

The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture – Part 2

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This is the second of two articles. The first appeared in the previous issue of Churchman (111/1).

The intention of these articles is to demonstrate that we need not avoid or be embarrassed about the Imprecatory Psalms, considering them to be inconsistent with the rest of Scripture, but rather that we should value them as a valid and important part of our God-breathed Bible. In the first article we looked in some detail at Psalm 109 and more briefly at Psalms 7, 35, 69 and 137, and showed that these Imprecatory Psalms fit comfortably within the theology of the Psalter. This second article seeks to demonstrate not only how they fit within the Old Testament as a whole, but also what part they take in the theology of the New Testament. It should then be apparent that this portion of Scripture is in no way inconsistent with the rest.

The Imprecatory Psalms and the Old Testament

There are those who would claim that the Imprecatory Psalms fit perfectly well in the Old Testament, on the basis of dividing the Old and New Testaments, and suggesting that Old Testament morality is totally different, especially regarding attitudes towards enemies. Cross comments in strong language: ‘...there is a considerable list of Psalms which the Christian Church would do well to preserve only in the ancient record, as evidence of the pit from whence we have been dug.’¹ If there were this major dichotomy between the two Testaments with regard to morality and particularly attitude towards enemies, then we would have no difficulty in placing the Imprecatory Psalms in the Old Testament, but it would render giving them a place within the theology of the New Testament, and indeed of holding the whole Canon of Scripture together, impossible. Fortunately this dichotomy does not obtain, for Old Testament teaching makes clear that love for the enemy was not optional, but obligatory.² Indeed, it is to the Old Testament that both Jesus and Paul appeal in their teaching on love for others.³ Moreover, this attitude is exemplified in the life of David, whom we consider to be the author of a number of the Imprecatory Psalms or, at the very least, closely connected with them.⁴ David constantly refused to take matters into his own hands and repay evil for good. He spared Saul in spite of the great evil committed against him and even wrote a song in memory of him and his son Jonathan. He was generous to Abner, patient with Joab and spared Shimei. Even within the Imprecatory Psalms themselves David’s attitude and actions towards his enemies are shown to be ones of love, not hatred.⁵

The Imprecatory Psalms do not therefore fit within the Old Testament on the simplistic basis of a hatred for enemies which is later countered by the teaching of Jesus. We have already considered a number of significant theological issues underlying these Psalms, and a closer look at these and how the Old Testament undergirds them may prove profitable in discussing the place of the imprecations in the Old Testament Scriptures. The supreme concern for God’s glory, particularly by people seeing that it is God who acts, the desire for retributive justice and the awareness of the covenant relationship, in which the righteous are vindicated and the wicked punished, are theological issues noted in the earlier article. These themes could be identified in many ways throughout the Old Testament, but this article, which

focuses particularly on the relationship of the people of God with their enemies and God's dealing with sin, will deal with two areas only. The concept of 'holy war', and the subject of the blessings and curses of the covenant treaty, both undergird the theology of the Imprecatory Psalms. We must therefore give attention to these two important issues.

Holy War

'That war figured heavily in ancient Israel's memory has never been in doubt; the Old Testament itself permits no other conclusion.'⁶ If this is the case, then the memory and presence of war will certainly have shaped the theology of the writers of the Imprecatory Psalms – in particular their understanding of God being in control and thus alone receiving the glory, and their realization of his hatred of sin, his righteous judgment and consequent retribution. Dyrness comments: 'The whole conduct of war became a symbol of God's righteous judgment, of Israel's faith and of the fearful end of those who withstand God.'⁷ It is important, then, to look at war in Israel, and particularly at what von Rad termed 'holy war'.⁸

The concept of 'holy war' is not to be confused with the Islamic *jihad* in which the faith is spread by force, but rather war becomes sacred because it is based entirely around Yahweh, and becomes 'prescribed and sanctioned by fixed, traditional, sacred rites and observances'⁹ It is found throughout the Old Testament. The Exodus, when God acted to deliver the people from the hand of Pharaoh, particularly the victory at the Red Sea, is sometimes considered as holy war with Yahweh being described as a 'Man of War' (Ex 15:3). The conquest of the land in the book of Joshua and the wars with pagan peoples in Judges and the books of Samuel and Kings are usually considered holy wars. In the Prophets the concept is less prevalent, although Isaiah is constant in his appeal to the people to trust Yahweh rather than political alliances (e.g. Is 7:3-9).¹⁰ The concept of holy war has also been used to describe the later Maccabean wars of the inter-testamental period, although it is argued that, though similarities exist, these are not explicitly ordered by God and should therefore be regarded as religious wars rather than the 'holy war' defined and described by von Rad.¹¹

In *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, von Rad identified a number of critical stages in recognizing 'holy war'. The first is that God calls together his people, often referred to as 'the people of Yahweh' (Judg 5: 11, 13). Next, the men were consecrated (Josh 3:5) and often offered sacrifices (1 Sam 7:9). The receipt of an oracle from God was important and would inspire confidence and faith in the people, as von Rad writes: 'On the basis of an affirmative divine decision, the leader proclaimed to the militia: "Yahweh has given ... into our hand." This cry is certainly to be understood as a perfect and not as a future.'¹² The victory has already been secured, even though the battle has not been fought, for it is God alone who gives the victory. Yahweh then moves ahead of the people as they march into battle (Judg 4:14), sometimes with the Ark in front representing God's presence. We should note that these wars are Yahweh's wars (1 Sam 18: 17) and that they are fought against Yahweh's enemies (Judg 5:31). It is Yahweh who acts alone and the responsibility of the people is to believe and trust and not to fear (Josh 10:8, 25). God's action and the people's trust cause the enemy to fear, as von Rad comments: 'It is a matter of divine terror which comes over the enemy'¹³ (Josh 10:10). He concludes: 'The highpoint and the conclusion of the holy war is formed by the *herem*, the consecration of the booty to Yahweh.'¹⁴ The final event was the dismissal of the people with a return to their 'tents' (2 Sam 20: 1).

The *herem*, the command to give everything over to Yahweh, usually by total destruction, as in individual battles with particularly resistant Canaanite cities, and indeed before the conquest of the Promised Land as a whole (Deut 7: 1-5; 20: 16-18), served to emphasize both

God's holiness and his hatred of and judgment on sin. These commands are difficult to understand; indeed Wenham writes: 'These directions are represented as the most solemn commands of God. If they are in fact so,¹⁵ we have a deep problem to grapple with.'¹⁶ However, they provide a justification for the Psalmist's hatred of sin and desire for judgment against it. It was not a nationalistic issue, and Wenham writes: 'It is to be noted that these commands are to be thought of, not primarily in terms of one nation against another, but in terms of those who love God against those who hate him',¹⁷ and it was a fact that the Canaanites were full of wickedness.¹⁸

Indeed, the sins of the Canaanites had been mounting up for four hundred years ever since God had spoken to Abraham (Gen 15:16). So the command to wipe out the people was not a sadistic act of hatred, but something demanded by God's holiness, and a lesson that would live on and critically shape the people's understanding of God. A quotation from Wenham will serve to emphasize this point:

If it was done with an intense realization of the holiness of God, and of the horror both of their own sins and of those of their enemies, it could serve as an indelible lesson.

That this was the spirit enjoined by God is emphasized again and again. The judgment was upon sin, not upon the enemy nations as such. If one is tempted to suspect that the Old Testament merely rationalized Israel's need for living space, it is well to remember that in fact God kept his people waiting for 400 years till the time for judgment on Canaan was ripe and that (when completely helpless) he rescued them from slavery. Their occupation of the land was no matter for nationalistic pride, it was the Lord's doing. And the Lord's commands were every bit as severe with regard to erring Israelites as they were to the Canaanites.¹⁹

The concept of holy war and the *herem* were central to Israel's understanding of God and his attitude to his enemies. The emphasis of the former is that it was Yahweh alone who acted and he alone who received the glory. De Vaux writes: 'This is the principal fact: it was Yahweh who fought for Israel, not Israel which fought for its God.'²⁰ The enemies were primarily Yahweh's rather than the people's. They were utterly dependent upon him to deliver them, and were simply to trust in him. The *herem* emphasized God's hatred of wickedness and his ruthless dealing with it in judgment on his enemies. It is unsurprising, therefore, that these issues are also evident in the Imprecatory Psalms – a hatred for sin, a desire for retribution and judgment against it, a realization that it is God alone who can act to accomplish this, as well as a concern for his glory.

Blessings and Curses

The idea of blessings and, perhaps more significantly in this study, curses, is an important one in the Old Testament and central to an understanding of the Imprecatory Psalms. Wenham writes: 'Such invocations and promises of judgment in the Psalms and in the Prophets have their basis in the Pentateuch.'²¹ The first curses in the Bible are God's judgment against the serpent and the ground after the Fall in Genesis 3. We should note that a blessing or a curse was not simply a set of words, but something real and active.²² This is, of course, especially true when it is God himself who administers the blessing or the curse.

The link of blessings and curses with the covenant people of God begins with Abram. God gives to him the foundational promises about his descendants and the land, and then states that there will be repayment of blessing for blessing and curse for curse upon those who come into contact with him (Gen 12: 1-3). This promise of blessing and curse is passed down through Isaac to his son Jacob (Gen 27:29). It is shown to have been passed to the people in

the wilderness when Balaam, ironically asked to curse Israel, ends up speaking oracles which recognize their blessing and which finish: 'May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed' (Num 24:9). It is recognized that: 'The theology of blessing and cursing in the promises made to Abraham is now a part of this oracle of blessing.'²³ These examples establish a clear link between the covenant people of God and blessings and curses, but it is at the end of Deuteronomy that, on the plains of Moab, the clearest teaching regarding blessings and curses is to be found.

Deuteronomy 27 and 28 list the curses and the blessings under the covenant treaty that God has made with his people.²⁴ Once they have crossed the Jordan, they are to assemble together around Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal and the Levites are to recite a series of twelve curses, sometimes known as the 'dodecalogue', and after each curse, all the people of Israel are to say 'Amen!' The list of offences includes 'a prohibition of images (v 15), four breaches of filial or social duty (vv 16-19), four cases of sexual irregularity (vv 20-23), two cases of bodily injury (vv 24-5), and a concluding comprehensive demand that this *law* (instruction) should be kept'.²⁵ Each of these offences is condemned elsewhere in the Pentateuch, and it seems that they are intended to be representative rather than complete. So Kalland writes: 'The sinful actions that evoke the curses are illustrative rather than comprehensive. Why these and not others should be mentioned is not clear.'²⁶ The 'Amen' was more than simply approval, as von Rad contends:

This 'Amen' involves an affirmation of this expression of Yahweh's will. The cultic community accepts the situation produced by the curses which have been proclaimed. Indeed, the congregation does not only acknowledge its agreement with Yahweh's wrath against the law-breaker; it also places itself at his disposal to give effect to it by dissociating itself from such lawbreakers.²⁷

The point here is that these curses are God's decrees against lawbreakers, and by affirming them the people of the covenant are 'calling upon themselves and their tribe a curse if they offended in reference to a particular law'.²⁸

A contrast between the promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience follows, the latter section approximately four times longer than the former. Obedience under the grace of God's covenant will be blessed with both national and international prosperity for Israel (28:1-14). Disobedience, however, will have terrible consequences. The curses extend to diseases of the mind and the body (vv 27-9), damage to property (vv 30-31), separation of families (v 32) and death at the hands of the enemy (vv 25-6). Disobedience leads to terrible suffering inflicted by the enemy, with verses 53-63 being 'surely one of the most appalling passages in literature concerning the sufferings of any people'.²⁹ The terrible curses listed here are warnings to God's covenant people against disobedience. This is what will happen to those who forsake God. Verse 20 summarizes, and Kalland comments:

Curses, confusion, and rebuke would fall on everything disobedient Israel did – until destruction and sudden ruin enveloped her. Disobeying the Lord is equated with forsaking him, because national and personal commitment to the Lord is the central command, and forsaking him is the central evil.³⁰

This survey of blessings and curses in the Pentateuch shows that the concepts are derived from God himself. He created the pattern that blessing would be repaid with blessing and curse with curse. Moreover, within the covenant we see that obedience results in blessing and disobedience leads to curses. This is not found only in these chapters, but: 'The principle that

obedience to the covenant will result in blessing, while disobedience will result in judgment, is quite characteristic of Deuteronomy as a whole. It was, indeed, an important principle in Israel's theology.³¹ The imprecations of the Psalmist are, then, undergirded by God's own imprecations. His desire for the punishment of the wicked and the vindication of the righteous finds its root in this theology of blessings and curses.

From this study of holy war and the blessings and curses in the Torah, we can conclude that the prayers of the Psalmists calling down judgment on their enemies, whether individuals attacking them and others, or whether whole pagan nations seeking to destroy the people of God, are not vindictive cries for personal or national revenge, but are prayers earthed in the theology of the Old Testament. The Psalmist is aware of the covenant in which he, and perhaps his enemies, stand and also of the covenant stipulations and curses to which the members of the covenant have bound themselves. These curses of Deuteronomy 27 and 28 are not personally formulated, but are part of a ritual and are given by Yahweh himself. The one who forsakes the covenant, who breaks God's law, as most surely the enemies of the Psalmist have done, not only deserves the curses of the Psalmist, but has actually brought them upon himself. Those who are outside the covenant, who have cursed and attacked those within, God's holy people, and who do not recognize Yahweh, are also to be cursed. Both inside and out, disobedience and the forsaking of Yahweh, however manifested,³² bring deserved cursing and judgment. 'The "jealous" God of the Old Testament is every bit as severe on his own covenant people when they are unfaithful to him, as he is on the nations who have always served other gods.'³³ This supports the imprecations of the Psalmist.

Moreover, the Psalms are prayers which place the activity of judgment and retribution squarely in the hands of Yahweh, in acknowledgement that it is only he who can and should carry out the judgment, and so receive the glory. The theology of holy war made this abundantly clear to the people of Israel. Their enemies are enemies of Yahweh, and it is Yahweh who will defeat them. They are simply to trust, which is what the writers of the Imprecatory Psalms are doing. The theology of the holy war and particularly the *herem* would also have embedded deep in the minds of faithful and obedient Jews the gravity of sin and the holiness of God. The Psalmist would have been aware of the seriousness before God of his enemies' offences, and his call for judgment is rooted in that understanding of sin. C S Lewis is right, at any rate in the second part of his statement, when he writes: 'If the Jews cursed more bitterly than the Pagans this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously.'³⁴

The Imprecatory Psalms therefore fit well within the theological framework of the Old Testament, and accord with the theology of holy war and the blessings and curses of the covenant. The supreme concern for God's glory, the desire for retribution and judgment on evil men and the vindication of the righteous are all important themes found not only in the Imprecatory Psalms, but also in the Psalter and the Old Testament as a whole. The questions to which we must now turn are whether these same themes are to be found in the New Testament, and how the Imprecatory Psalms fit into the whole Canon of Scripture.

The Imprecatory Psalms and the New Testament

This subject could warrant a complete study of its own but we shall look at only three issues, which give us confidence to contend that the Imprecatory Psalms do, indeed, fit into the theology of the whole Canon of Scripture. We shall notice the use of these Psalms in the New Testament, and then look at actual imprecations spoken by the apostles and Jesus himself. Finally, we shall consider apparent contradictions, such as the commands to believers to love

their enemies. The brevity of this section will leave some questions unanswered, or only superficially covered, but there will be enough evidence to offer a conclusion.

New Testament Use of the Imprecatory Psalms

Speaking of the imprecations in Psalm 109, Walker writes: ‘...we certainly cannot square them with the ethics of Jesus. No amount of apologetic straining can make the following passage (Ps 109:6-12) an expression of the Spirit of God.’³⁵ This understanding of the Imprecatory Psalms is not uncommon, and many suggest that they are superseded and rendered useless with the coming of Christ and the writing of the New Testament.³⁶ However, when we come to the New Testament, we see Jesus and the apostles taking these Psalms and using them, both in direct quotation and in less direct allusions. Indeed, Wenham writes of them: ‘Had they been alien to the spirit of the New Testament, one might have expected to have found them tacitly shunned by its writers. But in fact this is not the case at all.’³⁷ Indeed from the one hundred and fifty Psalms, there are one hundred and twenty five quotations in the New Testament, with the Imprecatory Psalms, according to Wenham, quoted at a rate of twice the average for the Psalms as a whole.³⁸ Similarly, the frequency of allusions made to these Psalms is higher than the overall average. Whilst some may argue that not all these quotations include an imprecation,³⁹ it can be maintained that the New Testament writers would have been fully aware of the whole context of the Psalm, as would many of their readers.⁴⁰ Further, although the statistics are rather rough, and the presence of these allusions, and even that of some of the direct quotations, might be debated, there is enough evidence to show that neither the apostles nor Jesus himself were embarrassed by these Psalms, or wished to remove them from the Scriptures.

A good example of quotation from the Imprecatory Psalms, which takes in two of the Psalms we have considered, is Peter’s appeal to Psalms 69 and 109, in the speech recorded by Luke in Acts 1:16-20. Peter clearly regards these Psalms as a valid part of Scripture, seeing them as fulfilled in the fate of Judas. ‘Each of them is treated as prophecy, and taken to be the sentence of God on invincible impenitence.’⁴¹ Their significance is seen in that they provide ‘the warrant for replacing Judas’.⁴² Clearly the writer of the Psalms would not have had Judas in mind, but Peter makes the distinction between the Holy Spirit inspiring and David being a mouthpiece, and so, as F F Bruce says: ‘We are not surprised ... to find the words of the Psalms and other Old Testament passages applied to circumstances not envisaged by the writers.’⁴³

Peter clearly regarded these Imprecatory Psalms as a valid part of the Scriptures, and used them with confidence. Jesus also quoted them, especially Psalm 69, and it has been suggested that he was alluding strongly to Psalm 137 in his words about Jerusalem in Luke 19:44. It may well be that, on the basis of Jesus’ opening of the Scriptures to the disciples and their own meditation upon them, Psalms 69 and 109 became part of a possible collection of ‘Testimonies’ about Judas used in the early church. The Imprecatory Psalms were accepted and used as part of the Canon of Scripture.

Imprecations in the New Testament

Wenham writes: ‘The divine curse is not only an Old Testament theme, but is also found in the New.’⁴⁴ He is clear that in the New Testament there are imprecations to be found, and a great deal of talk about judgment. While these are not expressed as graphically as those found in the Psalms – although some in Revelation are vivid (e.g. 19: 1-16) – they are nevertheless there, and in many ways more terrible, for the New Testament reveals more clearly the terror of eternal judgment. Indeed, some thirty years ago in a *Church of England Newspaper* article,

J A Motyer wrote: 'The most terrible prayer in all Scripture is found in Galatians 1:8-9 where the apostle desires the eternal doom of those who oppose the truth of the Gospel.' Clear pronouncements of judgment and imprecations are found in the words of Jesus, Paul and others, as the following examples show.

In Matthew 23: 1-36 Jesus makes a sustained attack upon the Scribes and Pharisees of Israel, who are hypocrites, and though given responsibility to guide God's people, have led them astray and loaded them with heavy burdens. They have become God's enemies, they are responsible for the blood of the Old Testament martyrs and will be so for those of the New Testament including Jesus himself; he therefore condemns them with a series of 'woes'. R T France writes of this term 'woe':

'...sometimes a powerful and denunciating judgment akin to a curse' (Garland p 87), as in [Matt] 11:21 ... Such series of 'woes' are familiar from the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Is 5:8-23; Hab 2:6-19), where the tone is of condemnation, and that is the emphasis here too. The 'woes' function almost as a converse of the 'blesseds' of 5:3-12; as the beatitudes set out the true way to please God, so the woes describe the wrong way, and pronounce judgment on those who follow and teach it.⁴⁵

Jesus is condemning, or cursing, these enemies of God.

In Galatians 1:8-9 Paul makes it doubly clear that: 'False teachers not only should be not believed or followed, but should be left to God's judgment to be accursed.'⁴⁶ Paul calls for judgment on any who corrupt the gospel, in the specific case of the Galatians, the Judaizers. It is not his personal enemies with whom he is concerned, but where 'fundamental matters are at stake, he is prepared, without hesitation, to draw clear lines and to speak with fervour in defence of "the truth of the gospel" (2:5,14)'.⁴⁷ Upon those who pervert the gospel he calls out that they be *anathema* which is 'the regular translation of *herem* (ban) in the LXX, where what is under the ban is removed from ordinary circulation and given over to destruction'.⁴⁸ Paul is cursing and calling for eternal judgment upon these enemies of the gospel and thus of God.

In Revelation 6:9-10 John sees those who have been martyred, and hears them crying out to God for judgment to come upon 'the inhabitants of the earth' who are enemies of God.⁴⁹ Some claim that this prayer is un-Christian,⁵⁰ but Wilcock defends it writing:

'Avenge our blood', cry the souls of God's witnesses, and in the light of the above [explanation of who the inhabitants of the earth are], their cry becomes not only excusable but right. For the inhabitants of the earth are those who are irredeemably committed to the cause of evil, and the martyrs are expressing not personal vindictiveness but an objective desire that justice be done.⁵¹

Here, in Revelation, we see the martyred saints calling for judgment against God's enemies.

The fact that there are imprecations in the New Testament is therefore evident. There are others which are equally clear, such as 1 Corinthians 16:22, and others again with the same thrust, such as Galatians 5:12 and 2 Timothy 4:14. Jesus' command to the disciples to shake the dust off their feet when they were not accepted in a town was in a sense a symbolic act of cursing (Matt 10:14), as was Paul's shaking out of his clothes (Acts 18:6). The seriousness of sin and judgment is made very clear indeed by Jesus' powerful parables on this theme, with eternal condemnation for those who are enemies of God (Matt 25:41). The Imprecatory

Psalms do not appear out of place alongside this emphasis on judgment and are consistent with the imprecations of the New Testament.

Love Your Enemies – Apparent Contradictions?

Whilst there is much talk of judgment and condemnation in the New Testament great emphasis is also placed on love and the forgiveness of the sinner, for that is of course the good news, the gospel. These two emphases are often seen as contradictory, with the result that one is elevated at the expense of the other (today it is judgment that is sidelined). The words of Jesus from the cross, ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do’, are often seen as an all embracing prayer to God for forgiveness. This apparent contradiction of any notion of condemnation or judgment rules out the imprecations and, more particularly in this study, the Imprecatory Psalms, from a rightful place in the Canon of Scripture. There are many verses which reveal an emphasis on love and forgiveness throughout the New Testament. We shall look at two of them.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commands his disciples: ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Matt 5:43-4). He is not altering an Old Testament injunction, for nowhere are God’s people told to hate their enemies, but rather, countering scribal additions. Certainly there was an ‘Old Testament distinction between the attitude required towards fellow-Israelites and towards foreigners’,⁵² but it was not to be one of hatred. The concept of hate was introduced from extra-biblical sources such as the Qumran community, where it is written in their Manual: ‘...that they may love all the sons of light..., and hate all the sons of darkness.’⁵³ Jesus is calling for an indiscriminating love for all people, a love that will lead his disciples to pray, even for those who are persecuting them. These are the disciples’ personal enemies, causing them harm, and Jesus says that they must love and pray for them, rather than hate them.

In Romans 12 Paul pleads for his readers to present themselves as living sacrifices, and to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (vv 1-3). In verses 14-21 he echoes the teaching of Jesus and commands them ‘...not only to refrain from desiring that harm should come to those who are persecuting us, but to desire good for them and to show that this desire is no mere pretence by actually praying for God’s blessing upon them’.⁵⁴ Paul makes it very clear that Christians are not to take personal revenge, for that is God’s role, but rather to treat their enemies well, which will bring shame upon them. A Christian’s personal enemies are to be blessed and not cursed.

The emphasis is on loving those who persecute you, your own personal enemies. It is possible to distinguish between personal enemies and those who are enemies of God. Sometimes they will overlap of course, but there are those who are persistent evil-doers, opposed to God’s purposes. Hence, in Paul, we see someone who is unconcerned about his personal enemies, but very severe in his condemnation of those who corrupt the gospel, and are enemies of God. The passage in Romans makes it clear also that God will judge those who persecute, and his wrath will avenge. Do these commands from Jesus and Paul, together with other teachings about forgiveness, invalidate the place of the Imprecatory Psalms, which call down judgment upon God’s enemies? The commands certainly raise major questions about praying imprecations, but they do not, we would contend, negate the desire for God’s name to be honoured, for God to exercise retributive justice, or for the righteous to be vindicated.

As mentioned in the introduction, more work could be done on the place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the New Testament. However, we have seen sufficient evidence to assert that these Psalms are not out of place there. Surburg writes: ‘The argument that maledictions are a feature of the Old Covenant and not of the New is simply to ignore the data of the New Testament.’⁵⁵ To point to Luke 23:34 as though it were the exhaustive theology of Jesus, and to ignore all his harsh words, is simplistic and inadequate. The reality of retributive justice against those who oppose God, and the ultimate exaltation of God in judgment is evident in the New Testament. The presence of imprecations, albeit in less explicit and graphic language than in the Psalms, and the way in which both Jesus and the apostles quote from such Psalms, clearly understanding their whole context, lead us not to dismiss them as un-Christian, but to contend that they fit well within the theology of the New Testament and therefore have a valid place there and in the whole Canon of Scripture.

Conclusion

The Imprecatory Psalms will perhaps offend, and will certainly sound very strange to ‘the ears of those who have been nurtured in an age of sentimental, unbiblical Christianity, which has forgotten that our first allegiance is to God, not to our fellow-man’.⁵⁶ However for biblical Christians they should carry no offence. As has been demonstrated, they are thoroughly theocentric, both rooted in the theology of the Old Testament and quoted and applied in the New, and thus sit squarely within a canonical context.

The argument to demonstrate the contribution of these Psalms began with a detailed look at Psalm 109, seeing that the Psalmist’s overall concern was the honour of God’s name, as justice was seen to be done, and the righteous vindicated, in the context of a covenant relationship. A brief study of four other Imprecatory Psalms showed the same theological issues arising; these were important aspects of the theology of the Psalter, with its theocentricity, its clear division between the wicked and the righteous, its strong emphasis on retributive justice and its covenantal basis. We then widened the study to the concepts of holy war and the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 27 and 28 which support the Imprecatory Psalms. Their emphasis on the seriousness of covenant breaking and of attacking the covenant people of God and the retributive judgment of God against such enemies demonstrated that: ‘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.’⁵⁷ The Psalms were lastly considered in the light of the New Testament. Its writers’ use of these Psalms, together with other imprecations and a strong emphasis on judgment are not contradicted by other passages. The concern for God’s name, the themes of retributive justice against sin and the vindication of God’s people are important theological issues in the Imprecatory Psalms and indeed throughout all Scripture. Thus we need not be embarrassed about or seek to avoid them, but rather embrace them as an important part of the Canon.

There are many aspects of a study in the Imprecatory Psalms which have not been tackled, or with which other literature is more concerned. One such issue is their use by Christians. They have a valid place in the Canon, but are they for Christians to use as a model for prayer against their enemies? Or do they have another use? The important question remains: ‘Why are the Imprecatory Psalms in Scripture?’ Two comments must suffice to answer this question. First, they are written for our learning.⁵⁸ They remind us that we should be theocentric in our thinking, praying and living. They teach us about God’s hatred of sin and his just and righteous judgment of those who oppose his purposes, and the need for Christians to trust in God rather than take matters into their own hands.⁵⁹ They offer assurance to

Christians, particularly to those who are persecuted, that God is governing a moral universe and will vindicate his righteous people.⁶⁰ They remind us that Christians should not be complacent about sin or passive regarding evil, but they should have a righteous indignation against that which opposes God and his purposes. The Christian has much to learn about God, the world and his relationship to both from these Psalms. Secondly, while we have much to learn from them and should not be embarrassed to read them and teach from them, it seems that we are not to use them directly in prayers against specific enemies.⁶¹ This is not to deny that when we pray for the Lord's return we are praying for judgment against God's enemies, or that we should express a righteous anger which is often absent from our prayers, or that we should pray for justice for the oppressed although this may mean judgment on the oppressor. However, the New Testament appears to confirm that the Christian's battle is with spiritual forces of evil. It is against Satan that we must fight, and the most effective way of damaging his cause is to pray for the conversion of God's enemies.⁶²

It has been established that the Imprecatory Psalms make an important contribution to the Canon. However, this is not to deny that certain passages remain difficult to understand. More work is needed on this contentious part of Scripture; and, although we may never understand them fully, C H Spurgeon rightly says that their study can be very profitable:

We confess that as we read some of these verses we have need of all our faith and reverence to accept them as the voice of inspiration; but the exercise is good for the soul, for it educates our sense of ignorance, and tests our teachableness. Yes, divine Spirit, we can and do believe that even these dread words from which we shrink have a meaning consistent with the attributes of the Judge of all the earth, though his name is Love. How this may be we shall know hereafter.⁶³

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Endnotes:

- 1) Earle Cross *Modern Worship and the Psalter* (New York: Macmillan 1932) p 29 quoted by R F Surburg 'Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms' *Springfielder* 39:88-102 December 1975 p 89. F Ballard writes in a rather more measured way: 'If justice is to be done to historical characters, they must be judged by the standards of their times ... We must remember the Israelites did not know science as we understand it, and they had not heard the Christian gospel or been taught the maxims of Christian morality' ('The Book of Psalms – expository notes' G A Buttrick ed *The Interpreter's Bible* [New York: Abingdon 1955] p 584).
- 2) Exodus 23:4-5 demands that practical help should be shown to the person in trouble, even if they hate one. Leviticus 19:18 teaches the Israelite 'love your neighbour as yourself, implying all people (cf v34), and only later did a group of stricter Pharisees, misunderstanding the command, add 'hate your enemy'. See also Proverbs 24: 17-18; 25:21-2. W Kaiser states: 'Even in the Old Testament, love for one's enemy was not an optional feature of the covenant community of faith' (*Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1983] p 300).
- 3) Mark 12:31; Rom 12:20
- 4) J W Wenham writes of the character of David: 'Though, like all his contemporaries, he was ruthless enough to his country's enemies, yet he showed extraordinary generosity to personal enemies who sought his death' (*The Enigma of Evil* [Leicester: IVP 1994] p 175).

- 5) 1 Sam 24:1-22; 26:1-25; 2 Sam 1:17-27; 3:6-21; 3:22-39; 19:16-23; Ps 35:12-14; 109:4-5
- 6) G von Rad *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1991) p 3
- 7) W Dyrness *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster 1979) p 183
- 8) G von Rad *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1991). It should be noted that others have disliked the term 'holy war', seeing it as both a misleading and a non-biblical term. P C Craigie points to G H Jones and R Smend as scholars who consider 'Yahweh war' to be more appropriate ('War, Idea of' *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* vol IV [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1988] p 1019). See also W C Kaiser *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1983) p 172 and Numbers 21:14 which refers to a book entitled 'The Book of the Wars of Yahweh'.
- 9) von Rad p 51
- 10) It has been suggested that in the prophets the same idea is thrust into the future with the concept of the 'Day of Yahweh', as J Bright notes: 'G von Rad is almost certainly correct in finding the origins of the concept in the traditions of Holy War' (*A History of Israel* [London: SCM 1974] p 258 footnote).
- 11) R de Vaux *Ancient Israel – Its Life and Institutions* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd 1961) pp 265-6
- 12) G von Rad *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1991) p 42
- 13) von Rad p 48
- 14) von Rad p 49
- 15) He argues that they are on the basis of Jesus' assumption of their authority by his use of surrounding texts, clearly aware of their context, and the fact that in the New Testament the occupation of Canaan is assumed to be a work of God (Acts 13: 17ff).
- 16) J W Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: IVP 1994) p 135
- 17) Wenham p 150
- 18) J Bright writes: 'Canaanite religion ... was, in fact, an extraordinarily debasing form of paganism, specifically of the fertility cult ... As in all such religions, numerous debasing practices, including sacred prostitution, homosexuality, and various orgiastic rites were prevalent' (*A History of Israel* [London: SCM 1974] pp 116-17).
- 19) The quotation continues: 'When Achan sought material profit from the conquest of Jericho, he and his family and his animals and his tent and his ill-gotten gains were all stoned and burnt. The inclusion of women and children in such judgments is sometimes regarded as the refinement of cruelty. Yet, not only is the family principle itself biblical, but in this case it might also have proved practical and humane. As far as the heathen were concerned, the danger from female devotees of Baal was quite as great as that from the men; and what sort of society would it be for either the women or the children, if (as would have been almost inevitable) they were reduced to the status of foreign slaves and were left with no menfolk of their own nationality to give them support?' (J W Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* [Leicester: IVP 1994] pp 152-3).

- 20) R de Vaux *Ancient Israel – Its Life and Institutions* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd 1961) p 262
- 21) J W Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: IVP 1994) p 167
- 22) Von Rad makes this clear: ‘We enlightened, urbanized Westerners scarcely know any more what a curse is. A curse is infinitely more than an evil word or a wicked slander. The ancients believed that one who cursed brought on something thoroughly evil, reached beyond the realm of prominent reality, and enticed profoundly abysmal, destructive forces’ (*God at Work in Israel* [Nashville: Abingdon 1980] p 36).
- 23) *NIV Study Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1987) p 223
- 24) Regarding chapter 28, S R Driver writes: ‘The chapter forms an eloquent and impressive peroration to the great exposition of Israel’s duty which has preceded (c 5-26): in sustained declamatory power, it stands unrivalled in the Old Testament’ (*Deuteronomy International Critical Commentary* [Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1895] p 303).
- 25) J A Thompson *Deuteronomy Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (London: IVP 1974) p 267
- 26) E S Kalland ‘Deuteronomy’ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* vol 3 F E Gaebelin ed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1991) p 163. Regarding the question as to why these and not others are included, some scholars have noted a ‘Secrecy Theme’ in that they are not offences that would readily be brought before a human court. Craigie comments: ‘If secrecy is the theme, then the curses pronounced here make it clear that crime is not determined merely by its discovery and punishment; whether or not an illegal act was ever discovered, it was nevertheless a crime against God and therefore deserved the curse of God’ (*The Book of Deuteronomy New International Commentary on the Old Testament* [London: Hodder and Stoughton 1986] p 351).
- 27) G von Rad *Deuteronomy* (London: SCM 1966) p 167
- 28) J A Thompson *Deuteronomy Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (London: IVP 1974) p 266
- 29) J W Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: IVP 1994) p 167
- 30) E S Kalland ‘Deuteronomy’ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* vol 3 F E Gaebelin ed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1991] p 171
- 31) J A Thompson *Deuteronomy Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (London: IVP 1974) p 268
- 32) In the case of the Psalms in question, this disobedience and forsaking of Yahweh is usually manifested by attacking God’s people.
- 33) J W Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: IVP 1994) p 169
- 34) C S Lewis *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Collins 1958) p 31
- 35) R H Walker *The Modern Message of the Psalms* (New York: Abingdon Press 1938) p 183
- 36) W E Farndale writes: ‘All this, set against the Imprecatory Psalms, pulls us up and makes us realise acutely how far the ethical ideal and standard has been raised for humanity by Jesus’ (*The Psalms in a New Light* [London: Epworth Press 1956] p 67).
- 37) J W Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: IVP 1994) p 172

- 38) Wenham pp 172-3. Note also that of the five Psalms we have looked at in this study we find three quoted seven times in the New Testament: Ps 35:19 – John 15:25; Ps 69:4 – John 15:25; Ps 69:9 – John 2:17, Rom 15:3; Ps 69:22-3 – Rom 11:9-10; Ps 69:25 – Acts 1:20; Ps 109:8 – Acts 1: 20.
- 39) D Kidner notes that sometimes the authors stop short of the imprecations in their quotations, but he adds that this is ‘usually for reasons of relevance rather than any reservations of doctrine’ (*Psalms 1-72 Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* [Leicester: IVP 1975] p 29).
- 40) C H Dodd *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet 1952) p 132
- 41) D Kidner *Psalms 1-72 Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (Leicester: IVP 1975) p 30
- 42) J R W Stott *The Message of Acts The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: IVP 1990) p 56
- 43) F F Bruce *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Tyndale 1951) p 76
- 44) J W Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: IVP 1994) p 169
- 45) R T France *Matthew Tyndale New Testament Commentary* (Leicester: IVP 1985) pp 326-7
- 46) J MacArthur Jr *Galatians* (Chicago: Moody 1987) p 17
- 47) R Longenecker *Galatians Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books 1990) p 19
- 48) Longenecker p 20
- 49) R H Mounce writes: ““Them that dwell on earth” is a semi-technical designation for mankind in its hostility to God’ (*The Book of Revelation New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1977] p 159).
- 50) Mounce points out: ‘Some writers emphasize what appears to be a marked contrast between this prayer and that of Stephen the first martyr, whose last words were a request that those who were stoning him be not held responsible for their act (Acts 7:60) ... Glasson concludes, “It should be frankly recognized that this is not a Christian prayer”.’ Mounce goes on to defend the prayer as Christian (p 158).
- 51) M Wilcock *The Message of Revelation The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: IVP 1975) p 73
- 52) R T France *Matthew Tyndale New Testament Commentary* (Leicester: IVP 1985) p 128
- 53) 1 QS 1:3-4, 9-10; 19:21-2 (France p 128)
- 54) C E B Cranfield *The Epistle to the Romans International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1979) p 640
- 55) R F Surburg ‘Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms’ *Springfielder* 39:88-102 December 1975 p 97
- 56) J W Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: IVP 1994) p 179
- 57) R F Surburg ‘Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms’ *Springfielder* 39:88-102 December 1975 p 99

- 58) Romans 15:4 ('For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us...')
- 59) In the article in the *Church of England Newspaper* already mentioned, J A Motyer writes of the Imprecatory Psalms: 'While they are expressed with vigour, yet when viewed for what they really are – prayers – they are primarily expressions not of revenge but of trust.'
- 60) R F Surburg writes that under bitter persecution 'Christians have found comfort in them because in the Imprecatory Psalms they find the assurance that the Judge of all the earth guarantees the ultimate destruction of their enemies as well as the complete triumph of their cause' ('Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms' *Springfielder* 39:88-102 December 1975 p 100).
- 61) There are some who would argue that these Psalms are to be used as Christian prayers. James Adams supports this in his book *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1991) in which he argues that all the Psalms are Christ's prayers, including the imprecations, and therefore the Christian should pray them through Christ. See also R F Surburg 'Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms' *Springfielder* 39:88-102 December 1975.
- 62) See brief discussion in T Longman III *How to Read the Psalms* (Leicester: IVP 1988) pp 138-9.
- 63) C H Spurgeon *Psalms* vol II (Wheaton: Crossway Books 1993) p 124