory Psalms find their lodging in the shade of these three and will be dealt with there but secondarily. Furthermore, I have chosen these three psalms specifically because they contain the harshest language or most severe imprecations against the enemies. Thus, if an answer may be given to these, then an answer may be given to all.

⁴³ Versification here and throughout the dissertation follows that of the Massoretic Text as reflected in *BHS*.

Psalm 58 contains a series of graphic imprecations against what is deemed a societal enemy—judges who have become blatantly unjust, deceitful, and violent. In it, appeal is made to the true Judge to swiftly and decisively mete out true justice:

^{58:7} O God, smash their teeth in their mouths;
 Break off the fangs of the young lions, O Yahweh!
⁸ Let them flow away like water that runs off in all directions;
 let him prepare to shoot his arrows, only to find them headless!
⁹ Like a miscarriage, let him melt away;
 like a woman's abortion, let them not see the sun!
¹⁰ Before your pots feel the heat of the brambles—
 as lively as wrath—may he sweep them away!
¹¹ The righteous will rejoice when he sees vengeance;
 he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked (58:7-11).⁴⁴

Under this umbrella Psalm 94 may be subsumed, for it involves the cry for divine vengeance from the “Judge of the earth” (94:2) against a corrupt and oppressive judicial throne (94:5-6, 20-21).

^{94:1} God of vengeance, Yahweh,
 God of vengeance, shine forth!
² Rise up, Judge of the earth;
 pay back to the proud what they deserve! (94:1-2).

Psalm 137 is a shockingly emotive cry from the bowels of the exiled remnant against those who had, with such carnage and cruelty, devastated Judea:

^{137:7} Remember, O Yahweh, against the Edomites—
 the day of Jerusalem!
 They cried, “Raze her, raze her—
 down to her foundation!”
⁸ O Daughter of Babylon, (doomed to be) devastated,
 blessed is he who repays you
 what you deserve for what you did to us!
⁹ Blessed is he who seizes and shatters
 your little ones against the cliff! (137:7-9).

⁴⁴ The translations of Scripture throughout this work are the author's own.

Stationed under Psalm 137, several psalms call for divine vengeance upon a national or community enemy, uttered either by the community itself, or by an individual speaking from the community's perspective:

^{68:2} May God arise, may his enemies be scattered;
 may those who hate him flee before him.

³ As smoke is driven away,
 may you drive them away;
 as wax melts before the fire,
 may the wicked perish before God.

.....

³¹ Rebuke the beast of the reeds,
 the herd of bulls among the calves of the peoples—
 trampled down, bringing bars of silver.
 Scatter the peoples who take pleasure in battle (68:2-3, 31).

^{74:11} Why do you draw back your hand—even your right hand?
 (Draw it) from the midst of your bosom; finish (them)!

.....

²² Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;
 remember how fools mock you all day long!

²³ Do not forget the clamor of your foes,
 the uproar of your adversaries, which rises continually (74:11, 22-23).

^{79:6} Pour out your wrath on the nations
 that do not know you,
 and on the kingdoms
 that do not call on your name.

.....

¹⁰ Why should the nations say,
 “Where is their God?”
 Before our eyes, make known among the nations
 that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.

.....

¹² Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times
 the abuse they have hurled at you, O Lord! (79:6, 10, 12).

^{83:10} Do to them as you did to Midian,
 as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon.

.....

- ¹² Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,
 all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna.

- ¹⁴ O my God, make them like whirling dust,
 like chaff before the wind.
- ¹⁵ As fire consumes the forest
 and as flame sets the hills ablaze,
- ¹⁶ so pursue them with your tempest
 and with your storm-wind terrify them!
- ¹⁷ Fill their faces with shame
 that they may seek your name, O Yahweh.
- ¹⁸ Let them be ashamed and dismayed for ever;
 let them be abashed until they perish.
- ¹⁹ Let them know that you, whose name alone is Yahweh—
 are the Most High over all the earth (83:10, 12, 14-19).
- ^{129:5} May all who hate Zion
 be turned back in shame.
- ⁶ May they be like grass on the roof,
 which withers before it can grow;
- ⁷ with it the reaper cannot fill his hands,
 nor the binder of sheaves his arms.
- ⁸ May those who pass by not say,
 “The blessing of Yahweh be upon you;
 we bless you in the name of Yahweh” (129:5-8).

The majority of the Imprecatory Psalms, however, are situated against a personal enemy, or a collective enemy viewed from the perspective of the individual (notably, David). Of first place, and most offensive, is Psalm 109:

- ^{109:6} Appoint a wicked man against him,
 and let an accuser stand at his right hand!
- ⁷ When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
 and let his plea be considered as sin.
- ⁸ May his days be few;
 may another take his office.
- ⁹ May his children be fatherless
 and his wife a widow.
- ¹⁰ May his children wander about and beg,
 and may they be driven from their ruined homes.
- ¹¹ May a creditor seize all that he has,

- and may strangers plunder what he has gained from his labor.
- ¹² Let there be no one to extend lovingkindness to him,
nor to take pity on his fatherless children.
- ¹³ May his descendants be cut off,
may their name be blotted out in the next generation.
- ¹⁴ May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before Yahweh,
and may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
- ¹⁵ May they remain before Yahweh continually,
and may he cut off the memory of his descendants from the earth.
.....
- ¹⁷ He loved cursing—so may it come on him;
and he found no pleasure in blessing—so may it be far from him.
- ¹⁸ He clothed himself with cursing as his coat;
so may it enter into his body like water,
and into his bones like oil.
- ¹⁹ May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
and like a belt tied forever around him.
- ²⁰ May this be Yahweh's payment to my accusers,
even to those who speak evil against my life.
.....
- ²⁸ Let them curse, but may you bless;
may those who rise up against me be put to shame,
but may your servant rejoice.
- ²⁹ May my accusers be clothed with disgrace
and may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a robe (109:6-15, 17-20, 28-29).

Under this plethora of imprecations, the various and remaining personal Imprecatory Psalms may be comprehended:

- ^{5:11} Declare them guilty, O God!
Let them fall by their own intrigues.
For their many transgressions, cast them out,
for they have rebelled against you (5:11).
- ^{6:11} May all my enemies be ashamed and greatly troubled;
may they turn back in sudden disgrace (6:11).
- ^{7:7} Rise up, O Yahweh, in your anger;
raise yourself up against the rage of my enemies!
Rouse yourself on my behalf with the judgment you have decreed.
.....

- ¹⁰ Bring an end to the evil of the wicked!

- ¹⁶ He dug a pit and scooped it out—
 so may he fall into the pit he has made.
- ¹⁷ Let the trouble he has caused recoil on his head;
 and let the violence he has wreaked descend on his pate! (7:7, 10, 16-17).
- ^{9:20} Rise up, O Yahweh, let not man prevail;
 let the nations be judged in your presence.
- ²¹ Strike them with terror, O Yahweh;
 let the nations know they are but men (9:20-21).
- ^{10:15} Break the arm of the wicked and evil man;
 may you seek out his wickedness
 that would not be found out (10:15).
- ^{17:13} Rise up, O Yahweh, confront them, bring them down;
 rescue my life from the wicked by your sword (17:13).
- ^{28:4} Repay them in accordance with their deeds
 and in accordance with their evil work;
 in accordance with what their hands have done, repay them,
 and bring back upon them what they deserve (28:4).
- ^{31:18} O Yahweh, let me not be put to shame,
 for I call on you;
 let the wicked be put to shame
 and go silent to the grave.
- ¹⁹ Let their lying lips be silenced,
 which speak arrogantly against the righteous
 with pride and contempt (31:18-19).
- ^{35:1} Contend, O Yahweh, with those who contend with me;
 fight against those who fight against me.

- ⁴ Let them be put to shame and humiliated
 who seek my life;
 let them be turned back in dismay
 who plot my ruin.
- ⁵ Let them be like chaff before the wind,
 with the angel of Yahweh driving them away;
- ⁶ let their path be dark and slippery,
 with the angel of Yahweh pursuing them.

-
- ⁸ Let ruin overtake them by surprise;
and let their own net they hid ensnare them,
let them fall into the pit, to their ruin.
-
- ¹⁹ Let not those rejoice over me
who are wrongfully my enemies;
let not those who hate me without cause
(maliciously) wink the eye.
-
- ²⁴ Vindicate me according to your righteousness, O Yahweh my God;
and let them not rejoice over me.
- ²⁵ Let them not say to themselves, "Aha, just what we wanted!"
Let them not say, "We have swallowed him up."
- ²⁶ Let them be put to shame and confusion altogether,
who rejoice at my ruin;
Let them be clothed with shame and disgrace
who exalt themselves over me (35:1, 4-6, 8, 19, 24-26).
- ^{40:15} Let them be put to shame and confusion altogether
who seek to take my life;
let them be turned back in disgrace
who desire my ruin.
- ¹⁶ Let them be appalled at their own shame
who say to me, "Aha! Aha!" (40:15-16).
- ^{52:7} So, may God tear you eternally down:
may he snatch you up and tear you from your tent;
and may he uproot you from the land of the living! (52:7).
- ^{54:7} May he repay with evil those who watch me with ill intent.
In your faithfulness annihilate them! (54:7).
- ^{55:10} Swallow them, O Lord, divide their speech,
for I see violence and strife in the city.
-
- ¹⁶ Let death take them by surprise;
let them go down alive to the grave,
for evils find lodging among them (55:10, 16).
- ^{56:8} For (such) wickedness, will they escape (punishment)?
In your anger, O God, bring down the nations (56:8).

^{59:6} And you, O Yahweh God of Hosts, God of Israel,
 awake to punish all the nations;
 show no mercy to all wicked traitors.

.....

¹² Do not kill them, lest my people forget;
 make them tremble by your power, and bring them down,
 O Lord, our shield.

¹³ For the sins of their mouths,
 for the words of their lips,
 let them be captured in their pride.

And for the curses and lies they utter,

¹⁴ consume them in wrath,
 consume them till they are no more.

Then it will be known to the ends of the earth
 that God rules over Jacob (59:6, 12-14).

^{69:23} May their table set before them become a snare;
 may it become retribution and a trap.

²⁴ May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
 and their loins tremble forever.

²⁵ Pour out your wrath upon them;
 and let your burning anger overtake them.

²⁶ May their camp be deserted;
 let there be no one to dwell in their tents.

.....

²⁸ Add iniquity to their iniquity;
 and let them not enter into your righteousness.

²⁹ Let them be blotted out of the book of life,
 and let them not be listed with the righteous (69:23-26, 28-29).

^{70:3} Let them be put to shame and confusion
 who seek my life;
 let them be turned back in disgrace
 who desire my ruin.

⁴ Let them turn back because of their shame
 who say, "Aha! Aha!" (70:3-4).

^{71:13} May they be put to shame and perish
 who accuse me;
 may they be covered with reproach and disgrace
 who seek my ruin (71:13).

^{104:35} May sinners vanish from the earth,
 and may the wicked be no more (104:35).

- ^{139:19} If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
 Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!

- ²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh,
 and abhor those who rise up against you?
- ²² I hate them with perfect hatred;
 I count them my enemies (139:19, 21-22).
- ^{140:9} Do not grant, O Yahweh, the desires of the wicked;
 do not let their plans succeed,
 or they will become proud. *Selah*
- ¹⁰ The heads of those who surround me—
 may he cover them with the trouble of their lips.
- ¹¹ May (fiery) coals fall upon them;
 may He throw them into the fire,
 into watery pits—may they never rise!
- ¹² Let men of slander not be established in the land;
 men of violence—may evil hunt them down swiftly! (140:9-12).
- ^{141:10} Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
 while I safely pass by (141:10).
- ^{143:12} And in Your lovingkindness annihilate my enemies
 and destroy all my foes,
 for I am Your servant! (143:12).

The Method of Approach

In this dissertation, I will seek to establish the plausibility that the utterance of imprecations or appeals for the onslaught of divine vengeance in the face of sustained injustice, hardened enmity, and gross oppression—as is found in the Imprecatory Psalms—is consistent with the ethics of the Old Testament and finds corresponding (albeit lessened) echo in the New.

In the development of this thesis, I will investigate first the principal solutions proffered with regard to the Imprecatory Psalms and Christian ethics and evaluate their

legitimacy. Secondly, I will seek to settle the Imprecatory Psalms in their ancient Near Eastern context, in which cursing was an every-day facet of life. Following this, in the major focus of the dissertation, I will explore the three harshest psalms of imprecation (Pss 58, 137, 109) in greater detail and seek to ascertain the theological foundations upon which their cries were uttered. Lastly, I will examine the categorical and apparently contradictory statements of the New Testament (particularly the command of Jesus to “love your enemies” and of Paul to “bless and curse not”) vis-à-vis the imprecations in the psalms, coupled with an attempt to account for like imprecations in the New Testament.

Moreover, I will approach the issue at hand from a biblical-theological, rather than a systematic-theological, standpoint. Therefore, I will limit my inquiry into the ethics of such imprecations to the corpus of the Old and New Testaments as they have been progressively revealed. This approach further entails the recognition of a direct connection between the testaments: that the Old and New Testaments speak alike of the same God,⁴⁵ and essentially of the same people of God,⁴⁶ who are governed by essentially the same

⁴⁵ For example: in Rev 1:17 Jesus is, by ascription, equated with Yahweh (alluding to Isa 44:6; 48:12); and in Rev 21:3, 7 God proclaims the culmination of the defining covenant declaration (cf. Gen 17:7-8; Lev 26:11-12; 2 Sam 7:14; Jer 31:33).

⁴⁶ For example: 1 Pet 2:9 speaks of the New Testament church in language drawn from that inaugural declaration of Old Testament Israel as the people of God (Exod 19:5-6); Gal 3:29 attests that those who are in Christ are heirs of the Abrahamic promise; and Rom 4 affirms Abraham as our father in the faith and the exemplar of our faith. Although there have been historical disagreements between covenantal and dispensational theologians regarding the degree of continuity versus discontinuity between the testaments and the people of God, dispensationalism, as it has been most recently expressed, embraces an *essential unity* to the people of God. Ware argues that “we can think responsibly about the continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the church as both entities relate within the one people of God.” He elaborates: “Israel and the church are in one sense a *united people* of God (they participate in the same new covenant), while in

ethic.⁴⁷ Indeed, the New Testament, by its own testimony and inference, is both the necessary complement and completion of the Old.⁴⁸

another sense they remain separate in their identity and so comprise *differing peoples* of God. (Israel is given territorial and political aspects of the new-covenant promise not applicable to the church.) Israel and the church are in fact one people of God, who together share in the forgiveness of sins through Christ and partake of his indwelling Spirit with its power for covenant faithfulness, while they are nonetheless distinguishable covenant participants comprising what is one unified people. As the title of this chapter suggests, they are in fact the united ‘people(s) of God,’ one by faith in Christ and common partaking of the Spirit, and yet distinct insofar as God will yet restore Israel as a nation to its land. One new covenant, under which differing covenant participants join together, through Christ and the Spirit, as a common people of God—this, then, is the grace and the glory of the marvelous provision of God.” Bruce A. Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 69, 96-97. Blaising and Bock agree, rooting this unity in the person and work of Christ: he “is the key to the dispensations. . . . He gives the dispensations their unity—a unity in historical development, not a static transcendental ahistorical unity—and He gives the redeemed their identity as the people(s) of God.” Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993): 300-01.

⁴⁷ For example: in Matt 22:36-40 our Lord distills the essence of the Old Testament commands as that of love for God and love for one’s neighbor (quoting from Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18); in 1 John 4:21 this same dual-faceted command is given to govern God’s New Covenant people; and in Gal 5:13-6:2 the “law of Christ” is linked to this very “law of love.”

⁴⁸ For example: in Matt 5:17 Christ asserts that he came not to abolish the Old Testament, but to fulfill it; 2 Cor 1:20 teaches that all God’s promises find their ultimate realization in Christ—and thus also to those united to him; and Rev 21-22 and Gen 1-3 together form an overarching inclusio to the Scriptures in their entirety.

CHAPTER 2

UNSATISFACTORY SOLUTIONS

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

Evil Emotions

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

¹ The ongoing works of Walter Brueggemann are nearest the exception.

² I.e., in the fulfillment of the demands of divine justice.

the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth”³—the worst of which is perhaps Psalm 109. But “even more devilish in one verse is the, otherwise beautiful, 137 where a blessing is pronounced on anyone who will snatch up a Babylonian baby and beat its brains out against the pavement.”⁴ Lewis uses such phrases to describe these psalms as: “terrible or (dare we say?) contemptible,”⁵ “indeed devilish,”⁶ “wicked” and “sinful,”⁷ “this fury or luxury of hatred,”⁸ “ferocious” and “dangerous.”⁹ He further believes with regard to them that “we must face both facts squarely. The hatred is there—festering, gloating, undisguised—and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves.”¹⁰

However, to embrace this position is questionable on four counts. Firstly, to insist that the numerous Imprecatory Psalms breathe words of hateful revenge and, as such,

³ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 120-21.

⁸ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22. Kittel echoes the sentiment that these notorious Imprecatory Psalms originated from superficial, mean-spirited persons, found among the pious of all times. “It is not necessary to excuse them; they belong to the past; to palliate them would be quite as foolish as to blame them; to repeat them would be blasphemy, and not to be thought of in these days.” Rudolph Kittel, *The Scientific Study of the Old Testament*, trans. J. Caleb Hughes (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910), 142-43.

are not to be repeated by those trained in the school of Christ who taught his followers to “love your enemies,” is to run counter to the *prevailing* piety of the psalmists—notably that of David, the principal author of these psalms. Though he did succumb to the temptation of rage and revenge (e.g., 1 Sam 25:21-22) and committed gross sin (notably, the account of his adultery, deception, and murder in 2 Sam 11), these failings did not express his pervading character, which was rather revealed in his repentance (cf. Ps 51; 1 Sam 25:32-34). Moreover, he was quick to exhibit a Christ-like spirit toward his enemies—in particular, King Saul.¹¹ It would thus appear an unlikely inconsistency if this principal author of the Imprecatory Psalms (23 of the 32 bear his explicit seal of authorship¹²) were to exhibit in

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

¹² There is a certain level of debate, ambiguity, and uncertainty surrounding the use of the introductory ל in the superscriptions of the psalms. Indeed, its fluidity of meaning is patently evidenced by the three-fold use in Ps 18:1: לְמַנְצֵם לְעַבְדֵי יְהוָה לְדָוִד אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַיהוָה, “for the choir director, of David, the servant of Yahweh, who spoke to Yahweh . . .”. Granting this, however, I adopt the traditional understanding of the ל in, e.g., לְדָוִד as the *lamedh* of authorship for the following reasons: (1) The extended superscription found in Ps 18:1 makes the matter of authorship indicated by לְדָוִד explicit. Moreover, it is likely that לְדָוִד is the abbreviated form of the longer and frequent, e.g., מְזִמּוֹר לְדָוִד, “a psalm of David.” That this is so to be construed, rather than as a psalm “for” or “concerning” David is buttressed by the like use in the prophecy of Habakkuk 3:1, where authorship is again explicit: תְּפִלָּה לְחַבְקִיּוֹק, “a prayer of Habakkuk . . .”. (2) Such an understanding is consonant with David’s reputation as both musician and composer (e.g., 2 Sam 23:1; Amos 6:5; 1 Chr 15–16). (3) Both Christ and the apostles considered David himself to be the author of those psalms which bore the imprint לְדָוִד (e.g., Mark 12:35-37; Acts 2:25-35). (4) The Tell Qasile ostraca (c. 8th cent. B.C.) evidence a use similar to that of the psalms: לַמֶּלֶךְ, “Belonging to the king.” John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 1, *Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 15-17. Moreover, Deutsch and Heltzer have

these psalms a heart consistently far from the character of Christ.¹³ To the contrary, we find as a core practice that precedes the personal imprecations of David a pattern of love-in-action. Indeed, the utterance of any imprecation in the psalms comes only after the enemy's repeated return of "evil for good" (Pss 35:12; 109:5), or after gross (and frequently, sustained) injustice (cf. Pss 58, 79, 137). For example, in Psalm 35:12-14, David relates:

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

Secondly, the purposes which govern the expression of imprecation in the psalms and the principal themes that run repeatedly through them are of the highest ethical plane: (1) a concern for the honor of God (e.g., Ps 74:22, "Rise up, O God, and defend your cause; remember how fools mock you all day long!"); (2) a concern for the realization of justice amidst rampant injustice (e.g., Ps 58:12, "Then men will say . . . 'Surely there is a God who judges in the earth!'"); (3) a concern for the public recognition

catalogued numerous early Hebrew inscriptions on personal articles, the preponderance of which are likewise introduced by the **ל** of ownership. Cf. R. Deutsch and M. Heltzer, *Forty New Ancient West Semitic Inscriptions* (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publication, 1994); and *ibid.*, *New Epigraphic Evidence from the Biblical Period* (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publication, 1995). Furthermore, Gesenius long ago observed that "the introduction of the author, poet, &c., by this *Lamed auctoris* is the customary idiom also in the other Semitic dialects, especially in Arabic." GKC, 420.

¹³ This is not to assert that David was in any way a stranger to sin and rebellion. But the governing principle of his life was **תִּפְּוּ**. And it must be remembered that these Imprecatory Psalms of David were incorporated into the Psalter for Israel's worship. Though this does not of itself demand that the things expressed therein are faultless, the sheer quantity of the cries for divine vengeance in the Psalms calls into question the view that they are not, in some measure at least, exemplary.

of the sovereignty of God (e.g., Ps 59:14, “Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob”); (4) the hope that divine retribution will cause men to seek Yahweh (e.g., Ps 83:17, “Fill their faces with shame so that they may seek your name”); (5) an abhorrence of sin (e.g., Ps 139:21, “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh?”); and (6) a concern for the preservation of the righteous (e.g., Ps 143:11-12, “For the sake of your name, O Yahweh, preserve my life! . . . And in your lovingkindness annihilate my enemies and destroy all my foes, for I am your servant”).

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

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

¹⁵ Although these words are in specific reference to Psalm 110, the implications are farther reaching.

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

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

¹⁶ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 19.

¹⁷ Ibid. Lewis later elaborates: “The total result is not ‘the Word of God’ in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we . . . receive that word from it . . . by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message.” Ibid., 112. Zenger likewise compromises the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Psalms in his defense of their appropriate use in the modern church. He baldly asserts that he is “not interested in a fundamentalist defense of the psalms of enmity and vengeance that are experienced as difficult or genuinely offensive, as if they must necessarily be retained because they are ‘the word of God’ and ‘revelation’.” Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 63. Rather, “these psalms confront us with the reality of violence and, especially, with the problem of the perpetrators of this suffering and their condemnation by the judgment of God. In the process, they very often compel us to confess that *we ourselves* are violent, and belong among the *perpetrators* of the violence lamented in these psalms. *In that way*, these psalms are God’s revelation.” Ibid., 85. Barnes, on the other hand, sought to defend the inspiration of the Imprecatory Psalms by insisting that “all that *inspiration* is responsible for is, the correctness of the *record* in regard to the existence of these feelings—that is, the authors of the Psalms actually *recorded* what was passing in their own minds. They gave vent to their internal emotions. They state real feelings which they themselves had; feelings which, while human nature remains the same, may spring up in the mind of imperfect man, anywhere, and at any time.” Albert Barnes, *Notes, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical, on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1868), xxxviii. However, as Bush notes, the question is not “whether these imprecations are ‘truthful,’ but rather how this truth can be approved by God!” L. Russ Bush, “Does God Inspire Imprecation? Divine Authority and Ethics in the Psalms” (Evangelical Philosophical Society Presidential Address, November 16, 1990), 5.

of evil emotion not to be emulated may well account for the initial writing of the Psalms, but it does not adequately explain why these psalms were incorporated into the canon—indeed, the book of worship for God’s people! Gunn perceptively observes that to regard the Imprecatory Psalms “as wholly vindictive may be a sufficient explanation for the *writing* of them, because anyone in certain given circumstances of distress and provocation may have surrendered to this dark spirit. What we have to account for, however, is not the writing of them but their incorporation into the Psalter at the time when it was compiled, and in view of the purpose for which it was compiled. It is as nearly certain as can be that there was a higher reason for their inclusion in a collection that was intended solely for use in the worship of God.”¹⁸ Indeed, these troubling curses and cries for vengeance appear with such frequency that they form an integral part of the canonical Psalter¹⁹—and this without any literary or theological intimation of divine disapprobation for the expression of such sentiments.²⁰ Nor was there felt any need by later copyists and compilers to expunge such material as unbecoming the Book of God. Gunn further muses that there

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

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

²⁰ Although it may be argued that such expressions were retained to show succeeding generations that all things may be rightly brought to Yahweh in prayer—even our rage and revenge (see below), this would have to be inferred, for such a limit and intent is nowhere explicitly stated. Moreover, it yet leaves open the question: Why are there *so many* Imprecatory Psalms?

must be some thought—albeit vivid and painful—in these psalms which the compilers “regarded as seemly and necessary in the people’s approach to God in worship; and they took the risk—a very large one—of the misunderstanding which would arise and has constantly arisen from the type of language in which that thought was clothed.”²¹ This reality must be duly grappled with.²²

To be expressed and relinquished. Walter Brueggemann, in a related position, understands the Imprecatory Psalms as hateful cries for revenge—but cries which Christians must move beyond. Yet this way beyond the psalms of vengeance “is a way *through* them and not *around* them.”²³ He feels that rather than disowning them, Christians ought fully to embrace these harsh psalms as their own. They voice a common sentiment, for humans are vengeful creatures. “Our rage and indignation must be fully owned and fully expressed.

²¹ Gunn, *God in the Psalms*, 99.

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

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1986), 68.

Then (and *only* then) can our rage and indignation be yielded to the mercy of God.”²⁴

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

Brueggemann nobly insists that this “rage is rightly carried even to the presence of

Yahweh,”²⁵ that it may be relinquished there.²⁶

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

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 85.

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

²⁷ These Old Testament theological foundations and New Testament imprecations will be dealt with in later chapters.

And initially, this yearning for God’s just vengeance on the inveterately wicked that we find in the Psalms is far from evil—Jesus himself was known to display the rage evoked by stubborn sin. Prominent in this regard are: “He looked around at them in anger, deeply grieved at their stubborn hearts” (Mark 3:5), and “Snakes! Brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to Gehenna?!”²⁸ (Matt 23:33). In both cases Christ was reacting against the hardened unbelief and opposition of the religious leaders of his day. Although neither of these statements is strictly imprecatory, they do bear the same sense and intensity: they exhibit a similar sentiment (i.e., the yearning for divine vengeance)²⁹ expressed through a similar emotional state (i.e., rage), which are the cornerstones of Brueggemann’s contention that the imprecations in the Psalms are indeed evil. And if this is the example of the supremely ethical Jesus, then a righteous “rage” has been reclaimed. In addition, an instance of actual imprecation from the lips of Christ is recorded in Mark 11:12-14, 20-21 (cf. Matt 21:18-20). As both the near context and the larger development of the Gospel elucidate, Christ’s cursing of the fig tree is a not-so-veiled imprecation against faithless and fruitless Israel—an Israel who had so stubbornly rejected him.³⁰

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

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

³⁰ This passage will be dealt with in more detail in chapter five.

Moreover, weighted against the contention that the Imprecatory Psalms pulsate with the venom of malice and revenge is the sheer volume of Imprecatory Psalms in the Psalter. If imprecations or calls for divine vengeance against the inveterately evil or unjust are to be construed as expressions of the faithful believer's dark side—even if intended as a teaching tool, how is the inclusion in the Psalter of such a disproportionately large contingent of imprecations to be explained? Indeed, their prevalence in the Book of Worship by those of established piety³¹ lends credence to the opinion that such cries are to be embraced as the believer's justified appeal to divine power and rectification in the midst of human powerlessness and oppression, rather than utterances to be desperately avoided.

Old Covenant Morality

Inferior morality. Approaching the issue from a dispensational and progressive-revelational standpoint, Roy Zuck seeks to alleviate the difficulty aroused by the Imprecatory Psalms by claiming that “the unfolding of revealed truth in the Word of God is accompanied by a similar advancement of morals,”³² and that “the Old Testament is on

³¹ Cf. discussion above, pp. 26-28.

³² Roy Ben Zuck, “The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1957), 73. Hammond similarly estimates “that prayers for the temporal and even capital punishment of the wicked, while unlawful and unjustifiable on the lips of Christian men, were nevertheless, under certain conditions, perfectly lawful and perfectly natural on the part of those to whom life and immortality and a judgment *to come* had not been brought to light.” Joseph Hammond, “The Vindictive Psalms Vindicated: Part IV,” *Expositor* 3 (1876): 452. This assertion is countered, however, when one encounters imprecations in the New Testament which bear the same or a similar likeness.

a lower moral plane than the New Testament.”³³ Of principal support for his thesis is the observation that, “though there are many passages which speak of tenderness and kindness toward others, even toward enemies, the Old Testament never speaks of *forgiving or loving avowed enemies of God*.”³⁴ This assertion is placed opposite the words of Jesus in the New Testament, in which he urged his disciples to “love your enemies” (Matt 5:44), and adjured his Father to “forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). In the entire Old Testament, Zuck finds only two passages which speak of consideration for one’s enemy—neither of which “says anything about forgiving or loving that enemy!”³⁵ The verses cited are Exodus 23:4-5 and Proverbs 25:21, which state, respectively: “If you happen upon the stray ox or donkey of your enemy, you must surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you fallen under its load, do not fail to help him; you must surely help him with it.” “If one who hates you is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.”

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

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

³⁴ Ibid., 60.

³⁵ Ibid.

of love placed upon the Old Testament (or the New, for that matter) is countered by the broader teaching and example of Scripture. In both testaments, love is expressed tangibly in acts of kindness, so that a deed of kindness is viewed as an act of love. For example, Leviticus 19, from which the second great commandment arises, is replete with various “actions” that reveal a heart of love for one’s neighbor. These include such things as “intentionally leaving the edges of the harvest field for the poor and the foreigner” (Lev 19:9-10); “paying your workers in a timely fashion” (Lev 19:13); “showing respect for the elderly” (Lev 19:32); and “treating the foreigner as if he were a native” (Lev 19:34). Indeed, in this latter passage, Yahweh goes on to command the Israelites to “love him [the foreigner] as yourself, for you were foreigners (גֵּרִים) in the land of Egypt.”³⁶ This helps us to understand that the reference to “loving one’s neighbor” in Leviticus 19:18, though paralleled with “one of your people,” is by no means meant to be confined there. Rather, that dictum is intended to apply to anyone nearby whose need one may meet, to whom one can show tangible love. This, in many ways, laid the foundation for Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to the query, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29-37). Furthermore, in Matthew 5:45 (cf. Luke 6:35), Jesus established the command for *loving* one’s enemies upon the example of the *kindness* of God, who “sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” alike. Moreover, this kindness toward one’s enemies is both unquestionably commanded (Exod 23:4-5; Prov 25:21) and exemplified in the Old

³⁶ Thus, although the term גֵּר speaks generically of a “resident alien,” in this context there is the added nuance of a basic and natural enmity as well. For, although Israel entered Egypt on friendly terms, their “sojourn” in Egypt was characterized by the enmity of denigration and oppression of slavery. It is this mistreatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians that Yahweh seeks to counter among his own people, counter to their inclinations (cf. Deut 10:19).

Testament (e.g., Elisha in 2 Kgs 6:18-23;³⁷ Naaman's slave girl in 2 Kgs 5;³⁸ and Yahweh vs. Jonah in Jonah 3-4³⁹). To distance deeds of kindness from the definition of love would be to limit the intent of Scripture without warrant. Thus, the Old Testament does indeed speak of loving one's enemies—but this enemy-love is placed in the language, command, and example of enemy-kindness, which is love in action.

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

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

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

³⁹ This example of Yahweh's "unexpected" compassion toward the Assyrians—his inveterate adversaries and the oppressors of his people—is contrasted with the unbecoming response of Jonah.

with absolute morality.”⁴⁰ And Archer well echoes that “progressive revelation is not to be thought of as a progress from error to truth, but rather as a progress from the partial and obscure to the complete and clear.”⁴¹ There is indeed a degree of difference in the progress of the testaments; but it is a difference in degree not in kind. Beardslee freely admits this development, yet rightly insists that “*in essence* there is only one principle in regard to morals pervading the Scriptures.”⁴²

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

⁴⁰ F. G. Hibbard, *The Psalms Chronologically Arranged, with Historical Introductions; and a General Introduction to the Whole Book*, 5th ed. (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856), 107.

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

⁴² J. W. Beardslee, “The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8 (1897): 496.

expression is constant with that of the Old.⁴³ The way that morality is expressed in the varying dispensations, however, may indeed vary. This is due, among other things, to the centralized status of God's people in the Old Testament versus the decentralized status in the New. In the Old Testament, God's people were surrounded by enemy nations: the necessity of their survival and the fulfillment of God's promises required a prevailing posture of caution or war.⁴⁴ But with the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit as the culmination of the ages and the climax of promise has come a more explicit embrace of enemy-love and enduring abuse⁴⁵ and the opening of the nations to the gospel of grace.

On a similar basis as the above, Chalmers Martin distances the praying of the Imprecatory Psalms from the New Testament believer when he asserts that the "distinction between the sin and the sinner was impossible to David as an Old Testament saint,"⁴⁶ but

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

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

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

⁴⁶ Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms," 548. He continues: "This impossibility arose out of the fact that the doctrine of Satan, which makes it easy for us to pity the sinner while we hate and condemn the sin, was then very imperfectly revealed. We pity the sinner because we view him as not exercising an unconstrained choice of evil, but as being the victim of a cruel compulsion. . . . They thought of these men as choosing evil simply because they loved it, and therefore as being worthy to be hated by all those who loved and chose the good." *Ibid.* This,

is a distinction which must rightfully now be made. According to Martin, the progress of revelation alters the Christian's stance toward the enemies of God from one of enmity against the whole being to one of mere hatred of the governing principle of sin operating through the sinner. This conclusion is similarly echoed by Althann who, after examining the use of imprecation in the Psalms vis-à-vis the cultural milieu in which they appear, proposes a solution to our present repugnance for such severe and unseemly language by "interpreting the expressions about the extermination of the godless in terms of the eradication of the causes of disequilibrium in the private and community life of Yahweh's faithful. . . . Thus, a Christian re-reading turns the execration of individuals into a denunciation of the unjust situation provoked by them."⁴⁷

Yet, however common this sentiment may implicitly be in modern Christendom,⁴⁸ it insufficiently characterizes the broader theology of Scripture. Therein, it is not merely "love the sinner but hate the sin," but also paradoxically, "love the sinner but

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

⁴⁷ Robert Althann, "The Psalms of Vengeance against Their Ancient Near Eastern Background," *JNSL* 18 (1992): 10.

⁴⁸ E.g., C. S. Lewis, in reflecting upon the imprecations in the psalms, denies that God looks upon the psalmists' enemies as they do (i.e., with hatred). While he asserts that God doubtless "has for the sin of those enemies just the implacable hostility which the poets express," he maintains that such hatred is directed "not to the sinner but to the sin." Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 32.

hate the sinner.”⁴⁹ For even in the New Testament, the fullness of revelation’s progress, it is *sinners*—not just sin—who will be destroyed, suffering the eternal torment of hell.⁵⁰

On the part of God, this seeming paradox of “loving yet hating the sinner” is evidenced by his raining both judgment and blessing upon them, as seen by the comparison of Psalm 11:5-6, “the wicked and him who loves violence his soul hates. He will rain⁵¹

⁴⁹ McKenzie rightly observes that “sin as an abstraction has no existence. The sin which we hate has its concrete existence in human wills.” John L. McKenzie, “The Imprecations of the Psalter,” *AER* 111 (1944), 91. It is for such reason as this, he argues, that law-abiding citizens may consent to the execution of a murderer—not because of the pleasure his killing gives them, but because his death restores the order of justice which his crime has violated. *Ibid.*, 90. Moreover, McKenzie, speaking out of the context of the Second World War, contends that “we would not carry on the war if we did not regard our enemies as evil and desire efficaciously to inflict evil upon them. This is a species of hatred.” *Ibid.* He then further perceptively muses: “there is a lawful hatred of the sinner; and indeed there must be, since such a hatred is the obverse of the love of God. The love of God hates all that is opposed to God; and sinners—not merely sin—are opposed to God. And if such a sentiment is lawful, its expression is lawful; and one may desire that the evil in another receive its corresponding evil—provided that this hatred is restrained within the limits of that which is lawful. These limits are: 1. Hatred must not be directed at the *person* of one’s neighbor; he is hated *for his evil quality*. 2. One may desire that the divine justice be accomplished in the sinner; but it must be a desire for divine justice, not a desire for the personal evil of another out of personal revenge. 3. The infliction of evil may not be desired absolutely, but only under the condition that the sinner remains obdurate and unrepentant. 4. It must be accompanied by that true supernatural charity which efficaciously desires the supreme good—the eternal happiness—of all men in general, not excluding any individual who is capable of attaining it. In a word, the sinner may lawfully be hated only when he is loved.” *Ibid.*, 92-93. In like manner before him, Aquinas had affirmed that “God hates the detractor’s sin, not his nature. So we may hate detractors in the same way without sin.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 35, *Consequences of Charity*, trans. Thomas R. Heath (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1972), 11. Sutcliffe similarly argues that God’s hatred of sinners—and thus ours as well—“is a hatred of the sinner precisely as a sinner or in other words it is a hatred of his sinful character.” E. F. Sutcliffe, “Hatred at Qumran,” *RevQ* 2 (1960): 347.

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

⁵¹ Although the form of **רָטַר** here is jussive rather than imperfect, the sense is evidently to be construed as imperfect, as suggested by the context and so rendered by a consensus of translations (likewise, cf. the LXX’s future **ἐπιβρέξει**).

on the wicked coals of fire⁵² and sulfur,” with Matthew 5:44-45, “Love your enemies . . . so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he . . . sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” alike. It is further compounded by the comparison of Isaiah 63:3-4, “I trampled them in my anger . . . their blood splattered my garments . . . for the day of vengeance was in my heart,” with Ezekiel 33:11, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” As Piper muses upon this paradox, he observes that “God is grieved in one sense by the death of the wicked, and pleased in another.”⁵³ This is evidence of what he labels “the infinitely complex emotional life of God,”⁵⁴ in which he is able simultaneously both to love and to hate unbelievers—loving them in the sense of his common grace distributed “commonly,” and hating them in the sense that they stand as rebellious sinners before a holy God.

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

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

⁵³ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1991), 66.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Humans are created in God’s image (and thus are to image Him, Gen 1:26-28); Christians are being renewed in that image (Col 3:10); and they are to follow the example of Christ (as patterned by Paul, 1 Cor 11:1).

character and sentiment of God, he is called to do so.⁵⁶ In this endeavor he finds as his pattern the person of Christ, who both lived pervasive love, yet did not shy away from severe denunciations against the (even religious) unrepentant wicked.⁵⁷ On the Christian's part, then, this paradox is lived out practically and particularly with regard to those hardened sinners deemed "beyond the ken of repentance;"⁵⁸ and imprecations of judgment against them are uttered "*on the hypothesis of their continued impenitence.*"⁵⁹ Under

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

^{5:5} Surely, you are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness;
evil cannot dwell with you.

⁶ The boastful cannot stand before your eyes;
you hate all who practice iniquity.

⁷ You destroy those who tell lies;
bloodthirsty and deceitful men Yahweh abhors (5:5-7).

^{139:19} If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!

²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh,
and loathe those who rise up against you?

²² I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies (139:19, 21-22).

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

⁵⁸ Surburg, "The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms," 100.

⁵⁹ This creative tension of loving yet hating the hardened sinner is ably represented by Thrupp: "Imprecations of judgment on the wicked *on the hypothesis of their continued impenitence* are not inconsistent with simultaneous efforts to bring them to repentance; and Christian charity itself can do no more than labour for the sinner's conversion. The law of holiness requires us to pray for the fires of divine retribution: the law of love to seek meanwhile to rescue the brand from the burning." Joseph Francis Thrupp, *An Introduction to the Study and Use of the Psalms*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1860), 202.

such circumstances, “to wipe out the sins results in the destruction of the sinner.”⁶⁰ This is most often seen in the necessity of public justice executed against flagrant criminals. And it is against men such as these—“bloodthirsty men”—that David cried, “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh?” (Ps 139:21).⁶¹

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

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

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

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

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 44. In like manner, he dismisses the cry for divine vengeance of the martyrs in heaven (Rev 6:10) as “not applicable to the church age.” *Ibid.*

However, in addition to ignoring the manifest presence of imprecations on the lips of saints in the “dispensation of grace,”⁶⁴ this position runs counter to the testimony of the New Testament which affirms the enduring validity of the Abrahamic promise for those who embrace Christ through faith (cf. Gal 3:6-29).⁶⁵ Laney’s restriction of the Abrahamic promise to “Israel according to the flesh” (1 Cor 10:18) is parried by Paul’s affirmation in Galatians 3:29 (cf. Rom 2:28-29) that “if you belong to Christ, then you belong to Abraham’s seed, (and are thus) heirs according to the promise.” And if one is an heir of the Abrahamic Covenant through Christ, one is an heir—in some measure at least—to the promise of blessing as well as cursing found therein.⁶⁶

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

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

⁶⁶ This blessing of the Covenant, which is the focus of Paul’s discussion, is articulated as the blessing of life, of sonship, of the Spirit (Gal 3:14, 26; 4:4-7); and the curse (taken from the Mosaic Covenant) is the curse of death and condemnation (Gal 3:10-13). This “blessing” is drawn specifically from Gen 12:3b, which promises that the Gentiles would be “blessed” through Abraham; and thus, the distilled argument of Paul is that the Gentiles through faith in Christ, *the Seed* of Abraham, fully partake in the Covenant made to Abraham. This covenant also promised: “I will bless those who bless you; and I will curse him who curses you.” Granted, the blessings of the Covenant explicitly mentioned by Paul, which the Gentiles inherit, are spiritual in nature. However,

Bobby Gilbert follows in a kindred line of argument. After establishing the trans-temporal justice of the *lex talionis*⁶⁷ as the basis upon which the author of Psalm 137 cries out for violence against the violators, he retreats in response to the question of whether this same attitude would be appropriate for a Christian. The basis upon which he asserts that the Christian is unable to respond in such a manner is that “the *lex talionis* was a civil law given to the nation Israel as a means of administering justice under Israel’s theocracy. As a civil law, it is not binding upon the New Testament believer. It cannot, therefore, be the basis of New Testament imprecations.”⁶⁸

this is arguably not meant to categorically exclude the more “physical” elements of the Abrahamic Covenant. Rather, it is for the sake of emphasizing the fundamental issues of the promise in the progress of revelation—which issues are most germane to his argument in this epistle.

Indeed, although Paul’s address of the curse in this context is contrary to the sense in Gen 12:3a (for the sake of his emphasis and argument), his earlier example in this very epistle implies that he understood the element of divine cursing, as intended in the Abrahamic promise, to apply in some measure—in extreme instances—to Christian ethics. In Gal 1:8-9, an impassioned Paul called down the divine curse on the grievous enemies of the church. Also, Peter freely applied the imprecations of Pss 69 and 109 to the traitor Judas (Acts 1:15-20). And Jesus instructed his disciples on their first mission that, if they were welcomed into a home, they were to let their peace remain on it (i.e., God, through his disciples, would “bless those who blessed them”); but, if they were refused, they were to shake the dust off their feet as a sign of peace’s antithesis—the curse of coming judgment (i.e., God, through his disciples, would “curse those who cursed them”) (Matt 10:11-15).

The relevance of the Abrahamic curse in the daily life of the New Covenant believer is further intimated by the apostle Paul when he assured his protégé Timothy that a certain Alexander, who “cursed” God’s people by strongly opposing both Paul and the gospel message, would in turn be “cursed” by God with divine retribution (2 Tim 4:14-15). It is of interest to note that significant elements of early Christianity understood Paul’s statement to convey an imprecatory sense. Indeed, although undoubtedly a secondary reading, the Byzantine tradition (along with a portion of the Western) explicitly transmitted this imprecatory intent, as evidenced by the optative ἀποδώη (cf. KJV).

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

⁶⁸ Bobby J. Gilbert, “An Exegetical and Theological Study of Psalm 137” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981), 81. Gilbert dismisses the *lex talionis* as a proper foundation upon which the New Testament believer could utter imprecations. Instead, he argues that “when Paul requests the judicial wrath of God upon those who do not love the Lord (1 Cor. 16:22) or

This proposed solution is to be questioned, however. Gilbert rightly insists that the divinely instituted *lex talionis* “is based upon the retributive nature of God himself.”⁶⁹ Although Yahweh is a God of love, he “is also a God of retribution who deals with His creature’s trespasses against His holiness on the basis of His retributive justice.”⁷⁰ This is seen most clearly and poignantly in the necessity of the cross—and it is the cross which both bridges and binds the two testaments. Since, moreover, it is a grounding assertion of Scripture that the nature of God does not change (e.g., Mal 3:6; Heb 13:8), the principle of divine justice based upon that nature, as encased in the *lex talionis*, must as well remain constant.⁷¹

upon those who preach a different gospel (Gal. 1:8, 9), he does so on the basis that it is God’s revealed will that sin be punished (Rom. 6:23) and that it is God’s will that evil men will one day be eternally condemned (Rev. 20:11-15).” Ibid., 82. However, it is difficult to see how this differs materially from the issue in the Old Covenant. Saints in both testaments appeal to the revealed will of God as the basis of their imprecations, and this revealed will of God in both testaments is essentially identical. One may listen, for example, to how the Song of Moses—particularly the refrain, “It is mine to avenge, I will repay” (Deut 32:35), lilt its way through the pages of Scripture: as the basis of many of the imprecations in the Psalms (e.g., “God of vengeance, shine forth!” Ps 94:1), as the foundation of New Testament ethics in Rom 12:19, and as the song of triumph at the close of the canon (Rev 15:3-4; 19:1-2; in response to Rev 6:9-11).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁷¹ Indeed, this trans-testamental law in its cousin formulation, “the law of sowing and reaping,” is expressed in such diverse passages as Prov 26:27, Hos 8:7 and 10:12-13, and Gal 6:7-8; and Jesus’ own version of the divine law of retribution is stated in Matt 7:2: “With the measure you use it will be measured to you.” Notice also how the cry of Ps 137:7-9 finds its ultimate realization in Rev 18:5-6, 20-21. Further example of the operation of the *lex talionis* in the New Testament is seen in the apostle Paul’s confrontation with Elymas the magician in Acts 13:8-11. Indeed, although Allen insists that the “Christian faith teaches a new way, the pursuit of forgiveness and a call to love,” he perceptively asks: “Yet is there forgiveness for a Judas (cf. John 17:12) or for the Antichrist?” Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*. WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 21 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 242. The issue of the *lex talionis* will be addressed in more detail in chapter four.

Although he approaches the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms from a covenantal perspective, Meredith Kline comes to a similarly dispensational conclusion. He posits that the Old Covenant witnesses to “Intrusion ethics”—that the ethics of the consummation have been “intruded” into the era of common grace. He believes that the ethics of the Sinaitic Covenant in particular are “an anticipatory abrogation of the principle of common grace”⁷² inappropriate for the New Testament age, but which will be realized as the ethics of the age to come. He notes in this regard the example that believers in the eschaton, in patterning their ways after God’s, “will have to change their attitude toward the unbeliever from one of neighborly love to one of perfect hatred.”⁷³ The Imprecatory Psalms, then, in their expressions of hatred and their cries for vengeance, witness to this divine abrogation of common grace and, as such, would be illegitimately echoed by the New Testament church.

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

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

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 161. For Kline, it is only the principle of intrusion that makes the destruction of physical enemies in the Old Covenant, and the cries for such in the Psalms, permissible. For in the consummation, “no longer will there be the possibility that the enemy of the saint is the elect of God.” *Ibid.*, 162.

them to particular individuals or groups of individuals who at any specific time by their actions display enmity at God's kingdom. Those who are enemies of God at present may be his choice vessels tomorrow."⁷⁵ Now, however true this latter statement may be, to the larger construction it must be objected that nowhere in Scripture is it affirmed that the psalmists knew by God's Spirit who were reprobate in the divine decree⁷⁶—but they did know who were the inveterate enemies of God and his people! And neither does Scripture categorically forbid the cry for judgment against such people.⁷⁷ Zuck rightly admits the presence of unmistakable imprecations in the dispensation of grace (and he cites 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9; 5:12; 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 6:9-10), which he explains as voiced against “those who are the avowed adversaries of the Lord,” and “who are inexorably opposed and relentlessly antagonistic to the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁸ And this, it ought be noted, is the very point of the Old Testament imprecations. They also are voiced against the “inveterate

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

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

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

⁷⁸ Zuck, “The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 64, 66.

adversaries of the Lord.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, Christians are never called to make the unerring judgment delineating those who are “permanently identified with the kingdom of evil.”⁸⁰ But Christ himself has given the guiding principle by which to detect, in a practical manner,⁸¹ the elect from the reprobate: “By their fruit you shall know them” (Matt 7:16, 20).⁸²

Moreover, whereas Kline seeks to uphold the permanent validity of the moral law of Moses by insisting that “the distinction made is not one of different standards but of the application of a constant standard under significantly different conditions,”⁸³ his assertion is not lived out in practice. Rather, in the development of his thesis, the ethics of common grace are thoroughly pitted against the ethics of the consummation. For example, in his discussion of the ethics of the Conquest, Kline asserts that

. . . if Israel’s conquest of Canaan were to be adjudicated before an assembly of nations acting [solely] according to the provisions of common grace, that conquest would have to be condemned as an unprovoked aggression and, moreover, an aggression carried out in barbarous violation of the requirement to show all possible mercy even in the proper execution of justice. . . . It will only be with the frank acknowledgment that ordinary ethical requirements were suspended and the ethical principles of the last judgment intruded that the divine promises and commands to Israel concerning Canaan and the Canaanites come into their own. Only so can the conquest be justified.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Ibid., 66.

⁸⁰ Mennega, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 94.

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

⁸² Cf. Calvin who, in commenting on 2 Tim 4:14, adjures Christians to pronounce sentence “only against reprobates, who, by their impiety, give evidence that such is their true character.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, first published 1556, trans. William Pringle (n.p., n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 269.

⁸³ Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 160.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 163.

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

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

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

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

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

⁸⁸ H. G. L. Peels, *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*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, ed. A. S. van der Woude, vol. 31 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 246.

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

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

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

⁹⁰ Ibid., 246.

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

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

⁹³ E.g., Isa 2; 4; 11; 19:16-25; 24-27; 34-35; 60-62; 65:17-66:24.

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

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

mute their plea. Rather, the New Testament records the utterance of imprecations and petitions for divine vengeance on the lips of earth-bound and heaven-arrived saints alike (notably Rev 6:9-10).⁹⁵

Songs of Christ

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

⁹⁵ Here, in particular, this cry of the martyred saints *in heaven* for divine vengeance is in language strikingly reminiscent of the Imprecatory Psalms (cf. especially Ps 79:10). For such breadth of definition as inherently germane to the discussion, cf. chapter 1, pp. 4-6.

⁹⁶ Jay E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1991), 21.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

In this, Adams concurs with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr of World War II, who likewise denies that one can simply echo the prayers of David in the Imprecatory Psalms,⁹⁹ grounding his assertion on the basis that “according to the witness of the Bible, David is, as the anointed king of the chosen people of God, a prototype of Jesus Christ. What happens to him happens to him for the sake of the one who is in him and who is said to proceed from him, namely Jesus Christ. . . . David was a witness to Christ in his office, in his life, and in his words. . . . These same words which David spoke, therefore, the future Messiah spoke through him. The prayers of David were prayed also by Christ. Or better, Christ himself prayed them through his forerunner David.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, Bonhoeffer argues, although David did, in fact, utter these prayers of imprecation against his enemies, he did so only as the type of Messiah Jesus who was to arise from his line.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ With regard to Psalm 58, Bonhoeffer asserts, “Is this frightful Psalm of vengeance *our* prayer? Are *we* actually allowed to pray in such a manner? . . . No, we are certainly not permitted to pray like that.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “A Bonhoeffer Sermon,” trans. Daniel Bloesch, ed. F. Burton Nelson, *Theology Today* 38 (1982): 467. And with regard to this same psalm, Adams seeks to assert that, although David is the author of this psalm, since he is not innocent it is Christ who is praying this psalm with David; for “only one who is just can rightfully accuse others of injustice; only someone who is guiltless can pray this way.” Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, 103. Regarding Psalm 83, Adams likewise asks, “Without assistance how can we ever righteously pray this prayer? I answer this question unequivocally: *We never can!* We cannot pray this prayer on our own.” *Ibid.*, 56. However, laying aside hermeneutical issues of historical credibility, this approach confuses absolute innocence and justice with relative innocence and justice. As in much of the Old Testament in particular, the latter is meant here; otherwise no believer, no matter how godly, could rightly plead for God’s justice or accuse of sin—no matter how extreme (which is patently false, as even the teaching of Christ admits—e.g., Matt 7:1-6).

¹⁰⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, trans. James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), 18-19.

¹⁰¹ A weakness in this position is its failure to adequately address the issue of confessions of sin in the Davidic psalms. E.g., Psalm 40, which is applied in part (vv. 6-8) by the author of Hebrews to the person of Christ (Heb 10:5-10), also contains a frank acknowledgment of personal sin (v. 12)—which was foreign to Christ’s experience, but known to David’s.

He further contends that “David could never have prayed for himself against his enemies in order to preserve his own life. We know that David humbly endured all personal abuse. But Christ, and therefore the church of God, is in David. Thus his enemies are the enemies of Jesus Christ and his holy church. For that reason Christ himself is praying this Psalm in David—and with Christ the universal holy church.”¹⁰² So, to the question initially raised, “Who prays the Imprecatory Psalms?” Bonhoeffer answers: “David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays, Christ prays, we pray. We—that is, first of all the entire community in which alone the vast richness of the Psalter can be prayed, but also finally every individual insofar as he participates in Christ and his community and prays their prayer.”¹⁰³

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

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

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

¹⁰³ Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, 21.

crucified Christ can do that, and I through Him. . . . In this way the crucified Jesus teaches us to pray the imprecatory psalms correctly.¹⁰⁴

However, although divine justice toward the redeemed *was* fully satisfied in the cross, divine justice toward the reprobate is not fully satisfied except in the torments of eternal hell.¹⁰⁵ And it is out of the scourges of injustice from such as these that the cry of the righteous arises. In addition, according to the testimony of Scripture, David does indeed function both genetically and typologically as the forerunner of Christ. But this is not meant to disassociate his words and actions from his person in history. Indeed, delaying these Davidic psalms of imprecation until the cross of Christ, and distancing them from their manifestly historical setting and speaker, robs them of both their immediate and archetypal¹⁰⁶ significance and power.

Furthermore, this proposed solution does not adequately answer the problem aroused by the presence of imprecations in non-Davidic Imprecatory Psalms, for not all of the Imprecatory Psalms designate David as their author (notably Ps 137).¹⁰⁷ And this

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

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

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

¹⁰⁷ Ps 137 dates from the Babylonian exile; Pss 74, 79, and 83 list Asaph as their author, and Pss 71, 94, 104, and 129 are anonymous.

objection is not satisfactorily addressed by subsuming all of the Psalms under the aegis of his name.¹⁰⁸ Neither does it answer the imprecations or cries for divine vengeance in other parts of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments alike. If imprecations against one's enemies and the enemies of God are deemed morally legitimate in other parts of Scripture—and these are not rendered legitimate by placing them on the lips of Christ, then this proposal offers no genuine solution to the issue of imprecation in the Psalms, nor to the issue of imprecation in general.

Summary

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

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

¹⁰⁸ Bonhoeffer readily affirms that “not all the Psalms are by David, and there is no word of the New Testament which places the entire Psalter in the mouth of Christ.” Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, 20. Nevertheless, he believes that the intimations of Scripture point to the entire Psalter as “decisively bound up with the name of David.” Ibid. However true this may be, Bonhoeffer’s position is dependent, not on a generic association, but on the genetic and typological link of historical David to historical Jesus, rendering the legitimacy of this extrapolation invalid. And certain of the Imprecatory Psalms are unquestionably non-Davidic (cf. note 107 above).

inspiration of the Imprecatory Psalms, and the presence of the Imprecatory Psalms in the canon—indeed, in its book of worship. The related position of Brueggemann that views such utterances as evil—and yet as an evil to be expressed to God and relinquished there—admirably answers the objection of these psalms in worship. However, it yet fails to fully reckon with the presence of like imprecations in the New Testament, the Old Testament theological foundations upon which they are uttered, and the profusion of such imprecations in the psalms.

The view that understands such imprecations as consistent with Old Covenant morality but inappropriate for the New Era is also expressed in two forms. The stance of Zuck that sees such imprecations as evidence of an inferior morality operative in the Old Testament overly restricts the biblical definition of love and minimizes the fundamental ethical continuity between the testaments in its application of progressive revelation. The explanation of Martin and Althann downplays the inextricable tie in both testaments between the sinner and sin. The related positions of Laney and Gilbert that exonerate the morality of the Imprecatory Psalms and yet consider it inappropriate for the New Testament believer based solely on the difference in dispensations rightly find a covenantal and theological foundation for such imprecations. However, they fail to adequately address the enduring validity of the Abrahamic promise and the implications inherent in the unchanging character of God. The perspective of Kline essentially pits the ethics of the Old Covenant against the New. The approach of Peels and Longman fails to reckon with the eschatological hope and spiritual awareness of the Old Testament believer, along with the presence of personalized imprecations in the New Testament.

The view of Adams and Bonhoeffer which asserts that the Imprecatory Psalms are appropriately prayed solely by Christ and only by his followers through him and his work on the cross overstates David's typological function, understates his historical situation, and evades the issue of such expressions in non-Davidic Imprecatory Psalms and in the remainder of Scripture.

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

CHAPTER 3
THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE CURSE

The use of “the curse” in the Psalms, as elsewhere in Scripture, though shocking to our modern Western sensibilities, arises out of a cultural milieu in which cursing was an integral part of life¹—both domestic and international, personal and covenantal. This is evidenced by the numerous extant examples of treaty curses, inscriptional curses, and incantations to undo curses, among others.² Indeed, it is proper to speak of a common ancient Near Eastern curse tradition, from which also the psalmists of Israel drew.

¹ Gevirtz well defines that, by the term “curse” in this context, we are to understand not the profane oath or interjectory exclamation, “but rather the deliberate, considered expression of a wish that evil befall another.” Stanley Gevirtz, “West-Semitic Curses and the Problem of the Origins of Hebrew Law,” *VT* 11 (1961): 140.

² The curse even figured prominently in one of the most popular compositions in the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum, which chronicled the rise and fall of the first great Mesopotamian empire: the *Curse of Agade*. Jerrold S. Cooper, *The Curse of Agade* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 5. This composition concludes with a horrific litany of curses on the city by the gods, which includes:

Enlil, may the city that destroyed your city, be done to as your city.
.....
May the cattle slaughterer slaughter his wife,
May your sheep butcher butcher his child,
May your pauper drown the child who seeks money for him!
May your prostitute hang herself at the entrance to her brothel,
May your cult prostitutes and hierodules, who are mothers, kill their children! *Ibid.*, 61.

The curse played a significant role in the daily life of the ancient Middle East. In all areas of private as well as communal life (social-economic, juridical, cultic, political) the practice of cursing was applied. The curse was to bring the truth to light (in juridical procedures, e.g., in the ordeal), force obedience (with treaties and regulations), frighten off thieves, plunderers and vandals (with inscriptions on graves, boundary stones and buildings), guarantee honesty (in economic transactions), etc. The oath, which was uttered under a vast number of circumstances, is a form of self-cursing. The deity could also employ the curse as a preventive measure or in punishment.³

Thus, the mere presence of curses or calls for divine vengeance as are found in the Psalms would not have aroused the moral indignation of the ancient Israelite. They were not in and of themselves shocking or hateful outbursts. Rather, in his world the distinction was made between a “legitimate” and an “illegitimate” curse—the one proper, and the other reprehensible. The illegitimate curse was uttered out of malice against an innocent party for personal gain, or “as a private means of revenge to smite a personal enemy,”⁴ often in secret and with the aid of magic. The legitimate curse, on the other hand, was uttered fundamentally for egregious infraction of the moral order, and often in a public forum with appeal to deity.⁵ Notably, it is this latter kind that we find uttered in the Imprecatory Psalms. Moreover, in the Psalms “it is precisely the godless enemy to whom such illegitimate curses are attributed (Ps. 10:7, 59:13, 62:5, 109:17, 28). The psalmist, with his imprecatory prayer, does not commit the same sin as his enemies. His prayer,

³ H. G. L. Peels, *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*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, ed. A. S. van der Woude, vol. 31 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 237.

⁴ Josef Scharbert, “ארר,” *TDOT*, 1:416.

⁵ Examples of the use of such “legitimate curses” from the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East are noted in the material which follows.

including the curse formulations, is fundamentally of another nature and posits justice against injustice, the appeal of God in contrast to the cursing of the godless.”⁶

Furthermore, in the community of Israel, as in the broader ancient Near East as well, the legitimate curse was an expression of human powerlessness, utilized when people were unable to adequately help or protect themselves. It was the voice of the oppressed, the victim, and the unjustly accused, among others, directed against powerful or unconvictable offenders.⁷ Indeed, it was the ultimate means of ensuring that the will of God, divine judgment, and divine acts of vengeance proclaimed in the judicial system, in ethics, and in religion were executed. When viewed in this light, the so-called Imprecatory Psalms and other imprecatory texts, which seem so vicious and strange to the modern reader, are seen to be expressions of faith in the just rule of Yahweh in situations in which the covenant member or community can see no other source of help or possible means of securing just treatment.⁸

The Function of Imprecation in the Ancient Near East

Treaty curses. Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties, as a genre, generally conform to a consistent pattern, the basic elements of which are (1) the preamble, which introduces the setting and the suzerain, extolling him in grandiose terms; (2) the historical

⁶ Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, 238.

⁷ See Robert Althann, “The Psalms of Vengeance against Their Ancient Near Eastern Background,” *JNSL* 18 (1992): 3-4.

⁸ Scharbert, “ארר,” *TDOT*, 1:417-18.

prologue,⁹ which delineates the past relationship between the two parties;¹⁰ (3) the stipulations, which form the core of the covenant, and state the obligations imposed upon, and accepted by, the vassal; (4) a statement concerning the storage and transmission of the treaty document; (5) the list of witnesses, principally divine, who would be invoked to enact due punishment should the covenant be broken;¹¹ and (6) the blessings and curses—blessings for obedience to the covenant and curses for disobedience. The purpose of these promised blessings and curses was to ensure the vassal’s loyalty to the sovereign and to the covenant. Although the suzerain played an active role in bestowing favor and enacting retribution vis-à-vis his vassal, the blessings and curses outlined in this section of the ancient Near Eastern treaty specified not primarily what the suzerain would do “in the event of either faithfulness to or violation of the treaty, but rather, the actions of the gods either for or against the vassal.”¹² This lays the groundwork in the mind of the faithful

⁹ Walton notes that there are two basic elements that distinguish the Hittite treaties of the second millennium B.C. from the Syrian and Assyrian treaties of the first: (1) the Hittite family of treaties is characterized by the use of the historical prologue to an extent not found elsewhere; and (2) the treaties from Syria and Assyria show a much greater emphasis on the curses that are used to enforce the treaty. John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 101. This two-fold observation lends credence to the opinion that the Book of Deuteronomy is a mid-second millennium B.C. covenant document, for it bears a form strikingly similar to that of the early Hittite covenants. This issue is relevant here, for the Imprecatory Psalms, at many significant junctures, hark back to the promised divine vengeance and curses of the Deuteronomic covenant.

¹⁰ Emphasis is placed here both on the suzerain’s power and on his kind acts on behalf of the vassal. The vassal, then, is expected both to be grateful in his acceptance of the treaty terms as well as fearful of violating them.

¹¹ The Song of Moses in Deut 32 fits into this “witness” category, for it affirms Yahweh’s ability to enforce the terms of the covenant. Of particular significance are vv. 39-43, in which Yahweh takes an oath to exact vengeance on behalf of his people. *Ibid.*, 104.

¹² *Ibid.*

Israelite that the fulfillment of the curse must be left up to God. It is out of this understanding that the Imprecatory Psalm is uttered.

The covenant curses of the ancient Near East are pronounced upon the totality of the vassal's life and the lives of his family,¹³ as the Hittite treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru concisely demonstrates: "should Duppi-Tessub not honor these words of the treaty and the oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Tessub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land and together with everything that he owns."¹⁴ These curses, here stated in Hittite brevity, are expanded in exhaustive and often hideous detail in the Assyrian vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon (dated 672 B.C.),¹⁵ parallels of which may be found in Deuteronomy 28.¹⁶ The distilled essence of

¹³ Mercer observes that "when a curse was pronounced it often comprised in its malediction the whole activity of a man's life. His every work and interest were placed under a ban. Not only the man himself but also his seed was doomed to destruction." Samuel A. B. Mercer, "The Malediction in Cuneiform Inscriptions," *JAOS* 34 (1914): 302. For Scriptural example of the curse extended to the next generation, cf. Pss 109:10-15; 137:8-9.

¹⁴ *ANET*, 205.

¹⁵ There are several copies of this treaty—the most complete copy of which was made "with a chieftain of the Medes names Ramataia of Urukazaba(r)na. The remaining texts were duplicates except that they named different city-governors, or chieftains, as the other party to the agreement." D. J. Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1958), 1.

¹⁶ Weinfeld avers that, because of the striking similarity of subject matter and sequence between these two texts (especially when comparing lines 419-30 of Esarhaddon's treaty with Deut 28:26-35), this "attests that there was a direct borrowing by Deuteronomy from Assyrian treaty documents." Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 121-22. However, Hillers observes that none of these parallels appears to be the product of "simple copying, but the possibility of influence of treaty-curses on Israelite literature, or of mutual influence, or of dependence on common sources, cannot be disregarded." Delbert R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets*, *Biblica et orientalia* 16 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964), 78. Rather, "the point to be grasped is that both in Israel and elsewhere there were living and primarily oral traditions of curses on which writers and speakers might draw for various

the pronounced curses, however, is the request that Ashur, king of the gods, “[decree for you] evil and not good.”¹⁷ The following excerpts from the extensive curses of this treaty flesh out what this synopsis entails:

May he never grant you fatherhood and attainment of old age.¹⁸

.....
 [May Sin], the brightness of heaven and earth, clothe you with
 [a lep]rosy; [may he forbid your entering into the presence of the gods]
 [or king (saying): ‘Roam the desert] like the wild-ass (and) the gazelle.’
 [May Shamash, the light of the heavens and] earth [not]

purposes, either leaving the material as they found it or recasting it into their own style. The authors of Deut 28 and Lev 26 drew on this tradition, each in his own way.” Ibid., 42. Queen Sutherland agrees: “Although agreement has been sought and found between the biblical curse-lists and extra-biblical materials, with the possibility of dependence a valid option, parallels in general may be explained by the accessibility of a traditional set of curses. These curses afforded the prospect of a gathering and adaptation of the maledictions in order to fit a particular situation or need. Similarities found between Deuteronomy 28, Leviticus 26, and some of the ancient Near Eastern treaties offer evidence of the combination and reworking of traditional curses in order to address specific situations.” Kandy Maria Queen Sutherland, “The Futility Curse in the Old Testament” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 153-54.

Further support for this interpretation of the comparative evidence may be seen in the similarity between the futility curses of the bilingual (Assyrian–Aramaic) inscription engraved on the Tell Fekherye royal statue (late second millennium or early first millennium B.C.), the Sefire I treaty (circa mid-eighth century B.C.), and Deut 28:17-18. The Aramaic lines 20-22 of the Tell Fekherye statue threaten with the curse: “may one hundred ewes suckle a lamb but let it not be sated, may one hundred cows suckle a calf but let it not be sated, may one hundred women suckle a child but let it not be sated, may one hundred women bake bread in an oven but let them not fill it.” Jonas C. Greenfield and Aaron Shaffer, “Notes on the Curse Formulae of the Tell Fekherye Inscription,” *RB* 92 (1985): 54 (cf. Lev 26:26). Although the order is different, Sefire I lines 21-23 likewise warn, “should seven nur[ses] anoint [. . . and] nurse a young boy, may he not have his fill; and should seven mares suckle a colt, may it not be sa[ted]; and should seven] cows give suck to a calf, may it not have its fill; and should seven ewes suckle a lamb, [may it not be sa]ted.” Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire I and II,” *JAOS* 81 (1961): 185. Deut 28:17-18 states in a similar, albeit more generic fashion: “Cursed be your basket and your kneading trough. Cursed be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, the offspring of your cattle and the young of your flocks.”

¹⁷ Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon*, 60, 78. Cf. use of like language—albeit in the indicative—in Pss 109:5 and 35:12 (cf. also 38:21), “They repay me evil for good.” Although here stated as a description of the enemies’ actions, rather than imprecation against them, this summary phrase serves as the ground for the curses which either precede or follow.

¹⁸ Cf. Ps 109:8, “May his days be few,” and Ps 69:29, “May they be blotted out of the book of life.”

[judge] you justly (saying): ‘May it be dark
 in your eyes, walk in darkness’.¹⁹
 [May Ninurta, chief of the gods,] fell you with his swift arrow;
 [may he fill] the plain [with your corpses;] may he feed
 your flesh to the eagle (and) jackal.
 [May Venus, the brightest of the stars,] make your wives
 lie [in the lap of your enemy before your eyes]; may your sons
 [not possess your house]; may a foreign enemy divide your goods.²⁰

 May they make your ground (hard) like iron so that
 [none] of you may flourish].
 Just as rain does not fall from a brazen heaven²¹
 so may rain and dew not come upon your fields
 and your meadows; may it rain burning
 coals instead of dew on your land.²²

 Just as a starving ewe puts
 [the flesh of her young] in her mouth, even so
 may he feed you in your hunger

¹⁹ Cf. Deut 28:29, “You will be groping around at midday like a blind man gropes around in the darkness.” The curse of blindness was a common ancient Near Eastern curse motif. Ps 69:24 echoes, “May their eyes grow too dim to see.” Furthermore, in the Ugaritic tale of Aqht, upon learning of the death of his son Aqht, Dan’el cries out against those who had a part in his son’s death. Among the curses uttered is: *‘wrt. yštk. b’l*, “May Ba’lu make you blind.” Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places (KTU: Second, Enlarged Edition)*, *Abhandlungen zur Literatur Al-Syrien-Palästinas und Mesopotamiens*, vol. 8, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995), 60 (KTU 1.19 IV 5). Margalit, however, believes that contextually it is better to translate this phrase as “May Baal stop-up thy well-spring(s).” Baruch Margalit, *The Ugaritic Poem of AQHT*, BZAW, ed. Otto Kaiser, vol. 182 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 164, 416-17.

²⁰ Cf. Deut 28:26-35, in which likewise the curses of war’s carnage, skin diseases, blindness, rape, and pillaging prominently figure.

²¹ Cf. Deut 28:23, “The sky over your head will be bronze, and the ground beneath you iron”; and the reverse imagery in Lev 26:19, “I will make your sky like iron and your ground like bronze.”

²² Cf. Ps 140:11, “Let burning coals fall upon them!” and the emended Ps 11:6, “May he rain on the wicked coals of fire and brimstone” (the MT evidences, it would seem, an early and inadvertent transcriptional error; cf. chap. 2, n. 52 above).

with the flesh of your brothers, your sons (and) your daughters.²³

.....
 [As oil en]ters your flesh,
 [just so may] they cause this curse to enter
 into your flesh,²⁴ [the flesh of your brothers],
 your sons and your daughters.²⁵

As in the ancient Near Eastern treaty curses, called down upon the vassal who breaks covenant with his suzerain, so also in many of the Imprecatory Psalms. The curses found therein are frequently voiced because the psalmist views his enemy as having grossly violated the covenant, and consequently, as deserving of the covenant's curses. And as the treaty curses were viewed as extending not only to the offender but also to his children, so also the curses in the Psalms are seen to extend at times to the enemy's posterity (notably Psalms 109 and 137).

Furthermore, in the ancient Near East, word was often united with ritual, to enhance the effect of the pronounced curse. In the late fifteenth century B.C. Hittite soldier's oath, ritual is utilized to reinforce and dramatize the curse: "He sprinkles water on the fire and speaks to them as follows: 'Just as this burning fire is snuffed out—whoever breaks these oaths, even so let these oaths seize him! Let this man's vitality, vigor and future happiness be snuffed out together with (that of) his wife and his children! Let the

²³ Cf. the more extended treatment of the curse of familial cannibalism in Deut 28:53-57.

²⁴ Cf. Ps 109:18, "He wore cursing as his coat; so may it enter into his body like water, and into his bones like oil."

²⁵ Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon*, 60-78. The curse is seen to extend naturally to the family and descendants of the contracting party.

oaths put an evil curse upon him!”²⁶ So also, in the mid-eighth century B.C. Assyrian treaty between Ashurnirari V and Mati’ilu of Arpad, a spring lamb is brought out

. . . to sanction the treaty between Ashurnirari and Mati’ilu. If Mati’ilu sins against (this) treaty made under oath by the gods, then, just as this spring lamb, brought from its fold, will not return to its fold, will not behold its fold again, alas, Mati’ilu, together with his sons, daughters, officials, and the people of his land [will be ousted] from his country, will not return to his country, and not behold his country again. This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’ilu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati’ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, [. . .], the head of Mati’ilu be torn off, and his sons [. . .].²⁷

The Syrian/Aramean mid-eighth century treaty between Bir-Ga’yah, king of KTK,²⁸ and this same Mati’ilu (vocalized below as Mati’el), king of Arpad, witnesses to a profuse display of curses should the vassal betray the suzerain—including curses upon the land of Arpad, ritually underscored curses against the person of Mati’el and his nobles, and

²⁶ ANET, 354.

²⁷ ANET, 532. McCarthy notes that rites such as these “are simply a form of curse” and are “aimed at one end: symbolizing and effecting the ruin of the oath-breaker.” Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 151. The oath-taker shares in these covenant dramas in the acting out or witnessing of “what he calls down on himself should he be faithless. Word and vivid rite have become very much one.” *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁸ This otherwise unknown king (“son of majesty”) and locale may possibly be pseudonyms for Ashurnirari V and Assyria, and this treaty the Aramaic counterpart of the Assyrian treaty between the two kings. Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, eds., *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, State Archives of Assyria, ed. Robert M. Whiting, vol. 2 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988), xxvii. Gibson prefers to view KTK as a small state or the capital of a small state in the region of Urartu, east of the Euphrates near the source of the river Balih. John C. L. Gibson, *Aramaic Inscriptions*, vol. 2, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 22. And Fitzmyer favors the position that Bar Ga’yah is the alternate name of Sardur III, king of Urartu. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic Suzerainty Treaty from Sefire in the Museum of Beirut,” *CBQ* 20 (1958): 475.

curses against any who would mar or fail to guard the inscribed treaty. After introducing the gods of the two nations as witnesses to the treaty comes a list of “futility” curses on the land and fertility of Arpad. It is of import to note that the fulfillment of these curses is under the purview of the witnessing gods. For example, the treaty says, “(And) [may Ha]dad [pour (over it)] every sort of evil (which exists) on earth and in heaven and every sort of trouble; and may he shower upon Arpad [ha]il-[stones]! . . . May the gods send every sort of devourer against Arpad and against its people!”²⁹ Following this come a litany of curses with accompanying rites. For example, “Just as this wax is burned by fire, so shall Matî[‘el be burned by fire. . . . [Just as] this calf is cut in two, so may Matî[‘el be cut in two and may his nobles be cut in two.”³⁰ The treaty concludes with a curse on any who would deface the treaty inscription: “Whoever will not guard the words of the inscription which is on this stele or will say, ‘I shall efface some of his (its) words’ . . . on any day on which he will do so, may the gods overturn th[at m]an and his house and all that (is) in it.”³¹

Inscriptional curses. In addition to their role in ancient Near Eastern treaties, curses—though without accompanying blessings—are characteristically found in inscriptions

²⁹ Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire I and II,” 185.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 187. Though the phraseology is not strictly imprecatory, it is of interest to note that the Book of Revelation concludes in words strikingly reminiscent of the ancient inscriptional curses that accompanied certain treaty documents, gravely warning any who would tamper with its words: “If anyone should add to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone should take away words from this book of prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Rev 22:18-19).

on tombs, statues, and boundary stones (*kudurrus*)³² as warnings against would-be violators, thus protecting the materials to which they were attached. In these, they “appear to be the last resort in situations when conventional means fail to provide needed security: where hidden tombs cannot defeat the cleverness of grave robbers, where respect for the dead does not prevent the living from jealously effacing a predecessor’s name from a record of his or her accomplishments,”³³ or where the promise of economic gain overshadows common respect for another’s property. Thus, in consonance with the Imprecatory Psalms, inscriptional curses were uttered out of a context of powerlessness, and their fulfillment was directed at deity. Therein it is the gods who are either explicitly³⁴ or implicitly³⁵ the

³² “The bulk of *kudurru*-inscriptions are to be dated . . . roughly from the latter half of the Second Millennium BC to the first half of the First Millennium. The *kudurru* was made to protect private property and especially the boundaries of property by extensive curse-formulae in the name of various gods. Any person who should damage the monument or cause the monument to be damaged, would inflict on himself all the curses of the inscription.” F. Charles Fensham, “Common Trends in Curses of the Near Eastern Treaties and *Kudurru*-Inscriptions Compared with Maledictions of Amos and Isaiah,” *ZAW* 75 (1963): 158.

³³ Timothy G. Crawford, *Blessing and Curse in Syro-Palestinian Inscriptions of the Iron Age*, American University Studies: Series 7, Theology and Religion, vol. 120 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1992), 97.

³⁴ For example, the funerary inscription of Sin-zer-ibni warns: “Whoever you are (who) shall remove this image and couch from its place, may ŠHR and ŠMŠ and NKL and NŠK tear out your name and *remainder* of life! And (with an evil) death may they kill you! And may they cause your seed to perish!” Gevirtz, “West-Semitic Curses and the Problem of the Origins of Hebrew Law,” 148.

³⁵ On a late-eighth century B.C. tomb at the entrance to the village of Silwan (Siloam), adjacent to Jerusalem, the following words are inscribed: “This is (the tomb of Sheban)iah the royal steward. There is no silver or gold here, only (his bones) and the bones of his maidservant with him. Cursed be the man who opens this.” John C. L. Gibson, *Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions*, vol. 1, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 24.

ones called to enforce the curse should the threatenings be ignored; they do not of themselves “magically” come into force.³⁶

Incantations to undo curses. The legitimate curse in ancient Mesopotamia, which sought to protect from harm, or to repair and recoil harm, “was a highly developed legal and religious ceremony, universally practiced and respected. It not only figured in ceremonies of great occasions, but also penetrated into the everyday life of the people.”³⁷ Witness to this prevalence is found, for example, in the mid-twelfth dynasty Egyptian Execration Texts,³⁸ but it figures most prominently in the various series of Assyrian incantation rituals—the three principal collections of which are *Maqlû*, *Šurpu*, and *Utukki Limnûti*. By means of these rites, the sufferer seeks release from the effects of a curse placed upon him either by a malevolent witch, demon, or some other unknown cause.

³⁶ Contra Fensham, who believes that if, in particular, “the stipulations on a *kudurrû* should be transgressed, the religious function in the form of punishment would immediately come automatically into force. The curses were regarded as coming into operation directly after the transgression as a kind of magical process.” Fensham, “Common Trends in Curses of the Near Eastern Treaties and *Kudurrû*-Inscriptions Compared with Maledictions of Amos and Isaiah,” 157.

³⁷ Mercer, “The Malediction in Cuneiform Inscriptions,” 309.

³⁸ From the Old Kingdom period through the Roman era, Egyptian priests “performed official ritual cursings of the potential enemies of Egypt. The ceremonies included the breaking of red pots and figurines inscribed with formal ‘Execration Texts’ listing Nubians, Asiatics, Libyans, living and deceased Egyptians, as well as generally threatening forces. The texts themselves contain no explicit curses, but instead serve to identify the fate of the enemies with that of the destroyed pot or image.” William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, vol. 1, *The Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 50.

In the series *Maqlû*, “the longest and most important Mesopotamian text concerned with combating witchcraft,”³⁹ a curse “is pronounced upon those who have bewitched the complainant and thus caused him to suffer.”⁴⁰ The ritual begins with a description of the supplicant’s status of suffering brought about by the supposed witch’s curse:

I have called upon you Gods of the Night:

 Because a witch has bewitched me,
 A deceitful woman has accused me,
 Has (thereby) caused my god and goddess to be estranged from me (and)
 I have become sickening in the sight of those who behold me,
 I am therefore unable to rest day or night,

 Because evil did she perform against me, and baseless charges has she
 conjured up against me,
 May she die, but I live!⁴¹

³⁹ Tzvi Abusch, “The Demonic Image of the Witch in Standard Babylonian Literature: The Reworking of Popular Conceptions by Learned Exorcists,” in *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and In Conflict*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al., 27-58 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 40.

⁴⁰ Stanley Gevirtz, “Curse Motifs in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1959), 114.

⁴¹ Abusch, “The Demonic Image of the Witch in Standard Babylonian Literature,” 32-33. Notice the similarity of symptoms (and the locus of their cause in “baseless charges”) between this series and the Psalms of Lament, of which the Imprecatory Psalms and the Psalms of Illness are a part. The similarity is such that Mowinckel located the array of Illness Laments in a like *Sitz im Leben*: they were recited to counteract the curses of the psalmist’s enemies. These פְּעֻלֵי אֱוִי were “practitioners of magic”—whether officially or unofficially—who, by means of powerful words and gestures, sought to destroy the psalmist and had caused his illness. Cf. Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien*, I, *Åwän und die individuellen Klagepsalmen* (Amsterdam: Verlag P. Schippers, 1966), 29-31; and idem, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, vol. 2, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), 3-7. However, although such a mentality and activity were common in the larger cultural context, it is far from certain that this is what is represented in the psalms. Indeed, whereas the element of sorcery or witchcraft may constitute a minor element in the psalms, given this milieu and similarity of language, such is nowhere rendered explicit. In addition, the key phrase, אֱוִי פְּעֻלֵי, rather than designating those who “practice sorcery,” appears to be used in a more generic fashion as those who “practice iniquity”—whether it be oppression, bloodshed, cursing, slander, etc.

The climax of this complex ceremony is the declarative wish which seeks, in effect, to reverse the original curse:⁴² “Die Zauberin, die mich bezaubert hat: mit dem Zauber, mit dem sie mich bezaubert hat, bezaubere du sie!”⁴³ Voiced again: “May the curse of my mouth extinguish the curse of your mouth!”⁴⁴ And, as its name “burning” implies, wax or wooden figurines of the sorcerer or—more often—the sorceress who bewitched the supplicant are melted or burnt in the fire, and the conjurations that compose this series address, with very few exceptions, either these witches—in effigy—or the fire-god who is to destroy them.⁴⁵

The series *Šurpu*, on the other hand, though it also means “burning,” is a rite of personal purification from an unknown offense rather than the retributive sympathetic magic of *Maqlû*.⁴⁶ In this ceremony, the sufferer seeks release from the ill effects of some

(cf. e.g., the use of פְּעֻלֵי אֵן in Pss 14, 59, 64, 94, 141). Moreover, this understanding of Mowinkel lends too much credence to the magical view of the world and of words—a view abhorred by the orthodox Yahwism championed in the psalms.

⁴² Cf. Ps 7:17, “Let the trouble he has caused recoil on his head.”

⁴³ “The witch who bewitched me, with the witchcraft with which she bewitched me, bewitch her!” Gerhard Meier, *Die assyrische Beschwörungssammlung Maqlû* (Berlin: Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 2, 1937), 12. Meier renders well the verbal playfulness of the Akkadian: *ḥkaššaptu tak-šip-an-ni kiš-pi tak-šip-an-ni ki-šip-ši*.

⁴⁴ Tzvi Abusch, “An Early Form of the Witchcraft Ritual *Maqlû* and the Origin of a Babylonian Magical Ceremony,” in *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, ed. Tzvi Abusch et al., 1-57 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 18.

⁴⁵ Erica Reiner, *Šurpu: A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* (Graz: Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 11, 1958), 2-3.

⁴⁶ Although burning plays a less significant role in this series as compared to *Maqlû*, the *Šurpu* ritual is nonetheless “an act of sympathetic magic; it consists of the burning of various objects that symbolize the sins and sufferings of the patient,” by means of which he is liberated. *Ibid.*, 1.

presumable sin of omission or commission, by which he has “offended the gods and the existing world-order.”⁴⁷

An evil curse like a *gallû*-demon has come upon (this) man,
 dumbness (and) daze have come upon him,
 an unwholesome dumbness has come upon him,
 evil curse, oath, headache.
 An evil curse has slaughtered this man like a sheep,
 his god left his body,
 his goddess . . . usually full of concern for him, has stepped aside.
 Dumbness (and) daze have covered him like a cloak and overwhelm him incessantly.
 Marduk noticed him,
 went into the house to his father Ea and cried out:

 ‘I do not know [what] to do, what would quiet him’.
 Ea answered his son Marduk:

 ‘Go, my son Marduk!
 Take him to the pure house of ablutions,
 undo his oath, release his oath,
 that the disturbing evil of his body,
 –be it the curse of his father,
 be it the curse of his mother,
 be it the curse of his elder brother,
 be it the curse of a bloodshed unknown to him—
 by pronouncing the charm of Ea the oath
 may be peeled off like (this) onion,
 stripped off like (these) dates,
 unraveled like (this) matting.
 Oath, be adjured by the name of heaven, be adjured by the name of the earth!’⁴⁸

In *Utukki Limnûti*, “Evil Spirits,” the third major collection of Mesopotamian magical incantations, the afflicted pleads for deliverance from the curse of bodily illness, believed to have been caused by demonic influence:

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 30-31. In like manner, the *Lipšur* litanies are performed to undo a curse: e.g., “May the curse recede like the water from the body of NN” . . . “May a bird take the curse up to the sky.” Erica Reiner, “*Lipšur* Litanies,” *JNES* 15 (1956): 141, 143.

Evil fiends are they!
 From the Underworld they have gone forth,
 They are the Messengers of Bel, Lord of the World.
 The evil Spirit that in the desert smiteth the living man,
 The evil Demon that like a cloak enshroudeth the man,
 The evil Ghost, the evil Devil that seize upon the body,
 The Hag-demon (and) Ghoul that smite the body with sickness,
 The Phantom of Night that in the desert roameth abroad,
 Unto the side of the wanderer have drawn nigh,
 Casting a woeful fever upon his body.
 A ban of evil hath settled on his body,
 An evil disease on his body they have cast,
 An evil plague hath settled on his body,
 An evil venom on his body they have cast,
 An evil curse hath settled on his body,
 Evil (and) sin on his body they have cast,
 Venom (and) wickedness have settled on him,
 Evil they have cast (upon him).
 The evil man, he whose face is evil, he whose
 mouth is evil, he whose tongue is evil,
 Evil spell, witchcraft, sorcery,
 Enchantment, and all evil,
 Which rest on the body of the sick man.⁴⁹

Notice even here, in an incantation ostensibly directed against demons, that the human element of cursing through word and magic is yet connected.

The Power of the Curse

It has been commonly alleged that, in the practice of the larger ancient Near Eastern world, the curse was viewed as “*automatic or self-fulfilling*, having the nature of a ‘spell,’ the very words of which were thought to possess reality and the power to effect the

⁴⁹ R. Campbell Thompson, *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia*, vol. 1 (London: Luzac and Co., 1903; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1976), 5, 7.

desired results.”⁵⁰ Or, as Sigmund Mowinckel succinctly states: “Der Fluch wirkt ganz *ex opere operato*.”⁵¹ It is “ein giftiger Stoff . . . eine verheerende Macht, die alles das zerstört, was sie trifft.”⁵² According to ancient opinion, in this view, the power of the curse was inherent in its form,⁵³ and the more powerful the speaker, the more powerful the curse.⁵⁴

A certain measure of support has been legitimately claimed from the Mesopotamian incantation series in which, even though there is periodic appeal to deity to effect the curse’s release, the essence of the incantations is magic. By means of established

⁵⁰ Sheldon H. Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” *HUCA* 23 (1950–51): 78. Indeed, Speiser believes that “supernatural spell” is the basic meaning behind the Akkadian and Hebrew root *ʾmr*. E. A. Speiser, “An Angelic ‘Curse’: Exodus 14:20,” *JAOS* 80 (1960): 198. Alternatively, Pedersen conceives of the exchange of blessing and cursing as fundamentally a transfer of “soul power” rather than an element inherent in the words itself. In his view, the power of the curse “lies in the mysterious power of the souls to react upon each other. He whose soul creates something evil for another—be it in thought, in word or in deed—he puts the evil into the soul of his neighbour, where it exercises its influence.” Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, I-II, trans. Mrs. Aslaug Møller (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 441.

⁵¹ “The curse operates entirely *ex opere operato*.” Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, V, *Segen und Fluch in Israels Kult und Psalmdichtung* (Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1966), 74. Although Mowinckel views the curses in the Psalms largely in common with the curses of the surrounding culture, i.e., that they are uttered in the context of religious ritual to counteract the curses of sorcerers uttered against them, he mollifies this remark by insisting that “we are not justified in concluding from this that the psalmists thought that without the will and help of Yahweh the word of cursing by itself could deliver them from the enemy.” Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, vol. 1, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), 202-03.

⁵² The curse is “poisonous stuff . . . a disastrous power, that destroys everything it strikes.” Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, V, 61.

⁵³ See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 81.

⁵⁴ Blank applies this to the imprecatory prayer: “men can appeal to God to curse one whom they wish cursed—and consider such a one more effectively cursed.” Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” 80.

word and rite, the desired release is (ostensibly) effected. Reflecting upon this intimate connection between fervent prayer and symbolic act, Scharbert expresses the prevalent impression “that people in the ancient Near East actually believed that the gods could be forced by such formulas and acts to intervene in the manner desired.”⁵⁵

However, whereas there is a measure of evidence that the broader ancient Near Eastern world embraced to some extent a magical view of the power of the curse—particularly with regard to the curses of witches and the incantations to undo these curses, this was by no means embraced wholesale. Indeed, and fundamentally, it was believed that the gods were the ones under whose jurisdiction lay the execution of at least the formal legitimate curses. This is evidenced by a number of extant treaty and inscriptional curses. Therein, the curses are either explicitly stated or implicitly understood to be enacted by the gods, rather than by virtue of some inherent power in the words themselves. It was not the curse formula *per se*, but the authority of the gods in which the power of the curse lay. For example, in the mid-eighth century B.C. treaty between Bir-Ga’yah and Matī’el addressed earlier, the litany of futility curses threatened (should Matī’el cease to observe the covenant stipulations) are said to fall under the purview of the gods called as witnesses to the treaty: “[May Ha]dad [pour (over it)] every sort of evil May the gods send every sort of

⁵⁵ Scharbert, “אָרַר,” *TDOT*, 1:416. Brichto rightly remarks that the religion of Israel stands in stark contrast to this ideology: for whereas Mesopotamia is steeped in magic, Israel is unrelenting in its campaign against it; and whereas in Mesopotamia even the gods are subject to the forces of magic, in Israel Yahweh is supremely independent of outside power—indeed the source of all power. Herbert Chanan Brichto, *The Problem of “Curse” in the Hebrew Bible*, JBL Monograph Series, vol. 13 (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1968), 212.

devourer against Arpad and against its people!”⁵⁶ Moreover, the scope of divine enforcement extended even to the treaty inscription itself: “Whoever will not guard the words of the inscription which is on this stele or will say, ‘I shall efface some of his (its) words,’ . . . may the gods overturn th[at m]an and his house and all that (is) in it.”⁵⁷

Support for a magical understanding of the power of the curse in the ancient Near East has been further sought from the Hebrew Scriptures and the religion of early Israel. Two passages frequently claimed to evidence this magical view of the curse (and blessing) in the life of ancient Israel are Judges 17:1-2 and the account of Balaam in Numbers 22–24. In the former passage, it is relayed that Micah’s mother had uttered a curse against a thief who had stolen from her a large sum of money. Upon her son’s confession that he was the culprit, she immediately cries out: **בָּרוּךְ בְּנִי לַיהוָה**, “Blessed be my son by Yahweh!” Blank believes this to be a forcible illustration of counter-magic—that a curse may be effectively neutralized by administering a blessing as an antidote.⁵⁸ However, even if that supposition be granted (and it is far from certain that it may rightly be so), it is important to note that this passage by no means recounts orthodox Israelite theology, as the context elucidates. Verses three and following relate the relativism and idolatry characteristic of syncretism. And indeed, there has always been in Israel’s history the tendency toward syncretism, and Yahweh has ever denounced it. Thus, if a proposition

⁵⁶ Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire I and II,” 185.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁸ Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” 94.

is to be legitimately established, it must be done via genuine expressions rather than perversions of Israelite religion.

In the latter passage, the Moabite king Balak pleads a summons to the famed Balaam:⁵⁹ “Come now, curse for me this people. . . . For I know that whomever you bless are blessed, and whomever you curse are cursed” (Num 22:6).⁶⁰ It has been commonly inferred from this that Balaam possessed an unusual aptitude to produce, by mere utterance, profound effect for blessing or cursing. That this was the pagan perception of Balaam’s abilities may partly be granted. However, the preponderance of evidence identifies Balaam as a diviner,⁶¹ and further suggests that he belonged to a class of Akkadian diviners known as *bārû*, who were believed to accurately ascertain the will of the gods by means, typically, of the examination of the entrails or liver of a sacrificed animal.⁶²

⁵⁹ The record of his reputation exceeds the limits of Scripture, for in an Aramaic text discovered at Deir ‘Allah in Jordan and dated circa 700 B.C., mention is made of a certain Balaam, son of Beor, who is described as a “seer of the gods” (*hiḫh . ’lhn*) and known for his ability to curse. J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, eds., *Aramaic Texts from Deir ‘Alla*, Documenta et monumenta orientis antiqui, vol. 19, eds. W. F. Albright and J. Vandier (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 173-82.

⁶⁰ Cf. Num 22:12, in which Yahweh warns Balaam: “Do not curse the people, for they are blessed.”

⁶¹ Balaam is called “the diviner” (מִקְוֵה) in Josh 13:22. Note also the (fee for) divination (מִקְוֵה) extended to Balaam by the emissaries of Balak in Num 22:7 to entice his services, as well as his description as “seer of the gods” (n. 59 above). In the language of 2 Pet 2:16, Balaam is styled a “prophet.”

⁶² Mitchell argues that, as a *bārû*, “the strength of Balaam’s curse is not in the power of the words, but in the accurate discernment of what the gods have in store.” Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, ed. J. J. M. Roberts, vol. 95 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 92. Similarly, cf. Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 132-33; 147-50. Allen in large measure concurs with this assessment of Balaam’s caste, although he posits the possibility that in the figure of Balaam one finds the combination of both *bārû* (diviner) and

In this scenario, the desire of Balak is for Balaam, with his superior knowledge of his craft and proven record of success, to ascertain the divine will (and also influence that will to his favor).⁶³ Perhaps, then, the apparent power of Balaam's curse, as evidenced by his reputation, was in his ability to "manipulate" the intent of the gods⁶⁴—something he found himself blatantly unable to do with Yahweh. Moreover, since this account records a pagan king's perception of a pagan diviner's power to curse, repeatedly thwarted and overturned by Yahweh, it is more germane to the larger ancient Near Eastern understanding than it is specifically to the understanding of ancient Israel.

Additionally, the observation that Hebrew curse formulas favor the passive construction (notably **רָרָא**, "cursed be") is further said to evidence an understanding of the inherent power in the curse⁶⁵—that no divine agency is needed to fulfill it. However,

āpīlu (prophet, as evidenced at Mari). Ronald Barclay Allen, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles: A Pagan Diviner and the Word of God" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1973), 202-03. Although his identity as diviner is prominent, Yaure perceives the weight of emphasis to be on Balaam as seer, and on his reception of revelation through dreams. L. Yaure, "Elymas-Nehelamite-Pethor," *JBL* 79 (1960): 310-14 (cf. Num 22:8-13; 24:2-4). And Moore argues for a more composite approach to the understanding of his identity and function. Michael S. Moore, "Another Look at Balaam," *RB* 97 (1990): 359-78.

⁶³ The curses of Balaam, then, become predominantly declarations of divine intent. This informs our understanding of Num 23:8, nestled amidst his first oracle from Yahweh, in which Balaam confesses his inability to curse apart from the prior determination of Yahweh to curse. For, as a *bārū*, Balaam can ostensibly do no more than divine the will of the God under whose auspices Israel lay.

⁶⁴ Notice the tie between Balaam's divination and "sorcery" (**שִׁבְחָה**) (Num 23:23; 24:1). The context of Num 22-24 suggests a complexity to the identity and activity of Balaam, and to the ancient Near Eastern phenomenon of cursing.

⁶⁵ Blank writes: "Apparently, then, no external agent was assumed and, apparently, the spoken curse was itself and alone conceived to be the effective agent. This is the significance of the habitual preference for the passive construction in the curse formula and the consequent absence of any reference to an external agent, demonic or divine." Blank, "The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath," 78.

this supposition overlooks the larger testimony of the Old Testament, in which Yahweh himself is portrayed as either the implicit or explicit agent behind the curse. Indeed, in the theology of orthodox Israel, nothing operates independently of him. He is the ground of all being and the source of all power—including the power of blessing and cursing. Apart from his will, no curse is effected;⁶⁶ and in his sovereignty he can transmute cursing into blessing⁶⁷ and blessing into cursing.⁶⁸ In this regard, Scharbert, himself a hesitant advocate of the magical view of the power of the curse, cautions against the adoption of “a purely magical understanding of the curse formula”⁶⁹ in the religion and community of ancient Israel. He does so by noting one such usage of the passive אָרוּר formula in which the agency of Yahweh is by no means concealed. In his estimation, the use of the phrase אָרוּר יהוה לְפָנַי יְהוּה (“Cursed be the man before Yahweh”) in the ancient Hebrew text of Joshua 6:26 “justifies the conjecture that the activation of misfortune was closely connected with an intervention of Yahweh.”⁷⁰ Most significantly, however, in the inaugural promise to Abraham, which forms the basis upon which Yahweh’s covenant with his people

⁶⁶ Cf. Num 23:8, “How can I curse when God has not cursed?” and Num 23:20, “He has blessed, and I cannot change it.”

⁶⁷ E.g., Deut 23:6, “However, Yahweh your God would not listen to Balaam, but Yahweh your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because Yahweh your God loves you.”

⁶⁸ Cf. Yahweh’s stern admonition to his priests in Mal 2:2, “If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to give honor to my name,’ says Yahweh of Hosts, ‘then I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings—indeed, I will curse them, because you have not so set your heart.’”

⁶⁹ Scharbert, “אָרוּר,” *TDOT*, 1:412.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Indeed, in the later passage which relates the fulfillment of this curse, it is commented explicitly that Yahweh is the one who spoke this curse through Joshua and implicitly that he is the one who brought it about (1 Kgs 16:34).

throughout the Scriptures is built, the active construction of **אָרַר** is used, with Yahweh the explicit actor. Therein, Yahweh emphatically places upon himself the prerogative for the enforcement of curses uttered against his people. In Genesis 12:3 Yahweh declares: **מִקְלָלְךָ אֲאָר**, “He who curses you I will curse.”⁷¹ And it is this declaration that forms the foundation for all personal curses appealed to out of the covenant context.

Thus, in the life of Israel, and for the heirs of her religion, the effect of the spoken curse depends wholly on the will of Yahweh.⁷² Moreover, as will be demonstrated, the Hebrew curse is either a veiled or blatant appeal to this God of justice to exact the punishment due for the guilt of the one cursed. For this cause, the Hebrew proverb can confidently assert: “Like a fluttering sparrow, like a darting swallow, so an undeserved curse does not come to rest” (Prov 26:2). Thus, in contrast to the broader concept of the curse in the ancient Near East—which allowed the curious blend of both divine and automatic enactment, the curse in Israel entirely loses its magical character.⁷³ What remains for her is a sovereign, just, and compassionate covenant God.

⁷¹ Although both **קָלַל** and **אָרַר** bear a measure of semantic overlap in that they both mean “to curse” (cf. the interchange in Deut 28:15, 45; 28:16-19), the former may carry the lesser nuance “to treat with contempt” (cf., e.g., Ex 21:17), whereas the latter is characteristically the more severe and often refers to a divine judicial sentence (cf., e.g., Deut 27:15-26).

⁷² Thus, the opinion of even that staunch opponent of word-magic, Anthony Thiselton, is in part deficient, for although he rightly avers that among the faithful in Israel the one who utters a curse is in practice invoking God, he yet apparently believes that the effectiveness of the curse depends in large measure both on the strength and status of the speaker who pronounces the curse, as well as on the receptivity of the person who is being cursed. Anthony C. Thiselton, “The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings,” *JTS* 25 (1974): 295.

⁷³ Althann, “The Psalms of Vengeance against Their Ancient Near Eastern Background,” 4.

CHAPTER 4

THE HARSHTEST PSALMS OF IMPRECATION

In the corpus of the Psalter reside numerous psalms characterized by imprecations or cries for divine vengeance. To address them in their entirety would exceed the bounds and intent of this dissertation. Therefore, I will approach the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms and their relation to Old and New Testament ethics by means of primarily three psalms—each representing one of the three major spheres of imprecation found within the larger body of the Psalms: (1) Psalm 58—imprecation against a societal enemy, (2) Psalm 137—imprecation against a national or community enemy, and (3) Psalm 109—imprecation against a personal enemy. Moreover, these three psalms in particular have been chosen because they contain the harshest language or most severe imprecations voiced against enemies to be found in the Psalter. Thus, if an answer may be given to these, then an answer may be given to all. These harshest psalms of imprecation will be explored by examining both the circumstances out of which their cries of cursing came, as well as the theological foundation upon which such words were uttered.

Psalm 58

Curse against a societal enemy.

¹ לְמַנְצֵחַ אֶל־תְּשַׁחֲת לְדָוִד מִכָּתָם:

2 קֹאֲמָנִים אֱלֹהִים¹ צָכַק תְּדַבְּרוּן
 מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל תִּשְׁפָּטוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם:
 3 אֶף־בְּלֹב עוֹלֹת תִּפְעֵלוּן
 בְּאַרְצָךְ² חֲמַס יִדְיָכֶם תִּפְלִסוּן:
 4 זָרוּ הַשְּׁעִים מִרְחֹם
 תָּעוּ מִבְּטֹן דְּבַרִי כָזָב:
 5 חֲמַת־לְמוֹ כְּדָמוֹת חֲמַת־נֹחַשׁ
 כְּמוֹ־פֶתֶן חָרַשׁ יֵאָטֵם אֲזָנוֹ:
 6 אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִשְׁמַע לְקוֹל מַלְאָכָיו
 חוֹבֵר הַגְּבָרִים מִחֶכְמָם:
 7 אֱלֹהִים הִרְסוּ־שִׁנְיָמוֹ בְּפִימוֹ
 מִלְתַּעוֹת כְּפִירִים נִחֵץ יְהוָה:
 8 יִמָּאֵסוּ כְּמוֹ־מַיִם יִתְהַלְכוּ־לְמוֹ
 יִדְרֹךְ חֲצִיו כְּמוֹ יִתְמַלְלוּ:
 9 כְּמוֹ שֶׁבֶלֶל תִּמְסֵי יִחְלֹךְ
 נִפְלֵ אִשֶׁת בַּל־חֲזוֹ שָׁמֵשׁ:
 10 בְּטָרְחָם יִבְיִנוּ סִירְתֵיכֶם אָטֵד
 כְּמוֹ־חַי כְּמוֹ־חֲרוֹן יִשְׁעָרוּ:
 11 יִשְׁמַח צִדִּיק כִּי־חָנָה נֶקֶם
 כְּעֲמִיו יִרְחֹץ בְּדָם הַרְשָׁע:
 12 וַיֹּאמֶר אָדָם אֶף־פָּרִי לְצִדִּיק
 אֶף יֵשׁ־אֱלֹהִים שֹׁפְטִים בְּאַרְצָךְ:

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

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

c	b	a
תִּפְעֵלוּן	עוֹלֹת	אֶף־בְּלֹב
c ¹	b ¹	a ¹
תִּפְלִסוּן	חֲמַס יִדְיָכֶם	בְּאַרְצָךְ

- ¹ For the director of music: “Do Not Destroy”; a *miktam* of David.
² Do you indeed, O “gods,” decree what is right?
 Do you judge with equity, O sons of men?³
³ No, in your heart you plan injustice;
 in the earth you weigh out the violence of your hands.
⁴ The wicked are estranged from the womb;
 they go astray from birth, speaking lies.
⁵ Their venom is like the venom of a serpent,
 like a deaf cobra that stops its ears,
⁶ that does not heed the sound of the charmers,
 the skillful binders of spells.
⁷ O God, smash their teeth in their mouths;
 Break off the fangs⁴ of the young lions, O Yahweh!
⁸ Let them flow away like water that runs off in all directions;⁵
 let him prepare to shoot his arrows,⁶ only to find them headless!⁷
⁹ Like a miscarriage,⁸ let him melt away;

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

c	b	a
צָדֵק תִּבְרָיוֹן	אֱלֹהִים	הָאָדָם
b ¹	c ¹	
בְּנֵי אָדָם	מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל תִּשְׁכָּחוּ	

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

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

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

⁷ **יְתַמְלְלוּ** is literally, “thoroughly circumcised.”

like a woman's abortion, let them not see the sun!

¹⁰ Before your pots feel the heat of⁹ the brambles—
as lively¹⁰ as wrath—may he sweep them away!¹¹

¹¹ The righteous will rejoice when he sees vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.

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

When considering the imprecatory nature of this individual lament, two

questions must first be asked and answered: (1) *Who* are being cursed?, and (2) *What kind of*

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

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

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

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

people are they? Firstly, the objects of David’s imprecations are the rulers or “judges” of the community—those whose position involves ensuring that justice is properly meted out. Indeed, this psalm is framed by an ironic inclusio of judicial terms and ideas: contrast the human **הַשְּׁפֹטִי** (v. 2) with the divine **שְׁפֹטִים** (v. 12); the human **אֱלֹם** (v. 2) with the divine **אֱלֹהִים** (v. 12); the lack of human justice **שְׁפֹטִים** (v. 2) with the hope of divine justice **בְּאֶרֶץ** (v. 12); and the human perversion of **צָדֵק** (v. 2) with the divine vindication of the **צִדִּיק** (v. 12).

The identity of these **אֱלֹם**, “gods,” as the leaders of the land is borne out not only by the context of this psalm, but also by that of its sibling, Psalm 82, in which the rulers of the people are spoken of as “**אֱלֹהִים**.” In arrangement of structure, development of theme, and manner of address, Psalm 82 is much like that of Psalm 58. And although Psalm 82 begins with the imagery of the divine assembly over which God presides, it condescends immediately to the realm intended by that imagery—that of corrupt human leadership: even these “gods” will yet die like men (82:7).¹² Moreover, in the settings of Exodus 21:6; 22:7-8, 27 [Heb.], there is some ambiguity in the use of the term **אֱלֹהִים**—whether it refers to God or to his representatives who function judicially under his authority.¹³ This ambivalence is reinforced in Deuteronomy 19:17, where the two parties in dispute are called to “stand before Yahweh, before the priests and the judges.” Here, in

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

¹³ A third option has been proposed by Gordon who argues, appealing principally to Nuzi court records, that the **אֱלֹהִים** here are household gods before whom oaths were made. Cyrus H. Gordon, “**אֱלֹהִים** in its Reputed Meaning of *Rulers, Judges*,” *JBL* 54 (1935): 139-44. This, however, is inconsistent with the pristine theology and practice of Israel.

Psalm 58:2, the psalmist sarcastically addresses what we might call these “gods of government” “to inquire whether they are ruling according to the demands of their positions under God’s sovereignty.”¹⁴

In addition, that the widespread injustice and violence in the earth is to be attributed to the dereliction of duty by the divinely endowed human authorities rather than, as Weiser asserts, by “the ‘gods’ who constitute the celestial court of Yahweh and are to dispense justice on earth as his servants and functionaries,”¹⁵ whose lackeys are the **רְשָׁעִים**, is supported by a number of textual factors: (1) the crafted inclusio of vv. 2 and 12 unifies the psalm;¹⁶ (2) the plausibly vocative “O sons of men” parallels “O gods” in v. 2; (3) mention of the **רְשָׁעִים** follows immediately and in the same vein as v. 2, making it appear that the two groups are to be equated; (4) the **רְשָׁעִים** are manifestly human—they are born and they bleed (vv. 4, 11); (5) the **אֱלֹהִים** are confronted with a crime of speaking in v. 2; likewise the **רְשָׁעִים** in v. 4—perpetual deception; and (6) the **אֱלֹהִים**, if distinct from the

¹⁴ Charles Wilson, “An Exegetical Study of Psalm 58” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1978), 29.

¹⁵ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, OTL, ed. G. Ernest Wright et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962): 430.

¹⁶ Auffret astutely notes the contrast “entre *dieu(x)* et *homme(s)*, on verra 2a et 12a ordonner en parallèle: *dieux* + JUSTICE // HOMME + JUSTE, mais 2b et 12b ordonner en chiasme: JUGIEZ + HOMMES // Dieu + JUGE” (i.e., “. . . between God/gods and man/men, in verses 2a and 12a arranged in parallel: gods + JUSTICE // MAN + JUST, but 2b and 12b arranged in chiasm: JUDGE + MEN // God + JUDGE”). Pierre Auffret, *Voyez de vos yeux: Étude structurelle de vingt Psaumes dont le Psaume 119*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, vol. 48, ed. J. A. Emerton et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 87.

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁸ F. G. Hibbard, *The Psalms Chronologically Arranged, with Historical Introductions; and a General Introduction to the Whole Book*, 5th ed. (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856), 120.

and their own ends. Indeed, the venom of this psalm is reserved for those who, when they should be protecting the helpless under their care, instead persecute and prey upon them.¹⁹

For such as these, even Jesus reserved the harshest sentence.²⁰ It is important to note, however, that in this psalm David himself is not seeking to exact revenge. Rather, he appeals to the God of vengeance. As Bonhoeffer observes, “whoever entrusts revenge to God dismisses any thought of ever taking revenge himself.”²¹

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

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

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “A Bonhoeffer Sermon,” trans. Daniel Bloesch, ed. F. Burton Nelson, *Theology Today* 38 (1982): 469.

Moreover, in light of this sustained reality of surrounding societal injustice, Psalm 58 functions as the voice of faith responding to an implied barrage of pointed questions—whether from the psalmist himself or from others to the psalmist—which strike at the very heart of that faith: Is there really a sovereign God who executes justice on this earth? Does it make any sense for the righteous still to trust in him, when, by all appearances, evil goes unpunished and uncontested? Indeed, “the foundational principles of existence are on trial.”²² As Piper passionately articulates: if God were never to bring vengeance on his enemies and the oppressors of his people, “then he is an unfaithful God whose covenant is worthless. For he would be saying in effect that it is a matter of complete indifference whether one trusts in him or not. He would be discounting the greatness and worthiness of his own name by admitting that faith and blasphemy are for him as good as equal. Or even worse, he would be awarding blasphemy the greater portion.”²³ It is against just such a background as this that the joy of the righteous must be understood. The righteous rejoice when God comes in vengeance to break the rule of the wicked and to punish injustice, and through this restoration of justice to put to rest all doubts and

²² H. G. L. Peels, *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*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, ed. A. S. Van der Woude, vol. 31 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 218.

²³ John Piper, *‘Love Your Enemies’: Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 117. Or, as Calvin dispassionately observes: “When righteousness is not rewarded, we are disposed to cherish unbelieving fears, and to imagine that God has retired from the government of the world, and is indifferent to its concerns.” John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1846; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 379.

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

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

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

²⁴ Cf. Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, 218.

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

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 4, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1847), 283.

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

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

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

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

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

³⁰ “Rejoice over her (i.e., Babylon destroyed), O heavens and saints and apostles and prophets, for God has judged her for the way she treated you.”

But one may ask, “What about the intensity of the imagery? How could the psalmist pray in such hideous terms?” Without a doubt, this psalm—and verse 11 in particular—“is one of the most fearful passages in the Old Testament. The combination of vengeance, joy and bloody foot-bath all in one text causes an intuitive aversion.”³¹ In response to this query, one must first recognize that what is voiced here is poetry, and that inherent in the nature of poetry is the use of vivid imagery. Where a concept in narrative may be described dispassionately, in poetry it is more likely to be expressed emotively. Coupled with this, the ancient Semites tended to speak in terms which the modern Western world prefers to phrase more delicately. For example, one may note the free use the Old Testament makes of the word “hate” to denote both rejection as well as the negative passion³² (cf. the various nuances in such passages as Mal 1:2-3;³³ Hos 9:15, 17;³⁴ Ps 139:21-22³⁵), and the prevalent use of bloody terminology as is found here and in much of the eschatological prophecies. Peels perceives that Psalm 58:11b—“he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked”—phraseology which seems “so offensive to modern ears, simply intends to employ a powerful image, borrowed from the all too realistic situation of the

³¹ Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, 214.

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

³³ “I loved Jacob, but Esau I hated.”

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

³⁵ “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh, and loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.”

battlefield following the fight (wading through the blood), to highlight the total destruction of the godless.”³⁶ Moreover, much of Scripture’s “immoderate” language is heard from the lips of Jesus himself, so that from the perspective of faith, it may not be unduly—if at all—slighted. And lest one think that Christ merely accommodated his tone to that of a more savage age, it is instructive to note that the Christian canon closes with like language (e.g., Rev 14:19-20; 18:4-8, 20; 19:1-3, 15), but in the tongue of the more “rational” Greek culture.

Secondly, one must grapple with the realization that passionate rhetoric naturally and rightly arises from extreme circumstances. As Kidner observes, “the words wrung from these sufferers as they plead their case are a measure of the deeds which provoked them. Those deeds were not wrung from anyone: they were the brutal response to love (109:4) and to pathetic weakness (137).”³⁷ And here in Psalm 58, the invectives hurled one upon the other serve to express both the psalmist’s sincere desire and his sense of outrage at the flagrant violations of justice.³⁸ These sentiments must be uttered with passion. This is done by means of the free use of potent simile, metaphor, and even limited

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

³⁷ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, TOTC, ed. D. J. Wiseman (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 27.

³⁸ Kraus comments regarding the thrust of this psalm: “It is when injustice has become intolerable that the plea for God’s intervention resounds.” Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 537.

hyperbole: in Psalm 58:7-8, David pleads for Yahweh to break the power of the wicked “gods” or judges; in Psalm 58:9-10, he further seeks their sudden demise; and in Psalm 58:11, his confidence in Yahweh’s intervention of vengeance is depicted by the image of total battle victory. In its fiery outbursts, this psalm “fights for the indispensable union of religion and ethics,”³⁹ the intertwined embrace of life and faith.

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

³⁹ Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 38.

⁴⁰ Cf. Pss 58:11-12; 79:9-10; 94:1-2, in which the expectation of divine vengeance forms the backdrop for the psalmists’ cries. Jacquet rightly finds the basis of the Old Testament appeal for divine vengeance in Deut 32:43. Louis Jacquet, *Les Psaumes et le coeur de l’Homme: Etude textuelle, littéraire et doctrinale. Psaumes 42 à 100* (n.p., Belgium: Duculot, 1977), 561.

Deuteronomy 32—the song of rehearsal and remembrance⁴¹ for God’s people, the “Song of Moses.”

The Book of Deuteronomy is structured after the pattern of ancient suzerain-vassal treaties and, in this form, Deuteronomy 32:1-43 functions as a “witness” of the covenant—a character underscored by its intended repetition in the lives of God’s people.⁴² Moreover, the Song of Moses has an ongoing prophetic function, as a witness to the ongoing covenant of God with his people—the application of which carries through to the end of the canon, wherein the cry for divine vengeance for the blood of saints spilt is yet raised (Rev 6:9-10) and its accomplishment rejoiced in (Rev 19:1-2). This is illustrative of both the primary and secondary purposes of the Song: primarily as a witness against Israel for their rebellions (cf. Deut 31:19-21, 28; 32:5-30), but also secondarily as a testimony to the faithfulness of God (in the face of his people’s faithlessness), which issues in his vengeance against her oppressors (cf. Deut 32:4, 31-43).⁴³

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

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

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

The most relevant portions for the discussion here are verses 33-43:

33 חַמַּת תְּנִינִם יֵינָם
וְרֹאשׁ פְּתָנִים אֶכְזָר:
..... 34
35 לִי נָקָם וְשָׁלֵם 44

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

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

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

לַעֲתַת תְּמוּט רַגְלָם
 כִּי קָרוֹב יוֹם אִידָם
 וְחֶשׂ עֲתֻדַת לְמוֹ:
 36 כִּי־יִדִין יְהוָה עַמּוֹ
 וְעַל־עֲבֹדָיו יִתְנַחֵם
 כִּי יִרְאֶה כִּי־אֲזַלְתָּ יָד
 וְאָפַס עָצוּר וְעִזּוּב:
 37 וְאָמַר אֵי אֱלֹהֵימוֹ
 צוּר חֲסִיו בּוֹ:
 38
 39 רְאוּ עַתָּה כִּי אֲנִי אֲנִי הוּא
 וְאִין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי
 אֲנִי אֶמִית וְאֶחִיָּה
 מִחֲצָתִי וְאֲנִי אֶרְפָּא
 וְאִין מִיָּדִי מִצִּיל:
 40 כִּי־אֶשָּׂא אֶל־שָׁמַיִם יָדִי
 וְאִמְרַתִּי חֵי אֲנֹכִי לְעֵלָם:
 41 אִם־שְׁנוֹתַי בְּרַק חֲרָבִי
 וְתֹאחֲזוּ בְּמִשְׁפַּט יָדִי
 אָשִׁיב נֶקֶם לְצָרִי
 וְלִמְשַׁנְּאֵי אֲשֵׁלֵם:
 42 אֲשַׁכִּיר חֲצֵי מַדָּם
 וְחֲרָבִי תֹאכַל בְּשָׂר
 מַדָּם חָלָל וְשִׁבְיָהּ
 מִרְאֵשׁ פְּרַעוֹת אוֹיֵב:
 43 חֲרָנִינוּ גוֹיִם עַמּוֹ
 45 וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לוֹ כָּל אֱלֹהִים
 כִּי דָם־עֲבֹדָיו יִקּוּם
 וְנֶקֶם יָשִׁיב לְצָרִיו
 46 וְכִפֹּר אֶדְמָתוֹ עַמּוֹ:

33 Their [i.e., the heathen oppressors']⁴⁷ wine is the venom of serpents,
the cruel poison of cobras.

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

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

⁴⁷ Although the text is notoriously ambiguous, it is contextually best to see the reference to “them” and “their” switching from rebellious Israel to her pagan oppressors at v. 31 (“for their rock is not like our Rock”), and then back to Israel again at v. 36 (“Yahweh will vindicate his people”). Holmyard observes that “Deut 32:30-31 makes a transition from ‘their rock’ to ‘our Rock,’ both expressions designating Israel’s God. In 32:31 ‘their Rock [sic]’ refers to the enemy’s

- 34
- 35 Vengeance is mine, I will repay.
 In due time their [i.e., the oppressors'] foot will slip;
 for the day of their disaster is near
 and their doom comes swiftly.'
- 36 Surely, Yahweh will vindicate⁴⁸ his people
 and have compassion on his servants
 when he sees that their power is gone
 and none remains—bond or free.
- 37 Then he will say, 'Where are their [i.e., his rebellious people's] gods,
 the rock in whom they took refuge?
- 38
- 39 See now that I, I am he,
 and there are no gods besides me.
 I put to death and I bring to life,
 I have wounded and I will heal,
 and no one can deliver out of my hand.
- 40 Surely, I lift my hand to heaven
 and declare: As I live forever,
 when I sharpen my flashing sword
 and my hand grasps it in judgment,
 I will take vengeance on my adversaries
 and repay those who hate me.
- 42 I will make my arrows drunk with blood
 and my sword will devour flesh—
 drunk with the blood of the slain and the captives,
 with the long-haired heads of the enemy.'

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

⁴⁸ Although the primary nuance of *לְדַלֵּת* in this passage is that of "vindication" (cf. the immediate parallelism and the focal element in vv. 41-43), there is a certain purposeful contextual ambiguity, embracing the nuance of "judgment," based upon the presence of God's enemies even among God's people (cf. vv. 36-38). Yahweh will principally punish the heathen who oppress Israel, but also secondarily he will punish the wicked in Israel who oppress the righteous. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 487-88. This secondary sense is evidenced in Ps 50:4 (cf. vv. 16ff), which borrows the language of Deut 32:1, 36: "He calls to the heavens above, and to the earth, to judge His people (*לְדַלֵּת עַמּוֹ*)." *עמו*."

43 Rejoice, O nations, with his people,
 and let all the gods worship him.
 Surely, the blood of his servants he will avenge;
 he will take vengeance on his adversaries
 and make atonement for the land of his people.

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

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

⁴⁹ Chisholm has codified a set of criteria for plausibly establishing the existence of allusion: “Sometimes a speaker or author will use a key word or phrase to allude to an earlier text of Scripture as part of his or her rhetorical strategy. . . . The verbal connection between the passages must be precise, the word or phrase involved must not be used so frequently that it qualifies as an idiom, there should be a thematic link between the two texts, and, ideally at least, there should be other contextual linguistic links between the passages.” Robert B. Chisolm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 52. It would appear from the ensuing discussion regarding the realization of promised vengeance, along with the broader concepts and specific terminology common to the passages, that the connection between Ps 58 (cf. Ps 79) and Deut 32 largely corresponds to his criteria. Support for this contention is found in Chisolm’s own recognition of the likely link between Hos 10:8 and Gen 3:18. He proffers a probable allusion based solely upon the broad context of judgment and the use of the precise phrase “thorns and thistles” (קוץ וַיִּרְדָּר), found in these two passages alone. *Ibid.*, 53. Furthermore, Fishbane also finds “intertextual allusion” similar to that endorsed above. He contends that “a close reading of the closing chapters of the Book of Exodus discloses unmistakable echoes of the language of Genesis 1:1–2:4a.” Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts*, 2d ed. (Oxford: One World, 1998), 12. He then compares Gen 1:31; 2:1, 2, 3 with Exod 39:43, 32; 40:33; 39:43, respectively. Such a connection is indeed subtly evident, even though the contexts and actors differ somewhat. Such is similarly the case in the echo of Deut 32 in Ps 58.

indeed act decisively on behalf of his defeated people. This very element runs strongly through the final verses of the Song of Moses: when all the power (literally “hand,” **יָד**) of his rebellious people is gone because of their heathen oppressors (v. 36), God demonstrates the power of his hand, from which none can deliver (v. 39). He lifts it to heaven with a self-imposed oath (v. 40), and grasps his sword with his hand to wreak vengeance on his enemies (v. 41).

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

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

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

⁵² Here, the psalmist is borrowing the imagery of such poisonous snakes and using it metaphorically, as even the Song of Moses in its later development does (compare the ostensibly literal use of the image in Deut 32:24 with the manifestly metaphorical use in Deut 32:33).

imagery of venomous (חַמָּת) serpents and deadly cobras (פְּתָנִים) (v. 33).⁵³ Lastly, in Psalm 58:11 bloody vengeance (נִקְּם) is longed for, while in Deuteronomy 32:41-43 it is such graphically bloody vengeance (נִקְּם) that is promised. And in the hope of its realization, the righteous are said to “rejoice” (Ps 58:11; Deut 32:43).⁵⁴

There are also others of the Imprecatory Psalms which hark back to the language and imagery of the latter part of this Song as the theological foundation and justification for their cries for vengeance. Psalm 94 begins with an appeal to the “God of vengeance” to repay the evil oppressors (vv. 1-2). But even more germane, and most overt in its allusion to Deuteronomy 32, is Psalm 79. After laying before Yahweh Israel’s hopeless and helpless situation, the psalmist Asaph locates the cause of their calamities in the anger and jealousy of Yahweh against his people for their sins (vv. 5, 8). He then pleads for compassion and forgiveness (vv. 8-9) and for the outpouring of divine wrath instead on the ungodly nations who have wreaked such havoc (vv. 6-7). This pattern is that which we find in Deuteronomy 32. In vv. 21-22, Yahweh is provoked to jealousy and anger against his people by their stubborn rebellions against him. Out of this jealous wrath, Yahweh promises to send various evils against them, including the ravages of the nations (vv. 23-33).⁵⁵ But at the point of their powerlessness, Yahweh promises compassion, vindication,

⁵³ This term is used only six times in the Hebrew Scriptures: in addition to Deut 32:33 and Ps 58:5, it is found in Job 20:14, 16; Ps 91:13; and Isa 11:8.

⁵⁴ Although the verb used in Deut 32:43 (רִנָּן) differs from that found in Ps 58:11 (שָׂמַח), the two are conceptually connected (cf. their parallel usage in Ps 32:11).

⁵⁵ The ravages of Israel’s enemies is the dominant curse threatened against God’s disobedient people in Deut 32:23-33 (vv. 32-33 being descriptive of Israel’s enemies); and it serves, in particular, as the background of the cry of Ps 79.

and vengeance (vv. 34-43). Psalm 79:10 makes the most explicit comparison, however. It pointedly requests of Yahweh that “the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants” (נְקַמַת דַּם-עֲבָדֶיךָ הַשָּׁפוּךְ) be known among the “nations.” This is the promise of Deuteronomy 32:43, which calls on the “nations” to rejoice, for Yahweh “avenges the blood of his servants” (דַּם-עֲבָדָיו יִקּוּם).

Moreover, far from being an isolated and peripheral portion of Old Testament biblical theology, this promise of divine vengeance found in Deuteronomy 32 is central to the theology and hope of Scripture—both Old and New Testaments alike. It is carried from the Law through the Prophets⁵⁶ and the Psalms into the New Testament through to the end of the Christian canon. Indeed, Deuteronomy 32:35 is quoted by the apostle Paul in Romans 12:19 in his justification of New Testament ethics.⁵⁷ In addition, in Revelation 6:9-11, both the cry of the saints in heaven for this vengeance and the context out of which they cry—their martyrdom, bluntly hark back to the promise of God in the latter portion of the Song of Moses to “avenge the blood of his servants” (Deut 32:43).

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

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

⁵⁷ The larger context of Rom 12:19-20, particularly as it relates to this thesis, is addressed in Appendix C.

Moreover, this eschatological tie is made explicit in Revelation 15:2-4, in which, at the close of the ages and following the bloody vengeance described in Revelation 14:19-20, the saints in glory are said to sing “the Song of Moses⁵⁸ and the Song of the Lamb” (15:3)—a song which proclaims the greatness of God’s justice revealed, and the consequent worship to arise from the nations (cf. Deut 32:43).

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

² And I saw . . . those who had been victorious over the beast and over his image and over the number of his name . . . holding harps (given them) by God. ³ And they were singing the Song of Moses the servant of God and the Song of the Lamb:

‘Great and marvelous are your works,
 O Lord God Almighty.
 Just and true are your ways,
 O King of the nations.

⁴ Who does not (now) fear (you), O Lord,
 and glorify your name,
 who alone is holy?
 All the nations will come
 and worship before you,
 for your judgments have been revealed.’

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

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

⁵⁹ Cf. footnotes 47, 48, and 51 above. The covenant lawsuit pattern (בִּי) is the central form in Deut 32. This is evidenced by the official summons to the witnesses in v. 1, the indictment in vv. 15-18, and the verdict of the Judge in vv. 19-29. G. Ernest Wright, “The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 43. This primary lawsuit form, however, was expanded in the final verses to include “hymnic themes drawn from Holy War traditions. Thus the *rib* became a mode of confession, the hymnic portions resolving the tension into an expression of hope and faith in God for deliverance.” *Ibid.*, 66. Thus this Song is, as Wright recognizes, “a ‘broken’ *rib*, that is, a specific cultic form adapted and expanded by other themes to serve a more generalized purpose in confession and praise.” *Ibid.*, 40-41.

cry for vengeance then arises out of this context and appeals to the terms of the covenant, which included this promise of vengeance against the enemies of God and his people—a promise applicable not solely to the Israel of the Old Covenant but also to the inheritors of the New Covenant, as affirmed by Revelation 6:10.⁶⁰

Psalm 137

Curse against a national or community enemy.

1 על נהרות בבל
שם ישבנו גם־בְּכִינוּ
בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן:
2 על־עַרְבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ
תָּלֵינוּ כְּנֹרְתֵינוּ:
3 כִּי שָׁם שָׂאֵלוּנוּ
שׁוּבֵינוּ דְּבַר־יְשׁוּרֵי
וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׂמִיחָה
שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן:
4 אֵיךְ נִשִּׁיר אֶת־שִׁיר־יְהוָה
עַל אֲדָמַת נָכָר:
5 אִם־אֲשַׁכְּחֶךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם
תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי:
6 תִּדְבֹּק־לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִכִּי
אִם־לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶכִי
אִם־לֹא אֲעִלֶה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם
עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמִיחָתִי:
7 זָכֹר יְהוָה לְבְנֵי אֲדָוָה
אֶת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם
הָאֹמְרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ
עַד הִיסוּד בָּהּ:
8 בַת־בָּבֶל הַשְּׂדוּדָה
אֶת־גְּמוּלָךְ שְׂגַמְלָתְךָ
אֶת־גְּמוּלָךְ שְׂגַמְלָתְךָ לָנוּ:
9 אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׁאַחֲזוּ וְנִפְצָה
אֶת־עַלְלֵיךָ אֶל־הַסֶּלַע:

⁶⁰ Cf. the use of Deut 32 for the assurance of divine vengeance in Rom 12:19, Heb 10:30, and Rev 15:3.

- ¹ By the rivers of Babylon,
 there we sat and we wept,
 when we remembered Zion.
- ² On the poplars in her midst
 we hung our lyres.
- ³ For there they demanded of us—
 our captors, song;
 and our slave-drivers,⁶¹ mirth:
 “Sing for us one of the songs of Zion!”
- ⁴ How can we sing Yahweh’s song
 on foreign soil?
- ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 may my right hand forget . . . !⁶²

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

⁶² The lack of an explicit object to **יְמִינִי תִשְׁכַּח** (frequently supplied in translations: e.g., “its skill”) has led some to suppose that there was an inadvertent scribal error in the transmission of the text, involving the transposition of letters—the most promising of which (in lieu of the alternative **תִּכְחַשׁ**, “may it fail”) has been made by Eitan. He asserts, supported by the Arabic cognate, that the MT’s **תִּשְׁכַּח** “represents a mere metathesis of **תִּכְחַשׁ** from an archaic verb **כַּשַׁח**, ‘to be paralyzed, lame.’ . . . Now, when the identity of this **תִּכְחַשׁ** as a *hapax legomenon* had been forgotten, any copyist could not but confuse its root with that of **אִשְׁכַּחַךְ**, precisely on account of the original assonance with it.” Israel Eitan, “An Identification of *tiškah!* *yəḥmīnī*, Psalm 137 5,” *JBL*

- ⁶ May my tongue cling to my palate
 if I do not remember you,
 if I do not lift up Jerusalem
 as my chief joy.
- ⁷ Remember, O Yahweh, against⁶³ the Edomites—
 the day of Jerusalem!⁶⁴
 They cried, “Raze her, raze her—
 down to her foundation!”
- ⁸ O Daughter of Babylon, (doomed to be) devastated,⁶⁵

47 (1928): 195. Others, however, have posited the presence here of the root II שׁכח, since there is no evidence of textual corruption, and since word-play or paronomasia is a common poetic device. Thus, שׁכח is to be interpreted as a homonym of the common root “to forget,” with the meaning here “to wither.” Cf. David Noel Freedman, “The Structure of Psalm 137,” in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. Hans Goedicke (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 195-96. Roberts observes, however, that this meaning is not supported by its supposed Ugaritic cognate, since it is used in two passages to describe an action leading up to sexual intercourse and resulting in pregnancy. J. J. M. Roberts, “NIŠKAH/ŦĪ . . . MILLĒB, Ps. XXXI 13,” *VT* 25 (1975): 800-01, n. 13. Koehler and Baumgartner cautiously recommend dispensing with the proposed root and adopting a conjecture. *HALOT*, 4:1491. In contrast to these proposals, however, the theme of “remembering” (vv. 6-7) and “forgetting” (v. 5) pervasive in the surrounding verses of this psalm lends weight to the MT as it stands, with the expected meaning “to forget,” with poetic ellipsis. The ellided object is probably “its skill” or some such equivalent, as is frequently supplied in translations, since it is likely that the psalmist here was a temple musician (cf. vv. 2-6). The self-imposed curse was thus placed upon those faculties most pertinent to his vocation.

⁶³ The *lamed* functions here as a dative of disadvantage (cf. like use in Ps 79:8).

⁶⁴ This refers to the day of Jerusalem’s downfall at the hands of the Babylonians, goaded on by the treacherous Edomites (cf. Obad 10-16; Ezek 35:5-6).

⁶⁵ This is contrary to the suggestion of many commentators (e.g., Dahood, Kraus, Weiser) and the editor of *BHS* to read the more expected active participle הַשְׁדִּיחַ, “the devastator,” in lieu of the MT’s passive הַשְׁדִּיחָה. The passive construction is plausibly maintained for the following reasons: (1) in general, the more difficult reading is considered primary, and the reading of the MT is manifestly the more difficult—speaking, as it initially seems, of Babylon’s state of devastation while at the height of her supremacy; (2) the equivalent construction is applied in Jer 4:30 to the kingdom of Judah in light of her impending exile: there the yet stable Judah is labeled שְׁדִּיחָה, “devastated,” to emphasize the imminence and certitude of her destruction; and (3) likewise, the psalmist’s intent by the use of the passive may simply have been to underscore the certainty of Babylon’s destruction at the hands of Yahweh, the God of retribution, who repays in full and in kind (cf. Jer 51:56). As such, the use of the participle here is to be seen as gerundive, as translated above (cf. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 387; Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2d ed. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988], 39-40), thus negating the apparent difficulty. This is further borne out by the striking relation of this cry to the near contemporary prophecy of Jer 51:47-56—the focal point of which is the coming “devastation” of Babylon, the world’s destroyer (note in

blessed is he who repays you
 what you deserve for what you did to us!
⁹ Blessed is he who seizes and shatters
 your little ones against the cliff!⁶⁶

The beautifully crafted—yet disturbing—Psalm 137⁶⁷ has been understandably dubbed “the ‘psalm of violence’ par excellence, and, at least in its full text, to be rejected by Christians.”⁶⁸ For are not Christians schooled in the law of Christ to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you,” and “turn the other cheek” (Luke 6:27-29)? And have they not been steeped in his words from the cross, the height of human cruelty and maltreatment: “Father, forgive them

particular the repeated use of **דָּשׁ** in Jer 51:48, 53, 55, 56). Therefore, “since the literary and verbal similarities between the two passages are considerable, it is better to accept MT here and interpret the reference as a proleptic statement of the irreversible fate already determined and soon to be accomplished.” Freedman, “The Structure of Psalm 137,” 203.

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

⁶⁷ Aletti and Troubet note a certain chiasmic fashioning apparent in Psalm 137, wherein repeated reference to Zion/Jerusalem in vv. 1-7 is framed in vv. 1 and 8 by reference to Babylon. Jean-Noël Aletti and Jacques Troubet, *Approche poétique et théologique des Psaumes: Analyses et méthodes* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1983), 242.

⁶⁸ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 46.

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

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

⁶⁹ R. E. O. White, *A Christian Handbook to the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 200.

⁷⁰ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 796.

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

⁷² John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 238.

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

For instance, Lewis has mused:

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

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

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

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

⁷⁴ Cf. Osgood, “Dashing the Little Ones against the Rock,” 35-37.

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

Siege warfare in the ancient Near East was frighteningly cruel.⁷⁵ For example, in the Vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon, many of the consequences promised in the event of covenant disloyalty bespeak these horrors of the siege:

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

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

 Just as honeycomb is pierced through and through with holes, so may holes be
 pierced through and through in your flesh, the flesh of your women, your
 brothers, your sons and daughters while you are alive.⁷⁶

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

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

⁷⁶ *ANET*, 539-40.

carnage.⁷⁷ This barbarous slaughter of the most helpless of non-combatants “effected total destruction by making war upon the next generation.”⁷⁸ The Scriptures make further use of this graphic and gruesome picture in its judgment oracles against rebellious Israel (Hos 14:1 [Eng 13:16]), Jerusalem (Luke 19:44), and cruel Assyria (Nah 3:10). And, most notably here, it is a fate promised as well to Babylon (Isa 13:16).

The abrupt and appalling shriek emanating from vv. 7-9, then, may be distilled as the “passionate outcry of the powerless demanding justice!”⁷⁹ Indeed, in the face of such blatant and humanly unpunishable injustice, the ravages of a wicked regime, God’s chastised people had no other recourse but to turn to Yahweh and plead for his justice. In the midst of their helplessness and humiliation, he was “their only hope for a righteous and just sentence of condemnation.”⁸⁰ And it is to Yahweh that Judah’s appeal for strict retaliation in both kind and degree is made—and surrendered.⁸¹ In such circumstances of all-too-real and horrible brutality, where there is the very real temptation to “forget” (cf. vv.

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

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

⁷⁹ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 47.

⁸⁰ Bobby J. Gilbert, “An Exegetical and Theological Study of Psalm 137” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981), 75.

⁸¹ Though implicit in the veiled imprecations of vv. 8-9, such an appeal and surrender of vengeance is made explicit in v. 7.

5-6) or to utterly abandon the faith for the sake of one's life and comfort, this psalm explodes upwards to the sole source of power in the midst of powerlessness, and hope in the midst of hopelessness. As Gilbert summarizes, the possibility, indeed, the necessity of such an appeal for retaliatory justice in the midst of blatant injustice "is the predominant theological teaching of this psalm."⁸² But does even this context justify the sentiment expressed in the emotional climax of the psalm? How could the supposedly pious psalmist ring out a cry for such violence and revenge that he would call "blessed" those who take up enemy infants and dash them mercilessly against the rocks—a death none ought lightly visualize?⁸³

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

⁸² Gilbert, "An Exegetical and Theological Study of Psalm 137," 58.

⁸³ The question is all the more relevant since Ps 137 was considered worthy to be retained in the book of worship for God's people of the Old Covenant and was embraced into the canon of the New Testament church as well.

code, this Old Testament statute forms the basis for all civilized justice. It was not a law of private retaliation,⁸⁴ but a law of just recompense.⁸⁵

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

¹⁶ If a malevolent witness should rise up against a man to accuse him of a crime, ¹⁷ then the two men involved in the dispute are to stand *before Yahweh, before the priests and the judges* who are in office at the time. ¹⁸ Then *the judges* are to investigate the matter completely, and if the witness is found to be a false witness, falsely accusing his brother, ¹⁹ then you are to do to him as he intended to do to his brother, and so you will purge the evil from your midst. ²⁰ The rest will hear and be afraid, and

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

⁸⁵ As Gordon Wenham insightfully observes, the phrase *eye for eye*, etc. was likely "just a formula. In most cases in Israel it was not applied literally. It meant that compensation appropriate to the loss incurred must be paid out. Thus if a slave lost an eye, he was given his freedom (Exod. 21:26). The man who killed an ox had to pay its owner enough for him to buy another (Lev. 24:18). Only in the case of premeditated murder was such compensation forbidden (Num. 35:16ff.). Then the principle of *life for life* must be literally enforced, because man is made in the image of God (Gen. 9:5-6)." Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 312. It is this principle of just recompense, embodied in the *lex talionis*, which forms the foundation in any period for any civilized judicial system.

never again will this evil thing be done in your midst. ²¹ Your eye must show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Additionally, in Leviticus 24:17-21, the chiastically fashioned⁸⁶ *lex talionis* in expanded form is nestled amidst a pericope (vv. 10-23) in which appropriate judgment for blasphemy was placed before Yahweh, awaiting his sentence. The divine verdict then forms the stage from which Yahweh reiterated the principle of justice by which his people were to be governed. That principle had first been uttered in Exodus 21:22-25. Even there, the punishment for personal injury was to be placed before both the wronged party and “the judges” (פְּלִלִים) for appropriate judgment (v. 22). And as the canon continued, the restriction on personal (as opposed to judicial) retaliation was made even more explicit. Indeed, it was as strictly forbidden in the Old Covenant as it is in the New. Proverbs 24:29 warns: “Do not say, ‘Just as he did to me, so I will do to him; I will pay that man back for what he has done’” (cf. Prov 20:22).⁸⁷ Jesus himself likewise summed up the Law and the Prophets in words reminiscent of these: “In all things, then, whatever you would like people to do to you, so also you do to them” (Matt 7:12).

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

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

וְאִישׁ כִּי יַכֶּה כָּל־נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם מוֹת יוּמָת: ¹⁷

וּמִכָּה נֶפֶשׁ־בְּהֶמָּה יִשְׁלַמְנָה נֶפֶשׁ תַּחַת נֶפֶשׁ: ¹⁸

וְאִישׁ כִּי־יִתֵּן מוֹם בְּעַמִּיתוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כֵּן יַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ: ¹⁹

שָׂבַר תַּחַת שָׂבַר עֵין תַּחַת עֵין שֵׁן תַּחַת שֵׁן כְּאֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן מוֹם בְּאָדָם כֵּן יִנְתֵּן בּוֹ: ²⁰

וּמִכָּה בְּהֶמָּה יִשְׁלַמְנָה ^{21a}

וּמִכָּה אָדָם יוּמָת: ^{21b}

⁸⁷ “Do not say, ‘I’ll pay you back for this wrong!’ Wait for Yahweh, and he will deliver you.”

uttered his impassioned plea. This tie is most pronounced in the comparison between Psalm 137:8 and Jeremiah 51:56, for in both verses the roots **שָׁדַד**,⁸⁸ **גָּמַל**, and **שָׁלַם** occur together in relation to the expected judgment against brutal Babylon:

בַּת־בְּבֵל הַשְּׂדוּדָה
 אֲשֶׁר־יְשַׁלְּמֵהָ לְךָ
 אֶת־גְּמוּלוֹךָ שֶׁגָּמַלְתָּ לָנוּ:

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

כִּי בָא עָלֶיהָ עַל־בְּבֵל שׂוֹדֵד

 כִּי אֵל גְּמֻלוֹת יְהוָה
 שָׁלֵם יְשַׁלְּמֵהָ:

Indeed, a devastator will come against Babylon,

 For Yahweh is a God of recompense;
 he will surely repay! (Jer 51:56).

As such, then, this psalm is as much a response to Scripture as it is to events.⁸⁹ Further striking parallels include: (1) the designation “Daughter of Babylon” (cf. Jer 50:42; 51:33 with Ps 137:8); (2) the depiction of her demise by the image of being rolled off “the cliffs” (**הַסֵּלָעִים**)—she who once was the invincible destroying mountain will soon be so no more (cf. Jer 51:25 with Ps 137:9); and (3) the ironic use of the violent term “shatter” (**נִפְץ**)—she who once was used of Yahweh to “shatter” the nations will soon find her little ones likewise “shattered” (cf. its repeated use in Jer 51:20-23 with Ps 137:9).

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

⁸⁹ Cf. Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, 460.

In addition, Jeremiah 50–51 skillfully and repeatedly weaves together the twin themes of the promise of divine vengeance and the principle of divine justice—or, the promise of vengeance in kind (Jer 50:15, 28–29; 51:6, 11, 24, 35, 36, 49, 56).⁹⁰ The former is classically expressed in the Song of Moses⁹¹ (Deut 32:35), the latter in the *lex talionis*. And this dual-edged promise, well encapsulated in Jeremiah 51:6: “For it is the time of Yahweh’s vengeance; he will repay her what she deserves!” (כִּי עֵת נִקְמָה הִיא לַיהוָה גְּמוּלָהּ), finds its echo not only in Psalm 137:7–9, but also in that other communal imprecatory prayer—Psalm 79:10, 12.⁹²

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

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

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

⁹² Ps 79:12 cries out: “Pay back into the laps of our neighbors *seven times* the reproach they have hurled at you, O Lord!” This appears on the surface to be a savage appeal to super-retaliation, and has been named “an echo of the viciousness of Lamech (Gen 4:24).” Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 72. However, this plea for sevenfold recompense is actually an image borrowed from the lips of Yahweh himself. In Gen 4:15, Yahweh promises the murderer Cain that anyone who killed him would himself receive “seven times” vengeance. And, more germane to the context of Ps 79, in Lev 26 Yahweh repeatedly promises sevenfold punishment for stubborn covenant breaking (Lev 26:18, 21, 24, 28). Whether this sevenfold *lex talionis* is to be construed as (1) a figure for sure and full punishment, (2) literary convention (hyperbole), or (3) starkly literal, it must be questioned carefully, for the psalmist is harking back to language initiated by Yahweh himself, and uttered for the highest cause: the sake of his honor.

and actually enacted in, the violent slaughter of the enemy's infants. The cry is for a punishment commensurate with the crime committed. Here the crime was the height of barbarity and ought be repaid in kind. As has been hinted, "a feeling of universal love is admirable, but it must not be divorced from a keen sense of justice."⁹³ The appeal is made to Yahweh to fulfill that justice as expressed in the *lex talionis*; the vehicle for its fulfillment is called "blessed," for through her justice would be realized, the honor of God would be upheld, and a certain measure of the world gone wrong would be righted. Such matters as these are not to be received by the righteous with regret, but with a measure of—albeit in a sense sober—rejoicing. Indeed, this very measure of rejoicing is *commanded* at the culmination of the New Testament canon of both heaven and God's saints over the future devastation of anti-typical Babylon according to the requirements of this same *lex talionis* (Rev 18:6, 20): "Give back to her just as she has given, and pay her back double for what she has done. . . . Rejoice over her, O heaven and saints and apostles and prophets!⁹⁴ For God has judged her for the way she treated you."

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

⁹³ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Psalms 125–150*, vol. 7 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1886), 189.

⁹⁴ Cf. Rev 18:20 with Jer 51:48, "Then they will shout for joy [וַיִּשְׂמְחוּ] over Babylon—heaven and earth and all that is in them."

here?”⁹⁵ In response, it must be noted that Deuteronomy 24:16 refers to judicial sentence to be carried out by men; God, on the other hand, retains the prerogative to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children (Exod 34:7). The most conspicuous example of this is when, after God’s longsuffering over their sin, he commanded the annihilation of the entire populace of Canaan at the entry of his people there. God has rights that man cannot have, for only he is God. Harsh and revolting though his justice may appear, the believer is called to trust his goodness even in the midst of his justice and accept any concomitant tensions.

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

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

⁹⁶ There are certain passages in the New Testament which unmistakably echo the essence of the *lex talionis*. For example, Paul’s curse of Elymas the sorcerer found in Acts 13:6-12 derives from this principle: Elymas had sought to keep the proconsul in spiritual blindness, so he was cursed with physical blindness. Likewise, Paul’s confidence regarding the antagonistic Alexander (2 Tim 4:14) is clearly based upon the *lex talionis*. And perhaps most notable in its conspicuous commendation of this law is Rev 18. The principle of the *lex talionis* is the theme which pervades the passage, and at its divine enactment against eschatological Babylon, an attitude of rejoicing is exacted from both saint and angel alike (Rev 18:20).

maligning the character of God who both established and promised it. As such, then, the psalmist bears no guilt for his cry, though its jarring effect remains.

Psalm 109

Curse against a personal enemy.

1 לְמַנְצַח לְדוֹד מִזְמוֹר
אֱלֹהֵי תְהַלְתִּי אֶל־תִּחְרַשׁ:
2 כִּי כִי פִי רָשָׁע וּפִי־מִרְמָה
עָלַי פִּתְחוּ
דַּבְּרוּ אֵתִי לְשׁוֹן שָׁקֵר
3 וְדַבְּרֵי שִׁנְאָה סָבְבוּנִי
נִלְחַמוּנִי חֲנָם:
4 תַּחַת־אֶהְבֶּתִי יִשְׁטְנוּנִי
וְאֲנִי תִפְלֵה:
5 וַיִּשְׁימוּ עָלַי רָעָה תַּחַת טוֹבָה
וְשִׁנְאָה תַּחַת אֶהְבֶּתִי:
6 הִפְקֵד עָלַי רָשָׁע
וְשִׁטָּן יַעֲמֵד עַל־יָמֵינוּ:
7 בְּהִשָּׁפְטוֹ יֵצֵא רָשָׁע
וּתְפִלָּתוֹ תִּהְיֶה לַחֲטָאָה:
8 יִהְיוּ־יָמָיו מְעַטִּים
פְּקַדְתּוֹ יִקַּח אַחֵר:
9 יִהְיוּ־בָנָיו יְתוּמִים
וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶלְמָנָה:
10 וְנוֹעַ יְנוּעוּ בָנָיו וְשִׂאלוּ
יִגְרְשׁוּ⁹⁷ מִחֶרְבוֹתֵיהֶם:
11 יִגְקַשׁ נוֹשָׂה לְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ

⁹⁷ Although the context well supports either reading, I emend the text on the basis of the LXX, in lieu of the MT: וּדְרָשׁוּ, “and may they seek (i.e., beg).” The LXX reading, ejkblhghvtwsan, apparently witnesses to a *Vorlage* which contained יִגְרְשׁוּ (for similar גרש מן/ג-ד constructions, cf. Exod 12:39; Job 30:5). The MT reading plausibly arose by confusion of ג-ד (although record of such confusion between these letters is absent from the discussions of both McCarter, *Textual Criticism*, and Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*) and inadvertent attraction to the preceding וְשִׂאלוּ as a more direct parallelism.

וַיִּבְזוּ זָרִים יִגְעוּ:
 12 אֶל־יְהוָה לֹא מִשֶּׁךְ חֶסֶד
 וְאֶל־יְהוָה חוֹנֵן לִיתוּמָיו:
 13 יְהוָה־אֶחְרִיתוֹ לְהַכְרִית
 בְּדוֹר אַחַר יִמַח שְׁמֵם:
 14 יִזְכַּר עוֹן אֲבֹתָיו אֶל־יְהוָה
 וַחֲטֹאת אִמּוֹ אֶל־תִּמַּח:
 15 יְהוָה נִגְד־יְהוָה תָּמִיד
 וַיִּכְרַת מֵאֶרֶץ זָכָרָם:
 16 יַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַר עֲשׂוֹת חֶסֶד
 וַיִּרְדֹּף אִישׁ־עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן
 וַיִּכְאֶה לְכָב לְמוֹתָת:
 17 וַיֵּאָחֵב קָלְלָהּ וַתְּבוֹאֶהוּ⁹⁸
 וְלֹא־חִפֵּץ בְּבִרְכָהּ וַתִּרְחַק⁹⁹ מִמֶּנּוּ:
 18 נִילַבֵּשׁ קָלְלָהּ כְּמַדּוֹ
 וַתְּבֹא¹⁰⁰ כַּמַּיִם בְּקַרְבּוֹ
 וּבְשֵׁמֶן בְּעֲצָמוֹתָיו:
 19 תִּהְיֶ־לוֹ כְּכַגְד־יַעֲטָה
 וְלִמְנַח תָּמִיד יִחַגְרָה:
 20 זֹאת פְּעֻלַּת שֹׁטְנֵי מֵאֵת יְהוָה
 וַחֲדָבְרִים רַע עַל־נַפְשֵׁי:
 21 וְאֵתָהּ יְהוָה אֲדַנִּי
 עֲשֵׂה־אֵתִי לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ
 כִּי־טוֹב חֶסֶדְךָ הַצִּילָנִי:
 22 כִּי־עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן אֲנִי
 וְלִבִּי חָלַל בְּקַרְבִּי:

⁹⁸ Consonant with the context, and contrary to the MT (which reads the *wayyiqtol* form וַתְּבוֹאֶהוּ), I emend to the simple *yiqtol* form with prefixed *waw*—a textual variation which involves alteration of the Massoretic pointing but no change in the consonantal text. This is in accord with the witness of the LXX, which reads the future $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \eta\xi\epsilon\iota\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\omega$. The *Vorlage* of the LXX read the same as the proto-MT, but the Greek translators interpreted the form differently than the Massorettes. Moreover, it is plausible that the jussive תְּהִי of v. 19 informs how the previous verses are largely to be construed (and that the *wayyiqtol* forms of v. 17 arose by attraction to the forms of vv. 16b, 17a, and 18a).

⁹⁹ Cf. the LXX's $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \mu\alpha\kappa\rho\nu\theta\eta\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota\ \acute{\alpha}\pi' \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\theta\upsilon$, and note 98 above.

¹⁰⁰ Cautiously repointing the Massoretic *wayyiqtol* form to a *yiqtol* with coordinate *waw*, interpreted as jussive in force, in keeping with the context (cf. note 98 above). Although this nuance is not reflected in the LXX, which reads $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \epsilon\iota\sigma\eta\lambda\theta\epsilon\upsilon$, it is supported by the NRSV, TEV, NEB, JB, and KJV (the NIV dissents at this point). Moreover, the imagery used in this imprecation is similar to certain cursing formulae of the ancient Near East (cf. note 110 below).

23 כַּצֵּל-כְּנֹטוֹתוֹ נְהַלְכֹתִי
 נִנְעַרְתִּי כְּאַרְבֶּה:
 24 בְּרַכִּי כְּשֵׁלוֹ מִצּוֹם
 וּבִשְׂרֵי כְּחֹשׁ מִשְׁמָן:
 25 וְאַנִּי הִיִּיתִי חֲרֻפָּה לָהֶם
 יִרְאוּנִי יִנְיַעוּן רֵאשִׁים:
 26 עֲזַרְנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
 הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי כְּחֹסְדֶךָ:
 27 וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי־יִדְּךָ זֹאת
 אַתָּה יְהוָה עֲשִׂיתָה:
 28 יִקְלְלוּ־הֵמָּה וְאַתָּה תִּבְרַךְ
 קָמִי יִבְשׁוּ¹⁰¹
 וְעֲבָדֶךָ יִשְׁמַח:
 29 יִלְבְּשׁוּ שׁוֹטְנֵי כְּלִמָּה
 וַיַּעֲטוּ כַּמַּעִיל בְּשִׁתָּם:
 30 אֹדֶה יְהוָה מֵאֵד בְּפִי
 וּבִתְוֹךְ רַבִּים אֶחְלָלֵנִי:
 31 כִּי־יַעֲמֵד לִימִן אֲבִיוֹן
 לְהוֹשִׁיעַ מִשְׁפָּטִי נִפְשׁוּ:

¹ For the director of music;¹⁰² a psalm of David.

O God whom I praise,¹⁰³ do not be silent!

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

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

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

- ² For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the treacherous
 have opened against me;
 they have spoken against me with deceitful tongues.
- ³ With words of hatred they have surrounded me,
 and have attacked me without cause.
- ⁴ In return for my love they accuse me,
 though I continue to pray (for them).¹⁰⁴
- ⁵ They repay me evil for good,
 and hatred for my love.
- ⁶ Appoint a wicked man against him,
 and let an accuser stand at his right hand!¹⁰⁵
- ⁷ When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
 and let his plea be considered as sin.
- ⁸ May his days be few;
 may another take his office.
- ⁹ May his children be fatherless
 and his wife a widow.
- ¹⁰ May his children wander about and beg,
 and may they be driven from their ruined homes.
- ¹¹ May a creditor seize all that he has,
 and may strangers plunder what he has gained from his labor.
- ¹² Let there be no one to extend lovingkindness to him,
 nor to take pity on his fatherless children.
- ¹³ May his descendants be cut off;
 may their name be blotted out in the next generation.
- ¹⁴ May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before Yahweh,
 and may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
- ¹⁵ May they remain before Yahweh continually,
 and may he cut off the memory of his descendants¹⁰⁶ from the earth.
- ¹⁶ For he never remembered to show lovingkindness,

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

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

¹⁰⁶ Literally, “their memory,” but with obvious reference to the villain’s descendants, rather than his sins, being cut off by Yahweh.

- but persecuted the poor and needy
and disheartened to their death.¹⁰⁷
- 17 He loved cursing—so may it come on him;
and he found no pleasure in blessing—so may it be far from him.¹⁰⁸
- 18 He clothed himself with cursing as his coat;¹⁰⁹
so may it enter into his body like water
and into his bones like oil.¹¹⁰
- 19 May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
and like a belt tied forever around him.
- 20 May this be¹¹¹ Yahweh's payment to my accusers,
even to those who speak evil against my life.
- 21 But you, O Yahweh my Lord,
deal with me according to your name;¹¹²
because your lovingkindness is so good, deliver me.
- 22 For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is pierced within me.

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

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

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

¹¹⁰ Cf. this curse with the following imprecation embedded in the vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon: “[As oil 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.

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

¹¹² The appeal to Yahweh’s “name” is an appeal to his character, especially his inestimable “lovingkindness,” as evidenced by the parallel phrase.

- 23 Like a lengthening shadow, I fade away;
I am shaken off like a locust.¹¹³
- 24 My knees give way from fasting,
and my body has lost all its fat.¹¹⁴
- 25 I have become an object of reproach to them;¹¹⁵
when they see me, they shake their heads.
- 26 Help me, O Yahweh my God;
save me according to your lovingkindness.
- 27 And let them know that this is your hand¹¹⁶—
that you, O Yahweh, have done it.
- 28 Let them curse, but may you bless;
may those who rise up against me be put to shame,
but may your servant rejoice.
- 29 May my accusers be clothed with disgrace,
and may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a robe.
- 30 With my mouth I will greatly extol Yahweh;
and in the midst of the multitude I will praise him.
- 31 For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save his life from those who would condemn him.¹¹⁷

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

¹¹³ The imagery is that of the quick movement to dislodge the insect from one’s body.

¹¹⁴ I.e., the psalmist’s body had become gaunt from fasting and trouble.

¹¹⁵ Referring to the psalmist’s accusers (cf. v. 20).

¹¹⁶ In Semitic thought, the “hand” is a graphic symbol of power. And in reference to God, it is characteristically an image of divine deliverance (as clarified in the parallel line; cf. Deut 32:36, 39-41).

¹¹⁷ Literally, “to save (him) from those who judge (i.e., condemn) his life.”

¹¹⁸ Joseph Hammond, “An Apology for the Vindictive Psalm (Psalm cix),” *Expositor* 2 (1875): 325.

“pregnant missile of evil,”¹¹⁹ a “raw undisciplined song of hate,”¹²⁰ and “as unabashed a hymn of hate as was ever written”¹²¹—and perhaps rightly so. Unquestionably, “this is one of the hard places of Scripture, a passage which the soul trembles to read.”¹²² The yearning for such detailed and appalling retaliation as is found in this psalm is vividly confrontational—particularly vis-à-vis the Christian call to “love your enemies” (Matt 5:44) and to “bless and curse not” (Rom 12:14). Indeed, David imprecates his enemy in a manner starkly reminiscent of certain ancient Near Eastern curse formulas. For example, compare Psalm 109:8, “May his days be few,” with the curse of Esarhaddon, “May he never grant you . . . attainment of old age.”¹²³ Furthermore, this psalm has been sorely misused in the life of the broader Christian community. For instance, Calvin records the reprehensible abuse of this psalm in his day—the practice of praying people to death for a price: “How detestable a piece of sacrilege is it on the part of the monks, and especially the Franciscan friars, to pervert this psalm by employing it to countenance the most nefarious purposes! If a man harbour malice against a neighbour, it is quite a common thing for him

¹¹⁹ Ragnar C. Teigen, “Can Anything Good Come From a Curse?” *Lutheran Quarterly* 26 (1974): 49.

¹²⁰ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 83.

¹²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 118. And he adds that the psalmist “was doubtless a hot-blooded barbarian.”

¹²² C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Psalms 104–118*, vol. 5 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1881), 157.

¹²³ Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon*, 60. Cf. also Ps 109:18, “He wore cursing as his coat, so may it enter into his body like water and into his bones like oil,” with Esarhaddon’s, “[As oil en]ters your flesh, [just so may] they cause this curse to enter into your flesh.” *Ibid.*, 78.

to engage one of these wicked wretches to curse him, which he would do by daily repeating this psalm. I know a lady in France who hired a parcel of these friars to curse her own [sic] and only son in these words.”¹²⁴

The initial question, however, that must be asked in regard to this psalm is this: “From whose lips do the vehement curses of vv. 6-19 escape—David’s or his enemy’s?” In modern treatments of the psalm, vv. 6-19 are often put in quotation marks, as being the words of David’s enemy uttered against him.¹²⁵ If this can be demonstrated to be the exegetically preferred interpretation, then the offense of the psalm is largely alleviated, and a moral dilemma avoided.¹²⁶ This view is not without significant support, chief among which are the following: (1) The psalms are known to make frequent use of un-introduced quotations—whether brief (e.g., Pss 22:9; 137:3) or lengthy (e.g., Ps 50:7-15). (2) Furthermore, whereas vv. 6-19 castigate the enemy in the singular, the verses which both precede and follow present the enemy in the plural. Indeed, no less than Artur Weiser asserts that “the change from the plural in vv. 1-5 and 20ff. to the singular in vv. 6-19 is satisfactorily accounted for only if vv. 6-19 are interpreted as a quotation of the imprecations directed against the psalmist.”¹²⁷ (3) Additionally, the structure of v. 20, in particular, is atypical and

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

¹²⁵ E.g., NRSV; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 70-71; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 335-36. An alternative approach is propounded by Jacquet (cf. JB), who argues that vv. 6-15 represent the enemies’ curses against David, and that vv. 16ff. are the curse of David about them. Louis Jacquet, *Les Psaumes et le coeur de l’Homme: Etude textuelle, littéraire et doctrinale. Psaumes 101 à 150* (n.p., Belgium: Duculot, 1979), 184-85.

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

¹²⁷ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 691.

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

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

¹²⁸ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 338.

¹²⁹ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 73.

friend turned traitor. And this same convention may be at work in Psalm 109 as well. (3) Also, the effect of v. 20, as introduced by the apparently stark and abrupt **זאת**, may likely be such that it gathers up all the foregoing curses in a fist and delivers them in a single pugilistic stroke¹³⁰ as the forceful prelude to the climactic and structurally disjunctive **ואתה** of v. 21. In addition, the inclusion of **מֵיַהוָה יְהוּהָה**, explicitly “from Yahweh,” at the end of the initial phrase renders the interpretation of **פְּעֵלָה** as “work” the less likely. It is rather a contextual indicator of divine recompense. (4) Lastly, the motive for which the verbal inclusions are framed may be explained as either simply expressions of literary craftsmanship,¹³¹ or as a means of giving “complete contextual justification for a curse by the psalmist in vv. 6-19.”¹³²

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

¹³⁰ David P. Wright, “Ritual Analogy in Psalm 109,” *JBL* 113 (1994): 400.

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

¹³² Wright, “Ritual Analogy in Psalm 109,” 394.

¹³³ As Drijvers observes, these “(poor and) needy” in the Psalms “are the humble and pious Israelites from all classes of society . . . men who through suffering and affliction were tested and matured, who through their suffering and trials had found proper submissive relation to Yahweh.” Pius Drijvers, *The Psalms: Their Structure and Meaning* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 131.

both in vv. 16 and 22 (cf. like use of אֶבְיוֹן in v. 31) in what appears to be an intentional verbal and emotional tie between the two.

יַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַר עֲשׂוֹת חֶסֶד
וַיִּרְדֹּף אִישׁ־עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן
וַנִּכְאַה לְבָב לְמוֹתָת:

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

כִּי־עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן אָנֹכִי
וְלִבִּי חָלַל בְּקֶרְבִּי:

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

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

19 found in Jeremiah 18:19-23.¹³⁴ (5) And lastly, this hypothesis runs counter to the understanding of the apostles, for in Acts 1:16, 20, Peter explicitly applies the imprecation in Psalm 109:8 as the words of David concerning Judas Iscariot.¹³⁵

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

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

- ¹⁹ Pay attention to me, Yahweh;
listen to the voice of those who contend with me!
- ²⁰ *Should evil be repaid for good?*
Yet they have dug a pit for me.
Remember that I stood before you
to speak well on their behalf,
to turn your wrath from them.
- ²¹ Therefore, give their children over to famine;
and hand them over to the power of the sword.
Let their wives be made childless and widows;
.....
- ²³ But you know, Yahweh,
all their plots to kill me.
Do not atone for their iniquity
or blot out their sin from before you.
Let them be overthrown before you;
deal with them in the time of your anger.

¹³⁵ In this, there is implicit commendation of the initial utterance. Indeed, as Peter relates, it was the Holy Spirit who spoke these things through David (Acts 1:16). In addition, the typological application of this psalm to the close associate-turned-traitor places the curses of Ps 109 in their appropriate context and usage.

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

- ¹¹ Malevolent witnesses rise up;
they question me about things I do not know.
- ¹² *They repay me evil for good—*
what bereavement to my soul!

already shown a pattern of enemy-love. However, this love had been both spurned and returned with repeated enmity. Moreover, even in the midst of the enemy's litigations and David's counter-imprecations, David apparently continued to exemplify a measure of concern for the enemy in his prayers (Ps 109:4).¹³⁷ In light of his enemy's appalling lack of lovingkindness,¹³⁸ climaxing in his abuse of the legal system, David resorts to his only remaining recourse for rectification.¹³⁹

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

¹³ Yet I, when they were sick, clothed myself in sackcloth,
I humbled myself in fasting;
but my prayers returned to me unanswered.

¹⁴ I paced back and forth as though for my friend or brother;
I bowed my head in grief as though mourning for my mother.

¹⁵ But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee

.....

¹⁹ Let not those rejoice over me
who are wrongfully my enemies;
let not those who hate me without cause
(maliciously) wink the eye.

¹³⁷ As Spurgeon comments: "We could all pray for the conversion of our worst enemy, and David would have done the same; but viewing the adversaries of the Lord, and doers of iniquity, AS SUCH, AND AS INCORRIGIBLE we cannot wish them well; on the contrary, we desire their overthrow, and destruction. The gentlest hearts burn with indignation when they hear of barbarities to women and children, of crafty plots for ruining the innocent, of cruel oppression of helpless orphans, and gratuitous ingratitude to the good and gentle. A curse upon the perpetrators of the atrocities in Turdey [sic] may not be less virtuous than a blessing upon the righteous." Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 5:157.

¹³⁸ This thread of *ds#j#* weaves its way prominently through the psalm. David appeals for the withholding of such from the enemy (109:12) because the enemy had himself habitually withheld it from those who so desperately needed it (109:16). Later, David twice appeals to the *ds#j#* of Yahweh as the basis of deliverance from his plight (109:21, 26).

¹³⁹ Cf. the language of the court: accusation and condemnation abused (Ps 109:2-4, 31) and appealed to (Ps 109:6-7, 31).

with the demands of *lex talionis*:¹⁴⁰ (1) Psalm 109:2, “For the mouth of the wicked (רָשָׁע) . . . [has] opened against me,” is answered by Psalm 109:6, “Appoint a wicked man (רָשָׁע) against him,” and Psalm 109:7, “When he is tried, let him be found guilty (רָשָׁע).” (2) Psalm 109:4, “In return for my love they accuse me (יִשְׁטְנוּנִי),” is answered by Psalm 109:6, “Let an accuser (שֹׁטֵן) stand at his right hand,” and Psalm 109:20, “May this be Yahweh’s payment to my accusers (שֹׁטְנֵי).” (3) Psalm 109:16, “He never remembered to show lovingkindness (רַחֲמֵי),” is answered by Psalm 109:12, “Let there be no one to extend lovingkindness (רַחֲמֵי) to him.” (4) Psalm 109:16, “He persecuted the poor and needy and disheartened to their death,” is answered by the imprecations which invoke such a state upon the oppressor (Ps 109:8-15). (5) Psalm 109:17, “He loved cursing,” is answered immediately by “so may it come on him” (cf. likewise throughout vv. 17-19). His talionic appeal informs our understanding of the evils of his enemy: those horrific imprecations wished upon the enemy in vv. 8-15 characterize the very crimes the enemy himself had committed¹⁴¹ (cf. vv. 16-20). (6) And Psalm 109:18, “He clothed himself (יָלַבַּשׁ) with cursing,” is countered by the plea in Psalm 109:29 that the psalmist’s “accusers be clothed (יָלַבַּשׁוּ) with disgrace.”

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

¹⁴¹ Cf. Drijvers (*The Psalms*, 119), who views the imprecations of Ps 109:8-15 as repetitions of “the words and threats” of the psalmist’s enemy.

And again, although it is noticeably a known personal enemy¹⁴² who is imprecated, David does not react in private revenge as would be expected in such a circumstance, but rather releases the retaliatory demands of justice to the one under whose jurisdiction it rightfully lies (cf. Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19).¹⁴³ He brings his hurt and hurtful cry for vengeance to God (Ps 109:1, 21, 26ff)—a cry which will transform to public praise when divine deliverance is realized (Ps 109:30-31).¹⁴⁴ Such is the nature of God's acts: vengeance upon his enemies is salvation for his people. God has taken sides in his covenant, and he has bound himself to remain faithful to it.

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

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

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

¹⁴⁴ As such, it is an expression of the psalmist's confidence in divine action on his behalf.

malevolently treated him was the covenantal promise of God to curse those who cursed his people, as is found initially and principally in Genesis 12:3.¹⁴⁵

וְאֶבְרַכָּה מְבַרְכֶיךָ
וּמִקְלָלֶיךָ אָאֹר

I will bless those who bless you,
and he who curses you I will curse.¹⁴⁶

The Abrahamic Covenant, of which this promise is a part, assured divine blessing on those who would bless the faith-descendants of Abraham, and divine cursing (אָרַר) on those who would treat them with contempt (קָלַל).¹⁴⁷ Though perhaps a “dangerous” concept,

¹⁴⁵ The Imprecatory Psalms base their theology of cursing in the Torah, the foundational revelation of God. And although the psalmist here does not quote from Gen 12:3 *per se*, he nonetheless evidently invokes the theology classically expressed therein—the divine promise to curse those who curse his people. This promise of divine blessing and cursing was to operate at both the individual and corporate levels: the promise was given to Abram and yet was to apply to the entirety of his descendants—all who would enter that covenant by faith. Later allusions to this promise were likewise applied both individually and corporately. For the former sense, cf. Gen 27:29, in the blessing of Jacob by Isaac—acquired by deception, yet binding nonetheless: אָרַרְךָ בְּרוּךְ וּמְבַרְכֶיךָ בְּרוּךְ, “Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you.” For the latter cf. Num 24:9, from the lips of Balaam, hired by Balak to curse the encroaching nation of Israel, but frustrated by the will of Yahweh to bless instead: וְאָרַרְךָ אָרוּר וּמְבַרְכֶיךָ בְּרוּךְ, “Blessed be those who bless you, and cursed be those who curse you” (cf. also Exod 23:22; Deut 30:7). This dual application runs apparently through the prophets as well: cf., e.g., the personal imprecations in Jer 18:18-23; the judgments against various surrounding nations for their sins against Israel and (notably) for the sins of Israel against their own people (specifically the righteous and the needy) in Amos 1-2; and the judgments promised against Edom in Obad 8-15.

¹⁴⁶ Both קָלַל and אָרַר mean “to curse,” although the former often bears the nuance “to disdain,” whereas the latter is characteristically solemn and judicial (cf. chapter 3, note 71). Thus, the promise of cursing iterated in Gen 12:3 bespeaks that “those who in the future would view Abraham and all that his faith and life represented as contemptible would find that they would come under God’s judicial curse. To curse Abraham would be almost equivalent to cursing God.” Allan M. Harman, “The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter,” *RTR* 54 (1995): 68.

¹⁴⁷ Laney rightly recognizes that the cries for judgment in the Imprecatory Psalms are uttered in accordance with the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant. But he further avers that

because of the implications for imprecation, this passage portrays that the enemies of Israel are the enemies of God, that “the despisers of Israel are the despisers of God.”¹⁴⁸ David, then, was taking hold of this danger. In an intense manner he made appeal to God, in a form familiar in the ancient Near East, to do as he had promised: to curse those who had so mistreated him.¹⁴⁹

Literary echoes of Genesis 12:3 are found in this psalm. Psalm 109:17 utilizes the term **קָלַלְתָּ** for the cursing of the enemy, in contrast with **בָּרַכְתָּ** (cf. v. 18). Likewise, and most directly, in Psalm 109:28 the enemy’s cursing (**יִקְלְלוּ-וְיִקְלְמוּ**) is contrasted with Yahweh’s blessing (**וְיִבְרַכְתָּ**). In addition, distinct allusion to earlier cursing formulas established in the Mosaic Covenant (which builds upon the Abrahamic) are expressed in David’s imprecations. In essence, he is reminding God to be true to his promise to curse—and to curse specifically as he had promised. For instance, Psalm 109:9, “May his children

they “are appeals for Yahweh to carry out His judgment against those who would curse the nation.” J. Carl Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” *BSac* 138 (1981): 42. However, the emphasis in the Abrahamic Covenant of Gen 12:2-3 is not so much on the nation as much as it is on the people of God. This is made clear not only in Gal 3:6-29 (which asserts that the essence of the Abrahamic Covenant embraces the New Testament saint as it did the Old), but also in the curses of the Sinaitic Covenant promised against rebellious Israel (e.g., Deut 28) and the grave warnings divinely uttered against the wicked within the covenant community of Israel (Ps 50:16-22). It is the faith of Abraham that is the principle mark of identity, rather than race (cf. Rom 2:28-29; Gen 12-22). Cf. also examples in Scripture of non-Israelites incorporated into the covenant community of faith and the promises given to Abraham (e.g., Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite: Josh 6:25; Ruth 1:16; 4:13-22; Matt 1:5).

¹⁴⁸ Raymond H. Swartzback, “A Biblical Study of the Word ‘Vengeance,’” *Interpretation* 6 (1952): 456.

¹⁴⁹ This theme is common to ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. E.g., the Hittite treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru includes the prescription: “With my friend you shall be friend, and with my enemy you shall be enemy.” *ANET*, 204. Likewise, in the covenant between Yahweh and his people, he promised upon their obedience: “I will be an enemy to your enemies, and I will be a foe to your foes” (Exod 23:22).

be fatherless and his wife a widow” makes explicit appeal to talionic justice in harking back to the words of Yahweh in Exodus 22:21-23, “Do not oppress any widow or the fatherless. For if you oppress them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. Then my anger will burn, and I will kill you with the sword; *your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.*”¹⁵⁰ Moreover, Psalm 109:14, “May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before Yahweh” (and related curses uttered in reference to the descendants of the offender) recalls the promise of Yahweh to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their children (Exod 20:5-6; 34:7).¹⁵¹ Thus, David is calling upon God to act as he had promised—in literal, though horrid, detail. As Peels similarly observes, such imprecatory prayers are heard from within the context of the covenant relationship between God and his people. “The covenant is threatened by the fury of the godless. It is not they who are being killed but the righteous, and nobody intervenes. When in this situation the psalmist raises an imprecatory prayer to God and pleads for the punishment of the enemy, he ties in with God’s own covenant curse upon the godless.”¹⁵²

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

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

¹⁵² Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, 240. This same principle is reinforced by Christ himself. In Luke 18:1-8, Jesus utilizes the example of a widow pleading for vengeance against her adversary (v. 3) as the consolation for his own covenant “elect” in their situations of extremity (v. 7).

Hence, Psalm 109 is a harsh and explicit appeal to the Lord of the covenant to remain true to his promise to curse those who curse his people—a promise which commenced with Abraham (Gen 12:3) and remained tacitly intact into the New Testament as well¹⁵³ (e.g., Gal 3).¹⁵⁴ Indeed, this psalm is the cry of the child of God who has no other recourse for justice—where no other aid is available for the redress of grievous personal wrongs, where the abuses of one’s enemies have reached the extent that the question of theodicy is evoked, where the name of God and the enduring faith of his people are at stake. It is from such a context that this prayer was first offered.

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

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

CHAPTER 5

COLLIDING WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT

Colliding with the New Testament after having suffered such a barrage of imprecations and pleas for divine vengeance to be wreaked against one's enemies—seen to be likewise the enemies of God—one is at first taken aback by the startling demands of Christ and his apostles, injunctions which initially appear to counter and even overthrow the ethics of the prior age as expressed in the Imprecatory Psalms. And indeed, there is a noticeable progress in the development of divine revelation—here, in particular, the ethic of enemy-love: both the command itself and the ramifications of that command are made more explicit and given greater emphasis, and the expectation of divine vengeance finds an increased eschatological focus. However, upon closer inspection, although occurring with less frequency and often with less vividness of imagery, the New Testament as well is seen to be interspersed with the conspicuous presence of extreme and even personalized imprecations, which markedly bear no concomitant implication of condemnation.

Apparent Contradictions

“*Love your enemies.*” In the arrangement of the first Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) is presented as that grounding expression of Christian ethics.¹ Arising

¹ It is specifically introduced as a sermon given to “his disciples” (Matt 5:1-2).

from its midst, and arriving at the climax of Christ's discourse on the Law in Matthew 5:17-48, comes the startling cry: "Love your enemies." This portion of his oration is replete with radical statements which appear to contradict the teaching of the Old Testament; yet this contradiction is more apparent than real. Jesus himself introduces his several internalized and intensified "re-statements" of the Old Testament with the words, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill" (5:17). In these words Jesus certified that he did not come to set himself up as a rival to the Old Testament—he does not disparage nor discredit what has come before. Rather, the Old Testament propels us *toward* Christ, is summed up *in* Christ, and must be interpreted *through* Christ.² Carson agrees that "Jesus does not conceive of his life and ministry in terms of *opposition* to the Old Testament, but in terms of *bringing to fruition* that toward which it points. Thus, the Law and the Prophets, far from being abolished, find their valid continuity in terms of their outworking in Jesus."³

In what follows (5:21-47), Jesus affirms the Old Testament by reiterating—via hyperbole⁴—the original intent of several commands, contrary to the prevailing Pharisaical

² Cf. Luke 24:27, 44-45; John 5:39-40, 46. For those who had seen Christ, the Old Testament would never be the same.

³ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978), 37.

⁴ Jesus made frequent use of this device for the sake of startling emphasis. Cf., e.g., the parallel utterances of Christ in Luke 14:26 and Matt 10:37—the former of which reads, "If anyone comes to me and does not *hate* his father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple." In the latter the offensive language of hyperbole is softened to comparison: "He who *loves* (his) father or mother *more than* me is not worthy of me."

and scribal understanding of them.⁵ This he did by plunging to the heart of the matter—the intent and implications of the commands, based upon his own authority. This was a radical measure in and of itself, for Christ was placing himself on the level of the Lawgiver, God. The crowds recognized such authority. Indeed, the contrast between the authority of Christ and that of the Jewish religious leaders was publicly evident: at the conclusion of his sermon the crowds were awed by the import and impact of his words (Matt 7:28-29).

Moreover, these restatements of Christ are framed by an inclusio of “impossible righteousness” (both surpassing that of the Pharisees—5:20, and comparable to that of God—5:48),⁶ the climax of which are his words in Matthew 5:43-45, 48:⁷

43 Ἦκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη, Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου καὶ μισήσεις τὸν ἐχθρόν σου. 44 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀγαπάτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν καὶ προσεύχεσθε ὑπὲρ τῶν διωκόντων ὑμᾶς, 45 ὅπως γένησθε υἱοὶ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν τοῦ ἐν οὐρανῷ, ὅτι τὸν ἥλιον αὐτοῦ ἀνατέλλει ἐπὶ πονηροὺς καὶ ἀγαθοὺς καὶ βρέχει ἐπὶ δικαίους καὶ ἀδίκους. . . . 48 Ἔσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι ὡς ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειός ἐστιν .

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴ But I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he causes his

⁵ For a discussion of Christ’s “reinterpretation” of the *lex talionis* in Matt 5:38-42, refer to chap. 4, n. 84.

⁶ This call for perfection serves as 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.

⁷ In the full pericope of Matt 5:43-48, verse 48 carries the dual function of summing up both the premier and over-arching command to love as well as the larger preceding pericope of 5:20-48, tying our activity to the prior activity of God, who is our exemplar. Verses 46-47 illustrate the command of enemy-love in tangible form.

sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. . . .⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁸

The first half of Jesus’ initial statement (“You shall love your neighbor”) is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18—words which come directly after prohibiting revenge or personal grudge, and which are considered the second-greatest commandment by Jesus’ own testimony.⁹ The latter half (“You shall hate your enemy”), however, is not to be found,

⁸ These words are paralleled in Luke 6:27-28, 35-36:

²⁷ Ἄλλὰ ὑμῖν λέγω τοῖς ἀκούουσιν, Ἀγαπάτε τοὺς ἐχτροὺς ἡμῶν, καλῶς ποιεῖτε τοῖς μισοῦσιν ὑμᾶς, ²⁸ εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς καταρωμένους ὑμᾶς, προσεύχεσθε περὶ τῶν ἐπηρεαζόντων ὑμᾶς. . . . ³⁵ πλὴν ἀγαπάτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν καὶ ἀγαθοποιεῖτε καὶ δανίζετε μηδὲν ἀπελπίζοντες· καὶ ἔσται ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς, καὶ ἔσεσθε υἱοὶ ὑψίστου, ὅτι αὐτὸς χρηστός ἐστὶν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀχαρίστους καὶ πονηροὺς. ³⁶ Γίνεσθε οἰκτίρμονες καθὼς καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν οἰκτίρμων ἐστίν.

²⁷ But I say to you who listen, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. . . . ³⁵ But love your enemies and do good (to them) and lend (to them), expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and evil.

³⁶ Be compassionate, just as also your Father is compassionate.”

Of note is the divergence between the closing clause in Matt 5:48 and in Luke 6:36. Matthew’s “perfection” is Luke’s “compassion”—hinting again that obedience to the dictums of our trans-testamental Lord is principally a matter of the heart. The question as to how these two sermon accounts relate to one another is an issue of ongoing debate. The options are primarily twofold. (1) Are they based upon a single occurrence, and individually fashioned from a common tradition (i.e., one or more recensions of Q)? Proponents of this position include Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1, BECNT, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 936; D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 126; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 243, 245; and David L. Tiede, *Luke*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Roy A. Harrisville et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1998), 138-39. (2) Or did Christ, in his extended itinerant ministry, preach essentially the same message on more than one occasion? Proponents of this position include Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC, ed. Leon Morris (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 138-39; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed., ICC, ed. Alfred Plummer, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1964), 177; also cited favorably by R. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 57.

⁹ Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31; cf. Luke 10:27.

as such, in any of the writings of the Old Testament.¹⁰ Yet there is a likely representation of the mindset behind this quotation in the Rule of the Qumran Community (1QS).¹¹ 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).¹² This hatred was such that it involved even the withholding of compassion from them (1QS 10:20-21).¹³ Apparently, many people of Jesus’ day had come to believe that if the Old Testament commanded the love of one’s neighbor, then it must also, consequently, command the hatred of one’s

¹⁰ However, Warstler argues that the command to hate your enemy “is a legitimate summary of Old Testament teaching.” Kevin Robert Warstler, “The Law of Love in Matthew 5:43-48” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 19; cf. 5-8. Olof Linton, in “St. Matthew 5, 43,” *Studia Theologica* 18 (1964): 78-79, likewise believes it to be an adequate paraphrase of the Old Testament’s instruction in this matter. Contrariwise, Sutcliffe summarizes astutely what the men of Qumran would have learned from the Old Testament with regard to both God’s and the believer’s attitude toward the enemy: “God hates sin and sinners too, precisely in so far as they are attached to sin, because as sinful they attract to themselves the hatred due to sin. Nonetheless God desires their repentance and longs to forgive. But if they persist in the stubbornness of their evil wills, He is obliged in justice to punish and to avenge. So too the pious Israelite, following the ways of God, hates sin and sinners and is called upon at times to act as the instrument of divine vengeance. But he must not entertain any personal hate or rancour. On the contrary he must act kindly even to those hostile to himself. He is commanded to love his neighbour as himself and this commandment embraces also foreigners resident in the land. He must act in regard of all even as he would wish others to act in regard of himself.” E. F. Sutcliffe, “Hatred at Qumran,” *RevQ* 2 (1960): 349.

¹¹ Contra Sutcliffe, who claims that Jesus’ statement is not reflective of the teaching to be found at Qumran. *Ibid.*, 355.

¹² The scroll reads: **כול בני אור איש כגורלו בעצת אל ולשנא כול בני חושך ולאהוב איש כאשמתו בנקמת אל**. James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations*, vol. 1, *Rule of the Community and Related Documents* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 6-7 (this form of the final *kaph* is extant in this edition).

¹³ Again: **כול סוררי כרכ ולוא ארחם על כול סוררי כרכ**, “But I will have no compassion for any who rebel against the way.” *Ibid.*, 46-47.

enemy.¹⁴ This understanding is given expression in the second century B.C. apocryphal book of Sirach 12:4-7:¹⁵

⁴ Give to the godly man, but do not help the sinner.

⁵ Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly;
hold back his bread, and do not give it to him,
lest by means of it he subdue you;
for you will receive twice as much evil
for all the good which you do to him.

⁶ For the Most high also hates sinners
and will inflict punishment on the ungodly.

⁷ Give to the good man, but do not help the sinner.¹⁶

But Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” In these words, Jesus shockingly asserts the unthinkable: that we are to “love” those we “hate” (or who hate us). This does not discount

¹⁴ This mindset was not solely isolated to the Qumran sectarians, for the general populace held a certain hatred toward Samaritans in general and in principle (cf. John 4:9; Neh 4, 6), and the Zealots held such rancor against the Romans that their very existence was sustained by their violent objective: the overthrow of Roman power and her expulsion from their land.

¹⁵ These words are in direct contrast to both Jesus’ words in Matt 5 and the apostle Paul’s in Rom 12.

¹⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version*, expanded ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1977), 143. Contrast this advice with that of the ancient pagan Babylonian *Counsels of Wisdom* (circa 1600–1700 B.C.):

Do not return evil to the man who disputes with you;
Requite with kindness your evil-doer,
Maintain justice to your enemy,
Smile on your adversary.
If your ill-wisher is [. . . .], nurture him.
Do not set your [mind] on evil.
. . . [.] agreeable [to] the gods.
Evil [.] an abomination [. . . of] Marduk.
.....
Give food to eat, beer to drink,
Grant what is asked, provide for and honour.
In this a man’s god takes pleasure,
It is pleasing to Šamaš, who will repay him with favour.

W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 101, 103. This same advice may be compared with that found in Rom 12:17-21 and Prov 25:21-22.

that they are yet our enemies; but, in a sense, our enemy becomes our neighbor. In the context of Christ's radical love command in Matthew 5:43-48, he defines "enemy" in such a way as to include both those who are foes in the customary politico-national sense, but also those whose enmity is primarily interior, including those among one's own people (who in Lev 19:18 are explicitly considered one's "neighbor"). Indeed, it is this latter element which is his point of emphasis.¹⁷ In this brief pericope, "enemy" is placed parallel to "those who persecute you" (5:44), "the evil" and "unrighteous" (5:45), implicitly "those who do not love you" (5:46), "tax collectors" (who were among their own people, but largely considered greedy and oppressive traitors, 5:46), and implicitly "those who aren't your brothers" and "Gentiles" (5:47).

Likewise, in the introduction to, and parable of, the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37,¹⁸ Jesus expands the concept of "neighbor" beyond what it initially appears. In this parable, Jesus drives home that the heart of the command, "Love your neighbor," includes implicitly within it, at least to a certain extent, "love your enemy." For in this parable, to the question: "Who is my neighbor?" (10:29) Jesus answers in essence, "Your enemy" (whether from the perspective of the Jew to the Samaritan, or vice versa; cf. John 4:9); for he asks in response: "Who was the neighbor to this man?" (10:36). To Jesus, my

¹⁷ Thus, as Spicq observes, Christ "preserved exactly the spirit of Leviticus which it fulfilled." Ceslaus Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament*, vol. 1, *Agape in the Synoptic Gospels*, trans. Marie Aquinas McNamara and Mary Honoria Richter (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1963), 11.

¹⁸ Note how this parable follows on the heels of Jesus' sending out of the seventy-two. Nestled in that account are the words of Luke 10:10-12, in which Jesus directs his disciples to perform a symbolic curse—a portent of impending doom—against those who do not receive them or their message.

“neighbor” may indeed be my “enemy”; for the one who is in need, and whose need I may meet, is my neighbor—whichever he may be.

In addition, the expression of kindness, as exemplified in this parable of Christ, is essentially love in action. And in the Sermons on the Mount and Plain, this love is patterned after the action of God, a God who freely exhibits kindness and compassion toward the evil and ungrateful (Luke 6:35-36), thus expressing his perfection (Matt 5:48). And this love characterized by indiscriminate kindness toward friend and foe alike is a “perfection” his followers are to imitate.¹⁹

¹⁹ Betz comments on God’s perfection in Matt 5:48: “In what way is God perfect? He bestows the benefits of his creation continuously on the bad and the good and on the righteous and the unrighteous. He does so, not because he is motivated by the expectation that the wicked and the unrighteous will become grateful to him and worship him; the assumption is, rather, that God’s enemies will *not* appreciate his benefits. They will remain enemies even though he keeps doing good to them. His generosity, however, does not provide any justification for the enmity of his enemies. This is God’s perfection. . . . The ‘sons of God’ can become perfect, too, by imitating God in dealing with their own enemies. The implication, however, is that the Christian must not sentimentalize the demand. Enemies are real and remain real, and love of the enemy does not mean loving them in order to turn them into friends. Although such conversion of the enemies is desirable, it cannot be the motivation and purpose.” Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 323-24. Cf. Dabney’s masterful effort at reconciling Christ’s revolutionary and thoroughgoing command vis-à-vis the like imperative of recognizing evil as evil and displaying appropriate hatred toward it (and thus in some measure against those who bear it, cf. Rom 12:9): “The sum of the matter, then, appears to be this: the law of love does not require the injured Christian to approve or countenance the evil character manifested in the wrong done him, or to withhold the verdict of truth and justice against it when righteous ends are gained by pronouncing it. The law of love does not require him to intervene for delivering the aggressor from the just claims of either human or divine law for penal retribution; nor does it forbid his feeling a righteous satisfaction when that retribution is executed by the appropriate authorities; but the law of love does forbid his taking retribution into his own hands, and it requires him still to extend the sentiments of humanity and the love of compassion to the enemy’s person so long as he continues to partake the forbearance of God, which love of compassion will prompt the injured party to stand ready to forgive the element of personal *damnum* to his enemy, and to perform the offices of benevolence to his person, in spite of his obnoxious character.” Robert L. Dabney, “The Christian’s Duty Towards His Enemies,” in *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney*, vol. 1, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 720.

Moreover, in certain discrete instances, the Old Testament unquestionably commands kindness toward enemies. For example, Exodus 23:4-5 says: “If you happen upon the stray ox or donkey of your enemy, you must surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you fallen under its load, do not fail to help him; you must surely help him with it.”²⁰ Likewise, Proverbs 25:21-22 states: “If one who hates you is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. For fiery coals you will heap on his head, and Yahweh will reward you.”²¹ In addition, this command is exemplified by many of the saints of old. Of notable mention is Naaman’s Israelite slave girl, who sought the welfare of her enemy master—the Aramean army commander, and of Yahweh’s kind response to him through his prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 5).²² Further mention could be made of Elisha in 2 Kings 6:18-23, whose counsel to the Israelite king to feed rather than kill the enemy Arameans, captured by a combined exhibit of divine power and human intrigue, was apparently intended to forestall continued enmity, which result did transpire

²⁰ Betz’s objection in *The Sermon on the Mount* (307) that “such help is directed toward the animals, not toward the enemy” is unwarranted. For in the agricultural milieu of the ancient Near East, these animals were a principal means of support, without which one might easily fall into financial ruin. So although this command positively affects the beast, its intent is aimed primarily at aiding the enemy. As the apostle Paul so bluntly asks, obviously expecting a negative response: “Is it about oxen that God is concerned?” (1 Cor 9:9). Here he speaks not categorically, but for the purpose of emphasis and of divine intent.

²¹ These verses are quoted by Paul in Rom 12:20 as the basis of our New Testament ethic. For exegesis of both the Old and New Testament passage, refer to Appendix C. For Old Testament examples which illustrate this command in detail or in principle, cf. 2 Kgs 6:22-23 and 1 Sam 24:17-19.

²² For an example of Yahweh’s surprising kindness toward the Assyrians—his inveterate adversaries and the oppressors of his people, cf. Jonah 4. Notably, the response of Jonah, who balked at this display of love, is portrayed as unbecoming.

for a time (6:23b). While it must be granted that the command to “love your enemies” is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament, 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.”²³

Furthermore, even in the context of Leviticus 19, “neighbor” is broader than its immediate parallel, “brother”—including all within one’s bounds (even resident aliens).²⁴ In Leviticus 19, both fellow Israelites and resident foreigners were to be loved in like manner—“as yourself.” Compare Leviticus 19:18, **וְאַהֲבָתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ**, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” with Leviticus 19:34, **וְאַהֲבָתָּ לוֹ כְּמוֹךָ**, “And you shall love him (i.e., the foreigner [גֵּר] in your midst) as yourself.” Although the term **גֵּר** speaks generically of a “resident alien,”²⁵ in this context there is the recognition of an implicit or provisional

²³ William Klassen, *Love of Enemies* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 28. As is repeatedly illustrated in Scripture, love of enemies is shown primarily by deeds of kindness to them. And this kindness toward enemies (i.e., love in action) is commanded in the Old Testament (e.g., Exod 23:4-5 and Prov 25:21-22 noted above).

²⁴ Although Lev 19:18 parallels “neighbor” with “one of your people” (i.e., an Israelite), both the near context and the broader Old Testament concept of kindness broke beyond that narrow restriction (cf. Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19).

²⁵ Or, “immigrant,” a translation of **גֵּר** proposed by Spina. Frank Anthony Spina, “Israelites as *gērîm*, ‘Sojourners,’ in Social and Historical Context,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O’Connor, American Schools of Oriental Research Special Volume Series, ed. Eric M. Meyers, vol. 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 323. He notes in his discussion that “immigrants were often viewed as ‘enemies’ or ‘outlaws’ in the sense that their attitudes and actions were construed as or in fact constituted an explicit denunciation of the social and political order.” *Ibid.*, 328.

status of enmity as well.²⁶ For, although Israel entered Egypt on friendly terms, their “sojourn” in Egypt was characterized by the enmity of slavery. It was this mistreatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians that Yahweh sought to counter among his own people, counter to their own inclinations toward oppression and suspicion (cf. Lev 19:33, in which the natural reaction to such a foreigner would be “mistreatment”).²⁷ Thus, a subtle sense of enmity, yet combined with the command of love (to be expressed in deeds of kindness), is indeed borne out in this passage.

Jesus, then, rather than presenting a novel (or imposing even a foreign) interpretation on the Leviticus 19 passage, was both distilling and radicalizing the essence of the Old Testament teaching in this regard. In his terse command, however, he distinctly moves beyond the oblique teaching of the Old Testament and its case law, making the

²⁶ Cf. likewise Gen 15:13; Exod 22:20; 23:9; Deut 10:19; 23:8; 24:17-22. Thus, there appears to be a propensity toward oppression and status of suspicion against גֵּרִים. Notice especially Exod 23:9, “You shall not oppress a stranger [גֵּר]. You yourselves know the soul of a stranger (i.e., how it feels to be one), for you were strangers in Egypt.” Thus, as Stigers observes: “the clearest sense of the noun *gēr* is seen when used of Israel in their sojourn in Egypt.” Harold G. Stigers, “גֵּר,” *TWOT*, 1:155.

²⁷ Such a predisposition toward mistreatment belies a certain sense of enmity. Cf. also Exod 23:22-23, in which God designates the indigenous peoples as enemy nations to be destroyed upon Israel’s entrance into Canaan, and Deut 23:4-5, which excludes the Moabite from the assembly of Yahweh, with the poignant accounts of Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite being embraced into the community of faith (Josh 6:25; Ruth 1:16; 4:13-22). King David’s stringent measures against the Moabites in 2 Sam 8:2 may be explained as David’s dealing with the Moabites as a *nation* as opposed to dealing with them on a personal level. Contrast these drastic actions with his earlier dependence upon the Moabite royalty for their familial loyalty (1 Sam 22:3-4; cf. Ruth 4:17). In the intervening years, the national enemy of Israel under Saul (1 Sam 14:47) had become the national enemy of Israel under David. Contrast also David’s relationship with Shobi the Ammonite versus his relationship with the kingdom of Ammon, under Shobi’s brother Hanun (cf. 2 Sam 10 with 17:27).

demand of enemy-love overt, and placing emphasis on what would have been considered the generally “unthinkable,” as far as characteristic attitude and action is concerned.

Arriving at these words of Jesus after having passed through the Imprecatory Psalms, however, raises the very difficult question: In commanding his followers to “love their enemies,” was he intending to utterly displace the seemingly barbaric pleas exclaimed in these psalms? Perhaps he was; but then again, perhaps not so. For, in extreme circumstances, even Jesus did not shirk from uttering excoriating woes (e.g., Matt 11:20-24; 23:13-39)²⁸ and pronouncing imprecation (cf. Mark 11:12-14, 20-21)²⁹—all against hardened unbelief. Yet we cannot accuse him of acting out of accord with his own radical dictum.³⁰ By Christ’s own witness and example, then, this enemy love is the attitude of readiness to show sustained and indiscriminate kindness. However, if the enemy’s cup of iniquity has become full to overflowing, so to speak, this love is overtaken by the demands of justice and divine vengeance. Jesus’ approach, in this regard, is strikingly similar to the approach of the psalmists who penned such harsh words. Notable among them is David

²⁸ For discussion regarding the relationship between the woe oracle and imprecation, refer to Appendix A.

²⁹ For exegesis of this passage, cf. below.

³⁰ The ultimate expression of enemy love, and of blessing those who persecute and curse, are the words Jesus himself voiced from the cross regarding the ones who had nailed him there: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Cf. the creative tension in the differing responses to degrees of enmity exemplified by the apostle Paul in 2 Tim 4:14-16. Of Alexander, a hardened enemy of Paul and the Gospel, he solemnly states, “The Lord (i.e., Jesus; cf. 2 Tim 4:8) will repay him for what he has done” (understood as an imprecatory wish in the Byzantine tradition and a portion of the Western, as evidenced by the optative $\alpha\ \text{j}\rho\text{o}\delta\omega\upsilon\upsilon/\text{h}$; cf. the example in 2 Chr 24:22); whereas concerning those who had wronged Paul by abandoning him in his time of trial and need he pleads, “May it not be counted against them”—reminiscent of the dying words of our Lord (and of Stephen, Acts 7:60).

who, by his testimony in Psalms 35:12-17 and 109:4-5, divulges his past habitual kindness toward those who were his enemies, and for his repeated kindness was returned abuse. His was an example of extreme love—and a love which finally and fittingly met its extremity.³¹ In the broader view, then, rather than being completely incompatible, enemy love and enemy imprecation are found to strangely complement one another.³²

“Bless, and curse not.” From its position nestled amidst that “masterful summary of Christian ethics”³³ rehearsed in Romans 12:9-21, and reminiscent of Christ’s words in Luke 6:28, “bless those who curse you” (εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς καταρωμένους ὑμᾶς) and in Matthew 5:44, “pray for those who persecute you” (προσεύχεσθε ὑπὲρ τῶν διωκόντων ὑμᾶς),³⁴ comes the clarion call:

³¹ For further expressions of imprecation arising out of the context of extremity, cf. Jer 18:18-23 and Lam 3:52-66 (esp. 3:64-66). In all cases, the basic issues are the same: that of gross and undeserved enmity—even unto death—against the pious.

³² There is one sense in which God loves his enemies, and another in which he hates them. In both cases, those who follow him are to follow suit, remembering that they were once as well the enemies of God (Col 1:21-22).

³³ David Alan Black, “The Pauline Love Command: Structure, Style, and Ethics in Romans 12:9-21,” *FN* 2 (1989): 14.

³⁴ Paul had apparently some awareness of Christ’s sermons, whether they had yet been codified or not. As Moo argues, Paul seems to combine these two forms of Jesus’ saying from the ‘Sermon on the Mount/Plain,’ suggesting perhaps that he quotes here a pre-Synoptic form of one of Jesus’ best-known and most startling kingdom demands.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 781. Cranfield prefers to regard Paul’s phraseology as “a free reminiscence of the traditional dominical saying.” C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, ed. J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 640. Moo continues: “Paul’s dependence on Jesus’ teaching at this point is bolstered by the fact that he appears to allude in this same paragraph to other portions of Jesus’ teaching on love of the enemy from this same ‘sermon’ (cf. vv. 17a and 21).” Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 781. Similarly, Dunn observes that “the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount breathes through these verses”—

εὐλογεῖτε³⁵ τοὺς διώκοντας ὑμᾶς,
εὐλογεῖτε καὶ μὴ καταράσθε.

Bless those who persecute you;
bless and do not curse (Rom 12:14).

Herein lies one of the most difficult statements of Scripture—one that runs counter to the Christian—indeed, the human—constitution. For when one is persecuted by evil men, one’s instinct is to curse, yet the Christian is enjoined to bless.

Rather than being a haphazard collection of ethical injunctions, Romans 12:9-21 evidences a highly stylized structure which is summed up in, and subsumed under, the introductory heading of ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος,” “genuine love”—a love which entails first and foremost abhorrence of what is evil and adherence to what is good (12:9).³⁶ The verses which follow serve to explicate what that sincere or un hypocritical love looks like in several concrete examples. Moreover, the command to “bless” one’s enemies is framed by the call both to “hate evil, clinging to the good” (12:9) and to “conquer evil with good” (12:21).³⁷

making particular note of Rom 12:14, 17, 19, and 21. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 750-51. Moreover, he avers that “since the contrast between blessing and cursing appears in this form only in Luke 6:28 and Rom 12:14 (Paul nowhere else uses **καταράομαι**), the obvious corollary is that the one who provided this decisive moral impetus was Jesus himself, as the Synoptic tradition attests.” *Ibid.*, 745.

³⁵ In a section of Scripture dominated by (imperative) participles, v. 14 stands out starkly in its use of the true imperative and, moreover, evidences its apparent dependence upon the words of Christ in Matt 5:44 and Luke 6:28.

³⁶ For an analysis of this stylized structure, cf. Black, “The Pauline Love Command,” esp. 5-11.

³⁷ According to the structure and development of this passage, **πονηρόν** in 12:9 is synonymous with **κακόν** in v. 21 (cf. its prior introduction in v. 17), both of which function as antonyms of **ἀγαθῶ**.

Black rightly observes that the overt repetition of these words “is a major device for defining 12:9-21 as a literary unit. Not only does it signal the beginning and end of the unit, but it binds the intervening material together, suggesting that what is embraced within the brackets belongs together.”³⁸ In some manner then, at least, the Christian is to wish the wicked well (cf. 12:14),³⁹ while at the same time hating that very wickedness (cf. 12:9b). Thus, in the right context and in the right way, holy hatred and genuine goodness can join hands (12:19-20; cf. Ps 35).

Within the examples of genuine love sketched in this passage, the command to “bless” in Romans 12:14 is given special emphasis: (1) in its use of the imperative (as opposed to the prevalence of participles); (2) in its repetition; and (3) in its reinforcement by the prohibition of its opposite, “do not curse.” Black recognizes that this emphasis stems from Paul’s attempt to demonstrate that the dominant Christian virtue “reaches its climax in the love of enemies. Love is intended not only to permeate the relationship of Christians to one another but to shape their attitudes towards those who even seek their ruin.”⁴⁰ Reflecting on the command of Christ to “love your enemies,” and on the nature of obedience to that command in light of the elaboration found in Romans 12:9-21, Piper delineates: (1) Such love is ready and willing to meet the physical needs of the enemy (Rom

³⁸ Black, “The Pauline Love Command,” 16.

³⁹ Perhaps this is as the puritan Gurnall has said: “A wicked man cannot wish well to a saint as a saint, as, on the contrary, a saint cannot bless the wicked as such. . . . They do, indeed, desire their conversion, and therein wish them well, but in the wicked way they are in at present they cannot bless them.” William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, vol. 2 (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1864; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 447.

⁴⁰ Black, “The Pauline Love Command,” 18.

12:20). (2) It likewise seeks the spiritual welfare of the enemy—ultimately his conversion, desiring that the enemy be blessed and not cursed (Rom 12:14). (3) Yet, the evil from which the enmity stems is viewed as no less abhorrent (Rom 12:9); for if there is no intense hatred (**ἀποστουγούντες**)⁴¹ of evil, then there will be no intense love for one’s enemy. Indeed, the good which love desires is primarily the removal of the cause of enmity, which is unbelief.⁴²

But how is the believer able to do this? As per Romans 12:17, “Repay no one evil for evil,” and 12:19, “Do not avenge yourselves,” the Christian is disallowed from any involvement in personal revenge or retribution, but he is assured of God’s just revenge—whether it is to be temporally or eschatologically enacted (12:19-20). And although not stated here, the understanding elsewhere in the two Testaments⁴³ is that at appropriate times the believer may call on him to do so.⁴⁴ For example, in Luke 18:7-8, as the climax to the parable of the preceding verses, Jesus comfortingly assured his disciples that God would indeed exact vengeance (**ἐκδίκησιν**) in response to the cries of his people—ostensibly for

⁴¹ As Cranfield argues, the force of the **ἀπό** is intensive: thus, “to hate utterly.” “What is required is not just a refraining from doing what is evil, but an intense inward rejection of it.” Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 631 n. 5. Schreiner notes that “true virtue is not passive about evil but has an intense revulsion of it. Evil is not tolerated but despised as that which is injurious and wicked.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 664.

⁴² John Piper, *‘Love Your Enemies’: Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 129-30.

⁴³ For New Testament examples of imprecations, cf. below.

⁴⁴ Secondly, the state and the judicial system are to exercise divinely sanctioned vengeance, and the Christian is to uphold that justice and to submit under God to those institutions that exact it (Rom 13:1-4).

that vengeance (cf. Luke 18:3, **ἐκδίκησόν με**).⁴⁵ Likewise here, in Romans 12:9-21, the foundation upon which these ethical injunctions are laid is the confidence of divine justice.⁴⁶ Paul bases his remarks on the promise of God found in Deuteronomy 32:35, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay,” and on the certainty expressed in Proverbs 25:21-22 that kindness spurned will not go unanswered by the divine Avenger (Rom 12:19-20).⁴⁷

How does one relate this dictum of Paul to the vehement curses of, for example, Psalm 109?⁴⁸ Paul, in Romans 12, is speaking in terms of principle, of the general characteristics and sentiments of a true Christian—in much the same way that Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount. However, the Imprecatory Psalms, as do the other imprecatory passages of both Old and New Testaments, arise out of extreme circumstances—circumstances which warrant the appeal to extreme ethics. Martin Luther

⁴⁵ This plea for vengeance is a key element of the Imprecatory Psalms, as they are by consensus defined and described (cf. chap. 1, pp. 4-6). It is to be granted that not all psalms of lament are Imprecatory Psalms, but the category of Imprecatory Psalms are characterized both by more formal curses as well as cries for divine vengeance.

⁴⁶ As Bock discerns with regard to the love command in the Sermon on the Plain, from which much of the essence of Paul’s remarks were drawn: “The reason the disciple can love all humanity is that the disciple knows that God will deal justly with all one day. Even the woes of Luke 6:24-26 are grounded in God’s final act of justice. It is the sermon’s eschatology of hope and justice that lays the groundwork for the disciple’s love ethic.” Bock, *Luke*, 1:567.

⁴⁷ These verses are addressed in greater detail in Appendix C.

⁴⁸ Dunn, for one, would assert that these two are irreconcilable, for he views the return of blessing for cursing as a distinctive feature of Christian teaching which constitutes an advance beyond both the more characteristic *lex talionis* attitude of the covenant as previously understood and the more typically Jewish assumption that God would curse those who cursed his people, as promised initially in Gen 12:3. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 744-45.

admits the possibility of such circumstances, in which “it is wrong not to curse.”⁴⁹ The resolution is to be found, I propose, in the phrase: “be quick to bless, and slow to curse”—a mindset well expressed by Hengstenberg: “Just as Christ did not at first come to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved, so also with the Christian, when he sees enmity against God’s word, his kingdom or his servants, the first movement of his soul should be to pray to God that he would soften these hard hearts and open these blind eyes—a movement to which the Psalmists also were not strangers.”⁵⁰ This concept of “quick to bless and slow to curse” finds its pattern echo in the divine and Christian character trait, “slow to anger.” In Ephesians 4:31 and Colossians 3:8, anger (ὀργή) is considered sin. Yet, in both Testaments, the Lord is displayed as expressing anger—and in graphic terms (e.g., Nah 1:2; Mark 3:5); thus, anger cannot be deemed inherently sinful without impugning the character of God. Yahweh resolves this apparent paradox in his self-description as “slow to anger” (Exod 34:6; cf. Nah 1:3). This is translated into the Christian life as: “let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (βραδύς εἰς ὀργήν) (James 1:19).⁵¹

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan and A. T. W. Steinhäuser (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 101.

⁵⁰ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 3, 4th ed., trans. John Thomson and Patrick Fairbairn (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), lxxv.

⁵¹ This apparent paradox of the Christian’s approach to anger is addressed even in the near context of Eph 4:31 cited above; for in verse 26, the command is ostensibly given to “be angry, and sin not”—thus intimating that there is an occasion for righteous indignation, if dealt with properly and swiftly. Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, “ὈΡΓΙΖΕΣΘΕ in Ephesians 4:26: Command or Condition?” *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1989): 353-72.

Instances of Imprecation

Christ. An instance of actual imprecation from the lips of Christ⁵² is recorded in Mark 11:14—uttered *en route* to the Temple courts against a fig tree which had all the appearance of vitality but no fruit. As both the near context and the larger development of the Gospel make clear, Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree is a not-so-veiled imprecation against faithless and fruitless Israel—an Israel who had so stubbornly rejected him.⁵³ This rejection would culminate in the crucifixion; Christ’s imprecation would climax in the desolation of A.D. 70.⁵⁴

This exhibition of Christ belongs in a series of incidents initialized by his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in which he was heralded by the people as the promised Davidic Messiah-king (Mark 11:1-11), and culminating in his prophecy of the imminent destruction of the very Temple complex he had so recently cleansed (Mark 13:1-2).

⁵² Brooks wrestles with this difficulty: “The incident seems out of character with all else that is known about Jesus. . . . Nowhere else did Jesus curse anything (though the ‘woes’ of Matt 23:13-32; Luke 6:24-26 are real equivalents, especially given the power of Jesus’ words).” James A. Brooks, *Mark*, New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery, vol. 23 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 181.

⁵³ This curse of Christ was directed both against the fig tree itself and against the community the fig tree ostensibly symbolized: the nation of Israel. It is an illustrative curse on the iniquitous nation and, in particular, her religious leadership. For the intimate tie between an object utilized in a curse and the person or thing signified by that curse, cf. the ancient Near Eastern practice and understanding of the curse discussed and illustrated in chapter three.

⁵⁴ This desolation of Jerusalem (prefiguring the eschaton) is referred to by Christ in Luke 21:22 as the *ἡμέραι ἐκδικήσεως*, “days of vengeance,” implying the resumption of his quotation of Isaiah 61:1-2 in Luke 4:18-19 and, moreover, “pointing out that the fall of that city was a fulfillment of the threat of vengeance (the vengeance of the covenant) made through Moses (in Lev 26 and Deut 32). It is clear from this text, as well as from the parable of the importunate widow [Luke 18:1-8], that Jesus did not do away with biblical vengeance.” Joel Nobel Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse*. Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 17 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 137.

Furthermore, the rejection-curse implicitly placed upon his people is explicated directly following in the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1-12, esp. v. 9),⁵⁵ which utilizes the language and imagery of Isaiah 5:1-7—a solemn parable of judgment against God’s people Israel, followed by a succession of woes.

The curse of Christ is pointed, marking the distinct end of one era and the beginning of another: **Μηκέτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἐκ σοῦ μηδιὲς καρπὸν φάγοι**, “May no one any longer eat fruit from you—ever!” (Mark 11:14).⁵⁶ Immediately following his curse, Christ moves into the Temple precincts where, of all places, “God ought to receive the purest form of worship,”⁵⁷ but instead he finds the basest form of corruption: greed. Upon their return following Christ’s purge of the Temple, Peter takes notice of this same tree, and marvels at the demonstrable effect of Christ’s curse: **Ῥαββί, ἴδε ἡ συκὴ ἣν κατηράσω ἐξηράνται**, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed—it has withered!” (Mark 11:21). Lane observes the intentional crafting of this immediate context:

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus’ action in the Temple is firmly embedded within the fig tree incident. The a-b-a structure of Ch. 11:12-21 (fig tree—cleansing of the Temple—fig tree) serves to provide a mutual commentary on these two events. Just as the leaves of the tree concealed the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the

⁵⁵ Cf. the narrative progression in Matt 21–24 (esp. Matt 21:19 with 21:43, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce *its fruit*”).

⁵⁶ The wording in Matt 21:19 is similar: **Μηκέτι ἐκ σοῦ καρπὸς γένηται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα**, “May you no longer bear fruit—ever!” At the parallel juncture in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus likewise speaks of the coming judgment against Jerusalem—but here tearfully and prophetically, yet in brutal language harking back to Ps 137:9 (LXX: **ἔδαφιεί**; cf. Hos 10:14; 14:1): **καὶ ἔδαφιοῦσίν σε καὶ τὰ τέκνα σου ἐν σοί**, “and they will dash you and your children among you to the ground” (Lk 19:44).

⁵⁷ Mark Moulton, “Jesus’ Goal for Temple and Tree: A Thematic Revisit of Matt 21:12-22,” *JETS* 41 (1998): 564.

magnificence of the Temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God. Both incidents have the character of a prophetic sign which warns of judgment to fall upon Israel for honoring God with their lips when their heart was far from him.⁵⁸

As the near context strongly intimates,⁵⁹ then, this curse of Christ was not directed against the fig tree *as such*,⁶⁰ as much as it was directed (for his disciples' benefit) against his unrepentant people as a sign of their divine visitation in judgment⁶¹—a judgment which marked the realization of that curse. This is indicated by the intentional location of this pericope as an *inclusio* to the Temple cleansing (Mark 11:12-21)—the dramatic *locus* of the rejection of Christ by his people and of his people by Christ (cf. Mark 11:14, 18). Thus, this curse puts an end to God's program as it had been administered historically through the nation Israel. As Cole remarks regarding the intent of Christ's action: "Unless we realize that this was an acted parable of Israel, we shall be puzzled by all sorts of irrelevant

⁵⁸ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 400. Although this action of Christ was indeed a "prophetic sign," it was explicitly signified by actual imprecation. Indeed, the text refers to Christ's utterance as a curse, and it is given as a curse. This curse spoken by Christ gave assurance of the impending calamities which were to befall his unrepentant people. As such, it evidences a certain semantic interplay and functional overlap between the differing domains of curse and prophetic sign/judgment. Indeed, every imprecation—whether of the Psalms or here, if divinely answered, finds its realization in some future action. In this instance, the realization of Christ's imprecation is seen in the ensuing judgment of A.D. 70.

⁵⁹ This is buttressed as well by the larger context of Mark 11-13.

⁶⁰ Hendriksen likewise argues: "It is impossible to believe that the curse which the Lord pronounced upon this tree was an act of punishing it, as if the tree as such was responsible for not bearing fruit, and as if, for this reason, Jesus was angry with it. The real explanation lies deeper. The pretentious but barren tree was a fit emblem of Israel. See Luke 13:6-9 (cf. Isa. 5). Jesus himself would interpret the figure the next day." William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 442.

⁶¹ Cf. Mic 7:1-4 for a prophetic backdrop to this account.

questions. . . . Henceforth Israel was to be blasted and fruitless; and the physical judgment of AD 70 was but an outward token of this. . . . [A]nd immediately below the Marcan fig tree passage, in verses 15-19, there comes the acted parable of the cleansing of the Temple. God came to His Temple looking for fruit and found none; and so it was inevitable that the predictions of Mark xiii.1,2 be made. . . . Like tree, like temple, like nation; the parallel is exact.”⁶²

Far from being an arbitrary choice or happenstance, Christ’s curse of the fig tree was intentional, drawing from a long history of imagery familiar to his people. Compare, initially, this account with Christ’s parable of nearly expended patience with an unfruitful fig tree uttered earlier in his earthly ministry (Luke 13:6-9). In this parable, the unfruitful fig tree unquestionably represents unrepentant Israel, and serves as an illustration of his call for his people to repent (Luke 13:1-5).⁶³ Moreover, in the Old Testament, the fig tree was frequently associated with the nation Israel: when verdant and fruitful, it was a picture of peace, prosperity, and divine blessing;⁶⁴ yet when ravaged and

⁶² R. A. Cole, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, TNTC, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 176-77.

⁶³ Bock comments that Jesus here “compares the crowd to a fruitless fig tree, a comparison he frequently made (Matt. 21:19-21 = Mark 11:13-14, 20-21; Matt. 24:32 = Mark 13:28 = Luke 21:29).” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2, BECNT, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1208. He perceptively observes that “the parable depicts the nation on the edge of judgment and God as a patient God, allowing the nation one final chance to respond to him in faith. . . . The warning is especially urgent because the people’s time is about to run out. Jesus describes the nation as a fig tree later in his ministry (the cursing of the fig tree in Matt. 21:18-19 = Mark 11:12-14).” *Ibid.*, 1202. Thus, Bock evidently understands the cursing of the fig tree in Mark 11:14 as a symbolic cursing of the nation and people of Israel.

⁶⁴ Cf., e.g., 1 Kgs 5:5 [Eng 4:25]; Mic 4:4; Joel 2:22.

withered, it served as “a vivid emblem of God’s active *punishment* of his people.”⁶⁵ For example, in Jeremiah 8:13 Yahweh includes this imagery in his judgment oracle against his rebellious people:

I will put an end to them entirely, declares Yahweh:
 There will be no grapes on the vine;
 and there will be no figs on the fig-tree;
 and their foliage will wither.
 What I have given to them will be taken from them.⁶⁶

In certain passages, moreover, God’s judgment against Israel’s fig trees is juxtaposed with Israel’s rabid idolatry and the perversion of God’s worship (e.g., Hos 2:13-15 [Eng 2:11-13]). Of particular note is Hosea 9:10-17, in which Yahweh speaks of Israel’s beginnings as “early figs on the fig tree” (9:10), but because of their gross iniquity Yahweh promises to “drive them out of my House” (i.e., “Temple,” 9:15). And they who are named “Ephraim” (i.e., “fruitfulness”) are instead “withered” and “bear no fruit” (9:16).⁶⁷

Mark’s readers, then, steeped in the Old Testament, would have readily understood Christ’s cursing of the barren fig tree as at the very least a solemn judgment upon Israel as a nation, but even more particularly in this context, as a judgment directed against a corrupt Temple and its cultus.⁶⁸ Hooker likewise concurs: “This, then, is why

⁶⁵ 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*, JSNTSup, vol. 1, ed. Ernst Bammel et al. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 135.

⁶⁶ Cf. Jer 5:17. Note also that in this context Yahweh thrice asks, “Should I not *avenge* myself on such a nation as this?” (Jer 5:9, 29; 9:8).

⁶⁷ Cf. how this context repeatedly includes the slaying of Israel’s children in declaration of judgment (Hos 9:12-14, 16; 10:14; 14:1 [13:16]; cf. Luke 19:44).

⁶⁸ Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree*, 136-37, 163.

Jesus curses the tree: not out of pique, but because it represents Israel, and Israel has fallen under the judgment of God. . . . Mark, by embedding the incident in the story of the fig tree, shows clearly that he interprets it as a sign of God’s condemnation of Israel because of her failure to bear fruit. This suggests that he sees it as a symbol of the future destruction of the temple and the final cessation of worship.”⁶⁹ Christ’s visitation here is reminiscent of the prophecy of Malachi, in which Yahweh promised to send his “Messenger of the Covenant” to his Temple, to cleanse his priests and people (Mal 3:1-5)—a coming accompanied by the threat of divine curse (Mal 3:24 [4:6]). At his approach to the Temple, then, in its state of acute corruption and perversion, and in light of the patent and repeated rejection of him by the leaders of his people, this curse is called down by Christ.⁷⁰

The Apostles. In Galatians 1:8-9,⁷¹ the Apostle Paul utters what is unquestionably a curse of the severest magnitude: that of eternal damnation.

⁸ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐὰν ἡμεῖς ἢ ἄγγελος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ εὐαγγελίζηται ὑμῖν παρ’ ὃ εὐηγγελισάμεθα ὑμῖν, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω. ⁹ ὡς προειρήκαμεν καὶ ἄρτι πάλιν λέγω, εἴ τις ὑμᾶς εὐαγγελίζεται παρ’ ὃ παρελάβετε, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω.

⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel to you other than what we preached to you, let him be “anathema”!⁹ As we have said before, so now I

⁶⁹ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Black’s New Testament Commentary, ed. Henry Chadwick (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 261, 265.

⁷⁰ It is to be noted here that Christ distances himself a degree from personal imprecation by cursing the fig tree as the symbol of Israel rather than naming Israel itself. He curses the nation indirectly, via the figure of the fig tree, rather than directly. The imprecation is thus initially somewhat softened from what is seen in the Imprecatory Psalms, yet is no less real. For the intended realization of that imprecation in the life of the nation is more horrible and graphic than anything before or after (cf. Matt 24:21; Mark 13:19; Luke 21:22-23).

⁷¹ Cf. similarly 1 Cor 16:22.

say again: If anyone should preach a gospel to you other than what you received, let him be “anathema”!

In Hellenistic Greek, the term **ἀνάθεμα** was used to denote both “something dedicated or consecrated to the deity” as well as “something delivered up to divine wrath, dedicated to destruction and brought under a curse.”⁷² It was used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew **קִרְיָהּ**⁷³—a term characteristic of the Israelite “holy wars”; whatever was so designated was dedicated to Yahweh for total destruction. The Pauline usage of the term, likewise, refers to being brought under the divine curse—but here the curse of eternal condemnation.⁷⁴ Such a character to this curse is the apparent intent of the **ἀνάθεμα**, a connotation confirmed by Romans 9:3, where Paul startlingly expresses the desire to become **ἀνάθεμα . . . ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ** if that would mean the salvation of his people; for to be “accursed . . . *from* Christ” is a curse of condemnation. The villainy of those who are the intended recipients⁷⁵ of Paul’s imprecation (**ἀνάθεμα ἔστω**) is the perverting of the gospel of grace by enslaving it to the rigors of legalism. Those who seek to undermine

⁷² Johannes Behm, “**ἀνάθεμα**.” *TDNT*, 1:354.

⁷³ E.g., Deut 7:26; 13:18; Josh 6:17-18; 7:11-15.

⁷⁴ This imprecation of Paul may be contrasted with the imprecations characteristic of the Imprecatory Psalms. There, the curses are typically temporal and often gruesomely vivid (e.g., Ps 58:7, “Smash their teeth in their mouths!”). Paul’s anathema is distinctly different (although later in the epistle, in Gal 5:12, Paul becomes noticeably graphic; cf. n. 76 below). Here, there is the absence of physical imagery, and its focus is eschatological—finding its locus in the eternal judgment of God. And yet, in this, Paul’s imprecation is the more severe.

⁷⁵ That the false teachers are not mentioned by name is no proof that Paul approves of only a general curse of damnation, for in other passages, he does not flinch from naming apostates and troublemakers in his denunciations (cf., e.g., Alexander in 1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 4:14; Elymas in Acts 13:10-11).

the ground and sustenance of the Christian's salvation truly merit the harshest of denunciations.⁷⁶

Moreover, in Acts 13:10-11, Paul voices severe words against a certain Elymas⁷⁷ the Sorcerer, attendant to the Roman proconsul of Cyprus where Paul and Barnabas were ministering the gospel. When Sergius Paulus wished to hear the word of God from them, Elymas raised strong opposition and sought to keep the proconsul from the faith. It is only at this point, but decisively so, that Paul utters what may arguably be considered an imprecation of blindness against him. Such is the understanding of Fitzmyer as to the import of Paul's words: "Paul curses Bar-Jesus and, in effect, calls upon the Lord to cause

⁷⁶ Cf. Gal 5:12, in which Paul utters further execration against these same troublers who sought to enforce upon the converts of Galatia the demand of physical circumcision, in particular, as a ritual necessary for salvation; but this time he does so in graphic—and even grotesque—words: ὄφελον καὶ ἀποκόψονται οἱ ἀναστατοῦντες ὑμᾶς, "I wish even that those who are agitating you would emasculate themselves!" Such seemingly unbridled language is indeed troubling, to such an extent that Klassen, for example, has concluded that this "is a sin Paul committed here. It can be understood and forgiven. Under no circumstances should it be made a model for Christian behavior." William Klassen, "Love Your Enemies': Some Reflections on the Current Status of Research," in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992), 21. However, Calvin counters with an appropriate response: "Paul cannot be accused of cruelty, as if he were opposed to the law of love. . . . It is a cruel kind of mercy which prefers a single man to the whole church. 'On one side, I see the flock of God in danger; on the other, I see a wolf "seeking," like Satan, "whom he may devour." (1 Pet. v. 8.) Ought not my care of the church to swallow up all my thoughts, and lead me to desire that its salvation should be purchased by the destruction of the wolf? And yet I would not wish that a single individual should perish in this way; but my love of the church and my anxiety about her interests carry me away into a sort of ecstasy, so that I can think of nothing else.' With such a zeal as this, every true pastor of the church will burn." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, first published 1548, trans. William Pringle (n.p., n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 157.

⁷⁷ This name, as Yaure argues, is probably to be understood as a Greek transcription of the Aramaic אַחַלְמַי, "dreamer" or "interpreter of dreams," which "designates a person who, supernaturally inspired, could not only interpret dreams but also deliver divine messages revealed to him in a state of trance," thus bearing, in common usage, the same connotation as the term μάγος, as required by the text (Acts 13:8). L. Yaure, "Elymas-Nehelamite-Pethor," *JBL* 79 (1960): 305.

the blindness.”⁷⁸ Haenchen likewise considers this “a solemn curse.”⁷⁹ Notice also that both here and in Acts 8:20, in consonance with the Akkadian *Maqlû* incantations and possibly certain curses against enemies in the psalms, the imprecations are uttered against **μάγοι**—variously “sorcerers, magicians, astrologers, interpreters of dreams.” And although this magician’s name was properly **Βαριησοῦ**, “son of Jesus” (13:6), Paul addresses him in accordance with his work and character as **υἱὲ διαβόλου**, “son of the Devil” (13:10).

¹⁰ Ὁ πλήρης παντὸς δόλου καὶ πάσης ῥαδιουργίας, υἱὲ διαβόλου, ἐχτρὲ πάσης δικαιοσύνης, οὐ παύσῃ διαστρέφων τὰς ὁδοὺς τοῦ κυρίου τὰς εὐθείας ¹¹ καὶ νῦν ἰδοὺ χεὶρ κυρίου ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ ἔσῃ τυφλὸς μὴ βλέπων τὸν ἥλιον ἄχρι καιροῦ.

¹⁰ “You son of the Devil! Enemy of all that is right! Full of all deceit and trickery! Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? ¹¹ So now, behold! The hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind, unable to see the sun for some time!”

Although this extreme malediction⁸⁰ is given in the future tense as a proclamation of judgment, it nonetheless bears the essence of a curse, for it is uttered as

⁷⁸ He adds: “The curse that Paul has laid on the magician is instantaneous in its effect.” Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, vol. 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 503.

⁷⁹ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. Bernard Noble et al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 400. Barrett concurs: “The magus is roundly cursed.” C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, ICC, ed. J. A. Emerton et al., vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 617. Likewise also, Johnson considers these words a curse. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 224.

⁸⁰ As Webster defines the term, a malediction is “a proclaiming of evil against someone; imprecation,” and is subsumed under the category of “curse.” William Allan Nielson, et al., eds., *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d ed., unabridged (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, Publishers, 1944), 1488, 648. Thus, Paul’s proclamation of blindness against Elymas classifies as a malediction.

the express wish of Paul⁸¹ (a wish immediately fulfilled). Moreover, it conforms to the pattern revealed, for instance, in Deuteronomy 28, in which promises of judgment are given as the “curses” of the covenant (cf. especially 28:15, 28-29). This curse of Paul through the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 13:9) is strikingly similar to, and reminiscent of, the curses of both the Old Testament and the ancient Near East. Compare, for example, the result of Paul’s curse on Elymas: “Immediately mistiness and darkness fell upon him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand” (Acts 13:11), with Deuteronomy 28:28-29: “Yahweh will smite you with . . . blindness You will grope about at midday like a blind man gropes about in the darkness.” Moreover, blindness was a common curse-theme in the ancient Near East as well, as can be seen, for example, from the Vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon: “May Shamash . . . take away your eyesight; walk about in darkness!”⁸² In addition, it is of import to note that this curse was uttered in accordance with the principle embodied in the *lex talionis*: since Elymas had sought to keep the proconsul in spiritual blindness, so he was cursed with physical blindness.⁸³ Furthermore, that Paul was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:9) as he voiced his cry comments unequivocally as to its rightness and propriety in the New Testament age and comports, in some measure at least, with New Testament ethics.

⁸¹ Such a sense is implied by Paul’s language and tone in these verses. For the potential inclusion of “wish” in the category of imprecation, cf. chap. 1, n. 17.

⁸² ANET, 538. Here the mood is explicitly imprecatory.

⁸³ Cf. also its tie to Paul’s own conversion experience, which was accompanied by temporary blindness. Moreover, that the curse was to remain in effect *ἄχρι καιροῦ*, “for a time,” intimates that the curse, though severe and directed against flagrant opposition, was intended to leave the door open to repentance and restoration.

Additionally, the Apostle Peter, in confronting Simon the Sorcerer who sought to purchase from him the power of the Holy Spirit, uttered the caustic curse: **Τὸ ἀργύριον σου σὺν σοὶ εἶη εἰς ἀπώλειαν**, “May your money perish with you!” (Acts 8:20). Such a scathing curse consigns Simon and his money with him to destruction, and functions as a solemn warning regarding what will surely happen to him if he does not change his attitude.⁸⁴ Indeed, however severe, this apostolic curse was to be actualized solely on the condition of continued sin and impenitence. This is evidenced by the exchange which directly follows, in which Peter voices a plea of repentance along with the offer of release: “Repent, then, of this evil of yours and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you the intent of your heart” (Acts 8:22). Even in the midst of such imprecation there is ever implicit or explicit the hope of repentance and restoration. Thus is gained additional insight into the maledictions of both psalmist and apostle: “that for all their appearance of implacability they are to be taken as conditional, as indeed the prophets’ oracles were. . . . 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’.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNTC, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 159. The language of Peter is explicitly imprecatory, but his intent is threat, as evidenced by the subsequent call for repentance. Calvin comments that Peter, “not being content with a rebuke, adds an awful curse,” declaring “that the just punishment of God threatens him closely.” John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles, 1–13*, first published 1560, trans. John W. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 238. Thus, in the mind of Peter—and in certain other Scriptural imprecations—there is an evident blending between the two domains of curse and threat. In their usage they often overlap and inform each other.

⁸⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, TOTC, ed. D. J. Wiseman (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 30.

The saints in heaven. The cry of the martyred saints in Revelation 6:10 is manifestly an appeal to a higher, divine court “in the face of a gross miscarriage of justice that resulted in their condemnation and death”:⁸⁶ Ἔως πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; “How long, O Master, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”⁸⁷ As Thomas observes, “this prayer follows the pattern of the ‘imprecatory’ psalms,”⁸⁸ and in the martyrs’ cry there is the understood “petition to carry out vengeance against those who have shed that blood.”⁸⁹ This language bluntly harks back to the divine promise in the Song of Moses to “avenge the blood of his servants” (Deut

⁸⁶ Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse*, 158. Indeed, whenever innocent blood is shed, there is justly the call for vengeance. *Ibid.*, 185. Moreover, this call for vengeance to “the Master” (ὁ δεσπότης), “is to be understood in the light of the covenant motif, wherein the suzerain is obligated to bring redress and justice when a vassal is attacked and injured.” *Ibid.*, 216. That the death of the martyrs here is viewed by God as a “sacrifice” is evident from their description as “souls under the altar” (cf. Rev 6:9 with Lev 17:11, “the soul/life of the flesh is in the blood,” poured out “at the base of the altar,” Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34).

⁸⁷ Beale notes that the expression “how long?” is typically used throughout the Greek Old Testament—notably in the Psalms—for questions concerning when God will finally punish persecutors and vindicate the oppressed. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 392. Moreover, in this expression in the present context the imprecatory cry is at least implicit, and in several places in the Psalms it is made explicit, in its direct and intentional coupling with imprecations (cf. Pss 79:5-6, 10, 12; 94:1-3; also Ps 74:10-11). For a judicious defense of the imprecatory intent of Ps 74:11, cf. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 20 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990), 243.

⁸⁸ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 445. Such a cry as this for divine vengeance is indeed an imprecatory prayer, as it is broadly defined and exhibited in the Imprecatory Psalms (cf. chap. 1, pp. 4-6). Indeed, every appeal to God for harm to justly fall on wicked persons is, by definition, an imprecatory prayer.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 446.

32:43), and is, moreover, a plea which characterizes the backbone of the Imprecatory Psalms. Notice the coupling of the cry of divine vengeance with the call “how long?” in the following examples:

^{79:5} How long, O Yahweh, will you be angry forever,
 Will your jealousy burn like fire?
⁶ Pour out your wrath on the nations
 that do not know you
¹⁰
 Before our eyes, make known among the nations
 that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants (Ps 79:5-6, 10).

^{94:1} God of vengeance, O Yahweh,
 God of vengeance, shine forth!
² Rise up, Judge of the earth;
 pay back to the proud what they deserve!
³ How long will the wicked, O Yahweh,
 How long will the wicked exult? (Ps 94:1-3).⁹⁰

Furthermore, the development of the Book of Revelation is largely the divine response to his martyrs’ cry. For instance, Revelation 16:5-6, in response to the realization of God’s judgments, issues the praise: “You are just . . . for they have shed the blood of saints and prophets.” And Revelation 18:20, 24 similarly rings out: “Rejoice! . . . for God has judged her for the way she treated you. . . . In her was found the blood of prophets and saints.” Notice particularly, at the climax of the Apocalypse, the cry of the heavenly crowd: “Hallelujah! . . . He has avenged the blood of his servants” (Rev 19:1-2). Moreover, the Song of Moses, which provides the foundation for the theology of divine vengeance, and

⁹⁰ The essential mood of Ps 94 concurs with the larger corpus of the Imprecatory Psalms, for its cry for vengeance is founded on the complaint: “They crush your people, O Yahweh, and they oppress your inheritance! They slay the widow and the sojourner, and they murder the fatherless!” (Ps 94:5-6).

upon which the martyrs implicitly appeal, is explicitly mentioned in Revelation 15:3.⁹¹

There, at the close of the ages, the saints in heaven are found celebrating its promised actualization in the judgments of Christ by singing “the Song of Moses the servant of God and the Song of the Lamb.”

Conclusion

In both Christ’s staggering command to “love your enemies” and Paul’s unqualified “bless, and curse not,” are given in explicit form the characteristic ethic of the new era—the age of “grace upon grace,” inaugurated in the coming of Christ. In the explication of these demands is evidenced a marked progress in the ethic of enemy-love. For nowhere in the Old Testament are such commands stated in such language, and so these words may at first seem to supercede the ethics expressed in the Imprecatory Psalms. However, although in this new age the demands of love have been heightened, they are not wholly new demands. The two great commands of both testaments remain the same. But what was embryonic in the Old Testament finds full expression in Christ. Indeed, the New Testament ethic of enemy-love and blessing is intensified, and the implications of that ethic are more extensively explored and applied.

⁹¹ Concerning this passage, the principal issue of both the preceding and succeeding contexts is the cry for, and the coming of, the promised divine vengeance. This promised divine vengeance is also the premier issue of the latter portion of the Song of Moses in Deut 32 (for earlier debate on the identity of this Song, cf. chap. 4, n. 58). It is of interest to note as well how the Book of Revelation binds the Song of Moses to that of the Lamb, for as the book progresses to its climax it is the Lamb who was slain who returns as the divine Avenger (cf. Rev 5 and 19).

Yet even in the New Testament imprecations infrequently, yet nonetheless, arise. Noteworthy examples are Christ's own curse of the fig tree as an illustrative imprecation on the iniquitous nation and her religious leadership, to be realized in the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. The apostles Peter and Paul were known to utter the curse of eternal damnation on those who sought to pervert and so undermine the gospel of grace. And Paul also did not shirk from pronouncing more physical curses as well. Lastly, the perfected martyrs in heaven likewise call out to God for the avenging of their blood, in language starkly similar to certain imprecations in the psalms. Thus, in some fashion, the utterance of imprecation comports with the ethic of enemy-love and blessing, as expressed in either testament.

The imprecations of the New Testament bear a measure of similarity to those of the Imprecatory Psalms. Like their Old Testament counterparts, the curses of the New Testament are uttered against the stubbornly rebellious as well as those dangerous to the faith or violent against the faithful. Dissimilarities are also manifest. Whereas the curses of the Imprecatory Psalms are predominantly temporal and physical, those of the New Testament are principally eschatological and spiritual in focus. However, the temporal and eschatological, the physical and the spiritual, join together notably in the imprecations and judgments of the Book of Revelation, for there time touches the eschaton.

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 exemplified: 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.

APPENDIX A

WOE AND CURSE

Although not identical to imprecation, the cry of “woe” (Hebrew **הוֹי**) in the ancient Near East bore a measure of semantic overlap with the curse—and in certain contexts took on “all the characteristics of a curse.”¹ This is most apparent in Zechariah 11:17, in which an oracle of woe is placed parallel to an evident imprecation:

Woe to the worthless shepherd,
who abandons the flock!
May the sword (strike) his arm and his right eye!
May his arm be utterly withered,
and his right eye utterly blinded!

Indeed, there is striking similarity not only in mood, but also in form, in content, and in context. The similarities are such² that Westermann posited an organic relationship

¹ Waldemar Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle*. BZAW, ed. Georg Fohrer, vol. 125 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972), 3.

² This similarity is not confined to the Old Testament; the implicitly imprecatory “woe” is found as well, e.g., in the Sermon on the Plain, in which Christ contrasts his “blessings” not with “curses,” but with “woes” (Luke 6:20-26; cf., Deut 28:3-6, 16-19, in which the typical arrangement of blessings is countered by curses). Wenham observes that “in Luke’s account of the Sermon on the Mount the blessings and woes are recounted in a way that is reminiscent of the scene at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerezim” (i.e., Deut 27). John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 156. And according to Mowinckel, Jer 17:5-8 (in comparison with Pss 1 and 112) illustrates that the combination **הוֹי-אֲשֶׁרִי** is but a weakened variant of the more potent **בְּרוּחַ אֲרוּר**. Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, V, *Segen und Fluch in Israels Kult und Psalmdichtung* (Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1966), 2.

between the two: that the woe-cry arose from the covenant curse.³ It has long been noticed that the form of the woe-cry has a distinct parallel in the Old Testament—that of the curse. As a spoken formula, the curse is usually introduced by אָרוּר, and the structure of some of these sayings is quite similar to that of the woes. Of particular note in this regard is Deuteronomy 27:15-26. There, appended to the אָרוּר, is a participial construction of the simplest kind, in which the participle describes the action which falls under the curse.⁴ Such is likewise the characteristic form of the woe-cry (i.e., הוֹי plus participle).⁵ Moreover, as Westermann perceives, both the curse and the woe are found predominantly in series (cf., e.g., Deut 27:15-26 with Isa 5:8-23; 28:1–33:1; and Hab 2:6-19),⁶ and largely concern the social morality of the Sinaitic covenant. For example, compare the following:

³ This argument is detailed in Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. Hugh Clayton White (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 191-98.

⁴ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "The Woe-Oracles of the Prophets," *JBL* 81 (1962): 258-59.

⁵ The full elements of a typical woe oracle are as follows: The structure is marked first of all by the cry *hōy*. This opening interjection is then followed by a participle (or in some cases by some other substantive) which is descriptive of those who are the subject of the oracle. A second participial clause and explanatory sentence using a finite verb follows, specifying the offense. An announcement of divine judgment usually comes at the conclusion of the oracle, or it may be placed at times after a series of such (abbreviated) oracles. W. Eugene March, "Prophecy," in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. John H. Hayes, Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion, ed. John H. Hayes, vol. 2 (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974), 164-65.

⁶ Westermann notes that in Deut 27:15-26, "the curse takes the place of the death punishment. Most of the transgressions named in the series are those which could be committed clandestinely and thus go unpunished A similar thing is true of the woes of the prophets." Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 197. Moreover, he observes that the curse, which is included in the legal procedure (cf. Deut 27), "presupposed the future intervention of Yahweh against the offender exactly as did the prophetic woe." *Ibid.*, 198. Thus he believes it is "probable that not only the form but also the content of the prophetic woe originated with the curse, which was itself a part of legal practice." *Ibid.*

אָרוֹר מִכָּה רֵעֵהוּ בְּסֵתֶר

Cursed be he who slays his neighbor in secret! (Deut 27:24).

הוּי בְּנֵה עִיר בְּדָמַיִם

Woe to him who builds a city on bloodshed! (Hab 2:12).

As the Scriptures progress, they reveal a varied usage of the term **הוּי**, characteristically translated “woe.” This term is used some fifty-three times in the Old Testament—the vast majority as announcements of doom. However, in eight instances—including the earliest attested—it is used to describe actual funeral laments. This earliest instance, 1 Kings 13:30,⁷ records one “man of God” mourning over another: **הוּי אָהִי**, “Alas, my brother!” Indeed, as Clifford observes, the funeral lament is the only attested non-prophetic use of *hōy* in the Old Testament. This suggests that the funeral lament is the origin of the *hōy*-cry, and that *hōy* enters the prophets as a funeral cry and develops within this new matrix into a curse-like formula.⁸ By the time of the later prophets, the curse-like element becomes more prominent. Clifford sees in Jeremiah and Habakkuk the “development of a bitter, curse-like tone,”⁹ and in Ezekiel, the *hōy* “seems not primarily a lament, but a curse-like formula or taunt.”¹⁰ Thus, he concludes that “the prophet’s own feeling and tone of each *hōy* passage must be learned from the context.”¹¹ In summary, then, the *hōy*-cry is the instinctive reaction of the prophet upon hearing the announcement

⁷ During the reign of Jeroboam, early 10th century B.C.

⁸ Richard J. Clifford, “The Use of *Hōy* in the Prophets,” *CBQ* 28 (1966): 459.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 461.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 464.

of God's sure and certain judgment. As "God's hired professional mourner"¹² (cf. Jer 9:17-18; Amos 5:16), he is "the first to announce both the 'woe cry' and the 'death wail'."¹³ When he hears of impending disaster from Yahweh, the prophet "utters a ritual *hōy* in automatic lament, a cry borrowed from the funeral customs of his milieu,"¹⁴ which became transmuted over time into a near-formula for curse.

Similarly, Janzen, in searching for the original *Sitz im Leben* of the prophetic woe oracle, agrees that there are undoubtedly instances in which *hōy* is associated with lamentation for the dead, yet also a significant number in which it introduces prophetic announcement of impending calamity.¹⁵ Jeremiah 22:13,18 illustrates this varied usage in the same prophetic context:

Woe [׀הו] to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice! (Jer 22:13a).

They will not mourn for him:

'Alas [׀הו], my brother! or 'Alas, sister!'

They will not mourn for him:

'Alas, lord! or 'Alas, his majesty!' (Jer 22:18).

Janzen remarks that "it is precisely the relationship between the *hōy* of mourning and the *hōy* of prophetic invective that needs to be illumined."¹⁶ And to the question: "Where does sorrow, mourning, and wailing on the one hand meet with accusation, announcement of

¹² Steven Horine, "A Study of the Literary Genre of the Woe Oracle," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 5 (1989): 86.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Clifford, "The Use of *Hōy* in the Prophets," 464.

¹⁵ Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle*, 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

evil to come, and curse?” he answers: “They meet where, in the face of violent death, mourning for the dead shades over into cursing of the guilty.” It is this context “which offers a genuine *Sitz im Leben* as the home of *hōy*, and which establishes an organic relationship between its apparently so diverse usages.”¹⁷ He finds striking corroboration for this hypothesis in the Ugaritic Legend of Aqhat. In this tale, as the royal Daniel weeps over the death of his longed-for son Aqhat, he pronounces curses/woes upon certain locales which presumably bore a measure of guilt in Aqhat’s death:

Qiru-mayim the king doth *curse*:
 ‘Woe to thee, O Qiru-mayim,
 O[n] which rests the blood-guilt of Aqhat the Youth!’

 ‘Woe to thee, city of Abelim,
 On which rests the blood-guilt of Aqhat the Youth!
 May Baal make thee blind . . .
 From now unto all generations!’¹⁸

Notably, this series of “woes” concludes in an imprecation; yet the entirety is evidently introduced by the simple description: “curse.” This example illustrates that, although woes may be generally distinguished from curses, they are closely related, bearing a large measure of similarity¹⁹ and partial semantic overlap.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ *ANET*, 154-55. In this regard, cf. the lament/imprecation of David against the “hills of Gilboa” on which Saul and Jonathan were slain (2 Sam 1:17, 21), the frequent use of prophetic woes against cities or locations (e.g., Jesus’ woes in Matt 11:20-24), and the combination of both lamentation over one’s devastation moving to imprecation against the culpable (Ps 137).

¹⁹ Alex Luc likewise argues that “we should not place a sharp distinction in function between the imprecations and the judgment predictions. This observation is reinforced by the instances where an imprecation and a judgment prediction occur in the same context, with one echoing and affirming the other.” “Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms,” *JETS* 42 (1999): 402. He cites, e.g., Pss 28:4-5; 68:1-2, 21; 55:15, 23; 109:6-19, 29; notably cf. Jer 11:20 followed by vv. 21-22.

APPENDIX B
THE TEXT OF DEUT 32:43

The original text of Deuteronomy 32:43, as a whole, is notoriously difficult to reconstruct. Indeed, G. Ernest Wright judiciously remarks that it “simply cannot be reconstructed with certainty.”¹ Nonetheless, I venture to propose the following reconstruction, and for the following reasons.

הַרְנִינוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ⁴³
והשתחוו לו כל אלהים
כִּי דַם־עַבְדָּיו יִקּוּם
וְנִקְמָם יֵשִׁיב לְאֶרְצוֹ
וְכִפֶּר אֲדָמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ:

⁴³ Rejoice, O nations, with his people,
and let all the gods worship him.
Surely, the blood of his servants he will avenge;
he will take vengeance on his adversaries
and make atonement for the land of his people.

This verse is represented in the differing textual traditions by a varying number of cola: both the Massoretic Text and the Samaritan Pentateuch preserve four, Qumran (4QDeut^q) contains six, and the Septuagint has eight:

MT:

¹ G. Ernest Wright, “The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 33, n. 23.

הַרְנִינוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ
 כִּי דַם־עַבְדָּיו יִקּוּם
 וְנִקֵּם יֵשֵׁב לְצָרָיו
 וְכִפֵּר אֲדָמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ

Rejoice, O nations, with his people,
 for the blood of his servants he will avenge.
 He will take vengeance on his adversaries
 and make atonement for his land, his people.

4QDeut⁹: 2

הַרְנִינוּ שָׁמַיִם עִמּוֹ
 וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לוֹ כָּל אֱלֹהִים
 כִּי דַם בְּנָיו יִקּוּם
 וְנִקֵּם יֵשֵׁב לְצָרָיו
 וְלִמְשָׁנָיו יִשְׁלַם
 וְיִכְפֹּר אֲדָמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ

Rejoice, O heavens, with his people [or, with him],
 and let all the gods worship him.
 For the blood of his sons he will avenge,
 and he will take vengeance on his adversaries.
 He will repay those who hate him,
 and will make atonement for the land of his people.

LXX: 3

εὐφράνθητε, οὐρανοί, ἅμα αὐτῷ,
 καὶ προσκυνασάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ θεοῦ·
 εὐφράνθητε, ἔθνη, μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ,
 καὶ ἐνισχυσάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες ἄγγελοι θεοῦ.
 ὅτι τὸ αἷμα τῶν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ ἐκδικεῖται,
 καὶ ἐκδικήσει καὶ ἀνταποδώσει δίκην τοῖς ἐχτροῖς,
 καὶ τοῖς μισοῦσιν ἀνταποδώσει,
 καὶ ἐκκαθαριεῖ κύριος τὴν γῆν τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ.

Rejoice, O heavens, together with him,
 and let all the sons of God worship him.

² Eugene Ulrich et al., *Qumran Cave 4, IX: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Kings*, Discoveries in the Judean Desert, vol. 14 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 141.

³ John William Wevers, ed., *Deuteronomium. Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*, vol. III, 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 359.

Rejoice, O nations, with his people,
 and let all the angels of God praise him.
 For the blood of his sons he will avenge,
 and he will avenge and repay vengeance to [his] enemies.
 He will repay those who hate [him],
 and the Lord will cleanse the land of his people.

Although it is possible that a tendency to parallelism underlies the Septuagint and Qumran texts, it is probably to be rejected on the basis that only partial parallelism truly exists. Instead, whereas colon 1 of the MT is given genuine parallel in 4QDeut^q (a parallelism doubled in the LXX), cola 2-3 of the MT are expanded into an awkward tricolon in both 4QDeut^q and the LXX, leaving MT colon 4 without parallel in either 4QDeut^q or the LXX. Moreover, it is plausible that Qumran colon 5 (cf. LXX colon 7): **ולמשנאיו ישלם**, was inserted to consciously or unconsciously match the same parallel thought of v. 41. Thus, I adopt as the most likely original a five cola structure for this verse, climactic in both its form and function. And in this climactic five cola format, it parallels v. 39—likewise pivotal in its theology.

In the initial call: “Rejoice, O nations,” I adhere to the MT—manifestly the more difficult reading, as it is seemingly out of place, out of parallel,⁴ and possibly offensive in its commendation of the “Gentiles/nations.”⁵ To its favor, however, the reading of Qumran frames the Song in an artful inclusio: the closing call to “Rejoice, O heavens” (v. 43) echoes the initial “Hear, O heavens” (v. 1). The LXX witnesses to both readings in what is apparently an expanded conflation of the two traditions.

⁴ I.e., with “gods” (see below).

⁵ The reading of 4QDeut^q, **שמ ים** (“heavens”), rids of any possible offence (as might be particularly felt among the sectarians of that era).

Εὐφράνθητε, οὐρανοί . . . εὐφράνθητε, ἔθνη.

The Hebrew text follows with the terse **יְמַעַ**. And what the MT states concisely, the LXX expands—seeking, in part, to explicate the ambiguity latent in this (consonantal) construction. The initial colon, in reading **ἅμα αὐτῷ**, “together with him,” understood a different vocalization of the Hebrew consonants—**יְמַעַ**. Its parallel is rendered **μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ**, “with his people,” following the pointing of the MT with its implicit preposition. This implicit preposition is made explicit in one medieval Massoretic manuscript which reads: **יְמַעַ נְאֻ**, “with his people.” Thus, the *BHS* editor proposes an original reading of **יְמַעַ עַ**—explicitly, “with his people”—which would have suffered the ravages of accidental scribal contraction (haplography) to become what we presently find in the MT. This solution, however, is misplaced, for the MT is sufficient as it stands—particularly as poetry, which often omits “extraneous” grammatical or syntactical elements for the sake of brevity and beauty. Furthermore, the shorter reading adopted here better explains the origins of the other variants.

At this juncture, I adopt the additional line: “and let all the ‘gods’ worship him,” following principally the testimony of 4QDeut^g. Although in the canons of textual criticism the “longer reading” is generally considered to be secondary, it is almost certainly in this instance primary. This reading is substantiated, in large measure, by the LXX tradition and provides the parallel colon necessary to conform this portion to the prevailing structure of the poem. The LXX manifests a lengthy conflate reading, in part proclaiming: **καὶ προσκυνασάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ θεοῦ . . . καὶ ἐνισχυσάτωσαν**

αὐτῶ πάντες ἄγγελοι θεοῦ.⁶ I would posit that both phrases here represent the reading of Qumran, expressed in synonym.⁷

By adopting the reading “(of) his servants” in the third colon of the proposed reconstruction, I maintain the witness of the MT against the testimony both of 4QDeut⁹ and the LXX: respectively בניו and τῶν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ, “(of) his sons.” בניו (or a related form) is represented in several instances earlier in the text,⁸ and it is perhaps because of these earlier occurrences that this variant originally (and unintentionally) arose. The reading of the MT, however, better fits contextually, paralleling its prior occurrence in 32:36. Moreover, Psalm 79, which patterns its plea after the development in this Song of Moses, climaxes in the cry: נִקְמַת דָּם עֲבָדֶיךָ (v. 10), intimating that the text tradition of Deuteronomy 32:43 current with the psalmist likewise read עבדיו.

Lastly, the Massoretic Text’s rather obscure reading at the verse’s close—ostensibly “his land, his people”—is better understood as an archaic form of the construct chain. This is made interpretively explicit in the readings of the Samaritan Pentateuch and

⁶ The LXX is known to render אלהים or בני אל as ἄγγελοι θεοῦ; e.g., Deut 32:8 and Ps 96:7 (LXX).

⁷ The question may yet be asked: What caused the abbreviation of the MT? Whereas accidental scribal deletion (due to, e.g., homoioteleuton) seems unlikely, the explanation of van der Kooij is plausible. He suggests that the shortening of the proto-MT to 140 cola—or 70 verse lines—was deliberate, in order to conform the structure of the Song to the “number of the (seventy) sons of Israel” (v. 8; cf. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan). He notes that “the changes of Deut 32:43 are closely connected with the change of verse 8: the corrections of both verses reflect a great interest in the significance of ‘the sons of Israel’, the people of Israel, for the nations.” Arie van der Kooij, “The Ending of the Song of Moses: On the Pre-Masoretic Version of Deut 32:43,” in *Studies in Deuteronomy: In Honor of C. J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. F. García Martínez et al. *Vetus Testamentum Supplements*, ed. J. A. Emerton et al., vol. 53 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 100.

⁸ Deut 32:5, 8, 19, and possibly 43a (cf. LXX).

Qumran (אֲדַמְתָּו עַמּוֹ), supported by the Septuagint (τὴν γῆν τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ).⁹ It is possible that the transcribers of the Massoretic tradition unconsciously inserted the 3ms suffix here, influenced by the presence of two such suffixes immediately preceding and one following, but a better alternative is that of Sanders who argues for the originality of the Massoretic reading—but as a construct, interpreting “the *waw* at the end of אֲדַמְתָּו as a meaningless affix. Such affixes are rare in biblical Hebrew but most of them are found at the end of the *nomen regens* in a construct chain. Here we find forms like אֲדַמְתָּו ‘the animals of [as in Gen 1:24]. . . . It is probably best to compare them with the Akkadian ending *-u* which could be attached to a *nomen regens* in every grammatical case. The Masoretes did not recognize the rare ending and vocalized it as a personal suffix. The proper vocalization would probably be אֲדַמְתָּו.”¹⁰

It is of interest to note here that the culmination of this verse and of the Song speaks of the bloody vengeance of God wreaked upon his enemies “making atonement for the land of his people.” Earlier in the Torah, it had been revealed that the blood of the murdered pollutes the land; it is only atoned for by the execution of the murderer (Num 35:33).¹¹ God’s honor, his people, and their land are all intimately tied; and the enactment of God’s vengeance restores all three. God is concerned with holistic atonement.

⁹ However, the accentuation of the MT suggests that this construction should be viewed as asyndetic (with an understood *waw*), as is made explicit in the Targums and the Peshitta.

¹⁰ Paul Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, ed. Johannes C. de Moor, vol. 37 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996): 254-55. For further examples of this grammatical phenomenon in the Hebrew Scriptures, cf. GKC, 254.

¹¹ This blood pollution was further applied to the pagan child sacrifices committed by God’s people (Ps 106:38).

APPENDIX C

COALS OF FIRE IN ROM 12:19-20

Romans 12:17-21, in its majority, reads:

- ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil.
.....
¹⁹ Do not avenge yourselves, beloved;
but give place to (God's) wrath,
for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord;
²⁰ but 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him (something)
to drink;
for in doing this you will heap coals of fire upon his head.'
²¹ Do not be conquered by evil,
but conquer evil with good.

Now, whereas the meaning of v. 19 is clear in its prohibition of personal revenge in the ethic of love and in light of the promise of divine vengeance, there is vigorous debate as to the meaning of Romans 12:20 as it follows on the heels of v. 19 and relates to the rest of the context. Two of the three principal positions¹ trace their lineage back to the early and eminent figures of Chrysostom and Augustine. The former held that the “coals of fire” referred to some future divine punishment that awaited those who spurned the Christian’s

¹ An untenable fourth is proposed by Dahood, who, although affirming that “coals of fire” is a metaphor for afflictions, argues that the preposition **עַל**, in addition to its usual meanings, could also denote “from.” Hence the phrase **כִּי גָחַל יִמְ אֶתְּהָ חֲתָהּ עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ** “lends itself to the translation ‘thus you will *remove* coals of fire *from* his head’.” Mitchell J. Dahood, “Two Pauline Quotations from the Old Testament,” *CBQ* 17 (1955): 21-22. However, this is appeal to a patently atypical use of the preposition, and runs counter to the witness of the LXX (and the derivative Rom 12:20) which translates the Hebrew **עַל** by the Greek **ἐπί**, unquestionably “upon.”

deeds of love. If the enemy did not repent at such grace extended, he summoned upon himself the sure judgment of God.² The latter held, however, that these “coals of fire” referred to the burning pangs of shame that the enemy would experience upon being shown such kindness, and which would lead to his repentance and reconciliation. In this he is followed by a majority of modern commentators, if one allows the third view (below) to be considered as a subset of the second. Cranfield, one of their number, believes that this latter interpretation is clearly to be preferred, “for it is congruous with the context in Romans, while the former interpretation is quite incompatible with it.”³ But if such a meaning is applied in this instance, it runs counter to the pattern of this image in Scripture.

The third view agrees with the second that the “coals of fire” is a positive image—not one, however, which is to be understood as “a burning sense of shame” as such, but one which harks back to an actual Egyptian ritual of repentance, known from the demotic Tale of Khamuas (or Chaemwese). In this narrative, the bringing of “a forked stick in the hand and a censer of fire on the head”⁴ were used to tangibly demonstrate repentance to the party wronged—although it is significant to note that in the tale itself the

² Cranfield, himself no advocate of this understanding, yet admirably relates the fuller position: Chrysostom “explains that Paul knew that even if the enemy were a wild beast he would scarcely go on being an enemy after accepting the gift of food, and that the Christian who has been injured would scarcely go on hankering after vengeance after he has given his enemy food and drink; and [he] goes on to say that to give one’s enemy food and drink with the intention of increasing his future punishment would be to be overcome of evil.” C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, ed. J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 649.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. F. Ll. Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis: The Sethon of Herodotus and the Demotic Tales of Khamuas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 32, 38, 121, 135.

repentance is more forced than heartfelt. Siegfried Morenz was the first to draw the comparison between this tale and the reference in Proverbs and Romans to the “coals of fire,” although the comparison is called into question on two accounts: (1) There is no mention of the “forked stick” in Proverbs 25:22 which is the alleged parallel to the tale, even though in that tale the two elements are inextricable. Moreover, Proverbs 25:22 makes reference to “coals” in lieu of Khamuas’ “censer”—a distinction of significance if direct borrowing is to be construed. (2) The composition of Khamuas dates to the middle Ptolemaic times—roughly 233/232 B.C.⁵ And although “the repentance ritual may antedate the literary document,”⁶ it is far from certain that it does so by such years as would place it in a Solomonic context (cf. Prov 25:1).⁷ Further—and earlier—support for an Egyptian provenance of Proverbs 25:21-23, however, may be sought from the Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet,⁸ the second chapter:

⁵ Siegfried Morenz, “Feurige Kohlen auf dem Haupt,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 78 (1953): col. 188.

⁶ William Klassen, “Coals of Fire: Sign of Repentance or Revenge?” *NTS* 9 (1962-63): 343.

⁷ Although this verse indicates that the proverb in question was copied and recorded for posterity by Hezekiah’s men, this only brings one about two hundred years closer to the Egyptian ritual (thus, yet five hundred years away). Moreover, the proverb itself is Solomonic (10th century B.C.) rather than Hezekianic (8th century B.C.), leaving the issue intact.

⁸ The Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet, dating roughly to the 12th-6th centuries B.C., bears a certain relation to the near context of Proverbs 22:17-24:22. It is uncertain, however, whether Proverbs borrowed its common material from Amen-Em-Opet, whether Amen-Em-Opet borrowed from Proverbs, or whether they both drew from a common milieu of wisdom material. Cf. e.g., *ANET*, 421-25; Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, TOTC, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 23-24; K. A. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East: The Factual History of Literary Form,” *TynBul* 28 (1977-78): 69-114; J. Ruffle, “The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs,” *TynBul* 28 (1977): 29-68.

He who does evil, the (very) river-bank abandons him,
 And his *floodwaters* carry him off.
 The north wind comes down that it may end his hour;
 It is joined to the tempest;
 The thunder is loud, and the crocodiles are wicked.
 Thou heated man, how art thou (now)?
 He is crying out, and his voice (reaches) to heaven.
 O moon, establish his crime (against him)!
 So steer that we may bring the wicked man across,
 For we shall not act like him—
 Lift him up, give him thy hand;
 Leave him (in) the arms of the god;
 Fill his belly with bread of thine,
 So that he may be sated and may *be ashamed*.⁹

It is to be granted that Proverbs 25:23, which directly follows upon the troublesome v. 22, seems to be more at home in an Egyptian rather than a Palestinian context, for it relays that “the north wind brings forth rain”—something true of Egypt but not of Palestine. However, although the passage from Amen-Em-Opet refers to such a wind and to feeding one’s enemy, the response of the enemy in the face of such kindness is “shame”¹⁰ rather than “stick and censer” or “coals of fire.”

In support of the first position—that the “coals of fire” represent divine judgment and that v. 20 is in large measure reinforcing the message of v. 19—are: (1) the grammatical structure of the verses in their apparent parallelism, (2) the context in which they are located, and (3) the development of the imagery from the Old Testament. Therein, the imagery of “coals of fire” is invariably used as a symbol of divine anger or judgment.

⁹ ANET, 422. The relevance of this passage to Prov 25:21-22 (and its quotation in Rom 12:20) is borne out in its advice regarding how one is to act toward an evil person/enemy (i.e., treat him with kindness, leaving the matter ultimately to god/God) and that person’s consequent response to such kindness.

¹⁰ As such, this passage correlates well with view two above.

For example, mirroring the imagery of Proverbs 25:21-22, from which Paul quotes, Psalm 140:10-11 reads:¹¹

10 רֹאשׁ מִסְבִּי
 עֲמַל שְׁפָתַימוּ יִכְסֹּמוּ:
 11 יִמְיִטוּ עַל יְהֵם גְּחָלִים
 בְּאֵשׁ יִפְּלֵם
 בְּמַהְמָרוֹת בַּל־יִקּוּמוּ:

¹⁰ The *heads* of those who surround me—
 may he *cover* them with the *trouble* of their lips.

¹¹ May (*fiery*) *coals* fall upon them;
 may he throw them into the fire,
 into watery pits—may they never rise!

For the apostle Paul to utilize this potent image in a manner foreign to its common usage—and without any clear contextual indicators to that effect—would seem rather unlikely.

This would also apply to Proverbs 25:21-22, whose near context—the additional proverbs of Solomon in 25:1–29:27—does not express a coherent argument. These verses, therefore, stand alone as their own discrete context: “²¹ If one who hates you is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. ²² For you will heap fiery coals on his head, and Yahweh will reward you.” Verse 21 outlines what was to be the general attitude and action of the Old Testament believer toward one’s enemy in need. If Solomon indeed utilized this imagery in common with its accustomed usage in the Old Testament literature, verse 22 would be seen as a word of comfort: that the enemy’s enmity would not go unpunished by the divine Judge, and that the believer’s kindness in the face of that enmity would not go unrewarded. In this, it is granted that the enemy remained

¹¹ Cf. further Ps 11:6, emended; Ps 18:9, 13/2 Sam 22:9, 13; 2 Esdr 16:53.

hostile. That such an implicit remark is left out of the proverb is not to be unexpected, for proverbs by their very nature are characterized by conciseness.

Moreover, scrutiny of the structure of Romans 12:19-20 reveals a certain symmetry which suggests that the message of v. 20 is to be construed as complementary and essentially identical to that of v. 19.

¹⁹ μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες, ἀγαπητοί,
ἀλλὰ δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ,
γέγραπται γάρ, Ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω, λέγει κύριος. ²⁰ ἀλλὰ
ἐὰν πεινᾷ ὁ ἐχθρὸς σου, ψώμιζε αὐτόν· ἐν διψαῖα, πότιζε αὐτόν·
τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ.

The commands in the larger context of Romans 12:9-21 are characteristically participial in form—stationed under, and serving to explicate, the summary heading of “genuine love” (ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος, v. 9). This prevailing structure¹² serves to bind vv. 19-20 together under the primary participial command: “Do not avenge yourselves, beloved.”

This primary command is counter-weighted by the two parallel ἀλλά phrases of vv. 19-20: “but give place to (God’s) wrath”¹³ and “but ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is

¹² This pattern is broken in only two places, if one excludes the summary heading and the concluding call: μὴ νικῶ ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ ἀλλὰ νικά ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ κακόν (v. 21). These are v. 14: εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς διώκοντάς ὑμᾶς, εὐλογεῖτε καὶ μὴ καταρᾶσθε, in which the repeated imperative is used to highlight this verse for its characteristic importance and as the fulcrum of the passage, and vv. 19-20. In these verses, the single participial command: μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες, ἀγαπητοί (v. 19a), is supported and expanded by what follows in vv. 19b-20.

¹³ As Schreiner observes: “The reference to God’s wrath and leaving room for it is exceedingly important in interpreting this text. When we believers are mistreated, abused, and our rights are infringed upon, the desire for retaliation burns within us because we have been treated unjustly. We are not to give in, however, to the desire to get even. Rather, we are to place the fate of our enemies firmly in God’s hands, realizing that he will repay any injustice on the last day. . . . This text suggests that believers will not be able to conquer feelings of revenge unless we know that ultimately there is justice, that God will set all accounts right. . . . Thus the recognition that God will judge our enemies is crucial for overcoming evil with good. . . . Believers are also to pray, of

thirsty, give him (something) to drink.” What the one expresses in a passive manner with regard to the renunciation of personal vengeance, the other expresses in an active manner with regard to the doing of good;¹⁴ in some measure, these deeds of kindness are compared to making room for God’s wrath. Furthermore, the primary command is substantiated by the two *gavr* phrases:¹⁵ “for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay,’ says the Lord” and “for in doing this, you will heap coals of fire upon his head.” This apparently intentional parallel structure suggests quite strongly that these “coals of fire” refer to the same divine and principally eschatological vengeance as expressed in v. 19.¹⁶

course, that God would bless those who persecute them (Rom. 12:14). This means that we pray for the salvation of our oppressors, hoping that they will turn from their evil and be rescued from the wrath to come. Nonetheless, we need to know (cf. 2 Thess. 1:3-10 for the same theme) that those who do not repent will experience judgment.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 673-74.

¹⁴ Cf. John Piper, ‘Love Your Enemies’: *Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 115.

¹⁵ Although the second *gavr* is indeed part of the quotation from Prov 25:21-22, it yet functions within that quotation as a word of comfort in support of the actions of kindness. And within the structure of Rom 12:19-20, and the development of its argument, it functions in like manner.

¹⁶ Piper, ‘Love Your Enemies,’ 115. Likewise, Stendahl believes that it is unlikely that “the passage as it stands could reasonably be understood by its first readers in any other sense than as a word related to the vengeance of God.” Krister Stendahl, “Hate, Non-Retaliatio, and Love: 1 QS x, 17-20 and Rom. 12:19-21,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 352. This view is not, as many argue however, to be construed as presenting a fundamentally negative view toward the Christian’s enemies, as in the caricature: “do good to your enemy so that his punishment will be all the more severe.” James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 750. Rather, it is a positive word of comfort for the Christian in the face of stubborn and unrepentant enmity.

In addition, the immediate context argues for such an understanding. Indeed, the principle of Christian non-retaliation enjoined by Paul in v. 19a is explicitly based upon and motivated by “the deference to God’s impending vengeance”¹⁷ in v. 19b. The issue Paul is addressing at this point in the chapter is “how to act when all attempts to avoid conflict with the enemies of God and of his Church have failed”¹⁸ (vv. 17-18). In such circumstances, the Christian is to continue to respond in love, entrusting justice to the God who has promised to repay the impenitent. In this way, these verses are similar to what Paul had earlier addressed in Romans 2:4-5: “Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

Thus, implicit in the affirmation that the Lord will repay (v. 19), heaping coals of fire on the head of the enemy (v. 20), is the condition of continued enmity: “If the enemy remains inimical,”¹⁹ for divine grace is ever extended to the repentant. Within the larger context of Romans 12:9-21, then, vv. 19-20 function not only to re-emphasize what is to be the grounding ethic and characteristic activity of the Christian, but also to provide both a consolation to the believer in the face of stubborn enmity as well as a justification of

¹⁷ Stendahl, “Hate, Non-Retaliation, and Love,” 354.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Piper notes that “there is a very real sense in which the Christian’s love of his enemy is grounded in his certainty that God will take vengeance on those who *persist* in the state of enmity toward God’s people.” Piper, ‘*Love Your Enemies*,’ 118. Cf. the example of Christ in 1 Pet 2:23, who suffered without retaliation, because he entrusted himself to God who judges justly.

the justice of God in the face of injustice.²⁰ Christians are indeed called to seek the benefit of those who hate them (v. 14), but grace repeatedly spurned has the assurance of divine vengeance (v. 19).

²⁰ As Schreiner summarizes (*Romans*, 675): “The sure realization that God will vindicate us frees us to love others and to do good to them,” thus conquering evil with good (v. 21).

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