

Imprecatory Psalms

12, 35, 52, 69, 70, 83, 109, 129, 137, 140

See too 5:10; 10:15ⁱ; 17:13; 28:4; 40:14-15; 55:9, 15; 59:12-13; 79:6, 13ⁱⁱ. There are a great many psalms where imprecations occur. It needs to be remembered that the form 'imprecatory psalm' is an artificial category, though a useful one. I see little value in arguing either for or against the inclusion into this category of other psalms which involve imprecations, since this is primarily a study of the phenomenon of prayers to curse the 'enemies', and not an attempt to fix forms.

Sample of Imprecations (Curses) Invoked upon Enemies

As Luc observes most imprecations are expressed in jussive statements ("may", "let"), though some involve imperatives.ⁱⁱⁱ

May the Lord cut off all flattering lips
and every boastful tongue... (12:3)

May their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and their backs be bent for ever.
Pour out your wrath on them;
let your fierce anger overtake them.
May their place be deserted;
let there be no-one to dwell in their tents...
May they be blotted out of the book of life
and not be listed with the righteous (69:23-25, 28)

May they ever be ashamed and dismayed;
may they perish in disgrace (83:17)

May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.
May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven from their ruined homes.
May a creditor seize all he has.
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labour.
May no-one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.
May his descendants be cut off,
their names blotted out from the next generation.
May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord;
may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
May their sins always remain before the Lord,
that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth (109:9-15)

O Daughter of Babylon,
doomed to destruction,
happy is he who repays you
for what you have done to us-
he who seizes your infants

and dashes them against the rocks (137:8-9)

Let the heads of those who surround me
be covered with the trouble their lips have caused.
Let burning coals fall upon them;
may they be thrown into the fire,
into miry pits, never to rise (140:9-11)

As far as David is concerned he is praying for poetic justice:
Since they hid their net for me without cause
and without cause dug a pit for me,
may ruin overtake them by surprise-
may the net they hid entangle them,
may they fall into the pit, to their ruin (35:7-8)

'Thomson^{iv} remarks that such "imprecations are really the psalmists' reply to those of Israel's enemies." In defence of this assertion he cites Psalms 35, 59 and 109.

For the curses and lies they utter,
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 (59:12-13)

He loved to pronounce a curse -
may it come on him;
he found no pleasure in blessing -
may it be far from him.
He wore cursing as his garment;
it entered into his body like water,
into his bones like oil.
May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
like a belt tied for ever round him (109:17-19)

In the case of at least some of these enemies David claims to have treated them with kindness only to be paid back with evil:

Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth
and humbled myself with fasting.
When my prayers returned to me unanswered,
I went about mourning
as though for my friend or brother.
I bowed my head in grief
as though weeping for my mother (35:13-14).

In return for my friendship they accuse me,
but I am a man of prayer.
They repay me evil for good,
and hatred for my friendship (109:4-5).

Simply to cite these instances of imprecations is to show the inadequacy of various treatments, e.g., that of Mowinckel who thought of the psalmist using “effective” magic as he warred with spiritual foes, and of Calvin who regarded the curses as prophetic words of what the fate of the wicked would be. On the contrary, the imprecations are uttered upon real, flesh and blood people and the psalmist identifies himself with what is desired by way of retribution.

The Psychological Hypothesis

Erich Zenger has argued “that the ‘psalms of enmity’ are a way of robbing the aggressive images of the enemies of their destructiveness and transforming them into constructive forces.”^v In their studies of the phenomenon of violence anthropologists and social analysts have made much of the concept of ‘enemy images.’ Following Bauriedl the idea here is that when “anxiety in interpersonal conflicts becomes too strong” there is a psychological necessity within both parties to the conflict which will inevitably lead both to develop to think of each other as destructive enemies. This way of regarding the other becomes “a specific *form of relationship* between the one who has developed the image and his or her ‘enemy’”. Since the image of the enemy is understood to belong to the structure of a particular relationship it follows that destroying the image of the enemy - dissolving the concept of the other as enemy - results not in the clarification of a misunderstanding but in changing the structure of relationships.^{vi}

Zenger emphasises the poetical nature of the psalms and essentially sees the expressions of the psalmists’ desire for vengeance on enemies as rhetoric. He believes the label ‘psalms of cursing’ invite misunderstanding “because they do not curse; they present passionate lament, petition, and desires before God.”^{vii}

It is true that the imprecations do achieve a psychological function. Fee and Stuart approach the imprecatory psalms in much the same way as Zenger:

They guide or channel our anger to and through God verbally, rather than to or at anyone else, verbally or physically... God through the imprecatory psalms, invites us to ‘be angry but not to sin’ (Psalm 4:4)... Imprecatory psalms harness our anger and help us to express it (to God) using the same sorts of obvious, purposeful exaggeration known to us from other types of psalms... Understood in their context as part of the language of the laments, and used rightly to channel and control our potentially sinful anger, the imprecatory psalms can indeed help keep us from sin...^{viii}

These comments are fair enough as far as they go, but the fact of the matter is that they don’t go far enough. This psychological approach to the imprecatory psalms is grossly inadequate. As we shall discover, the imprecations of both the Old and New Testaments are far from being rhetorical but represent prayers for judgment which most certainly have been and will be answered by God. We cannot evade the force of these psalms by psychologising the imprecations.

The Predictive Hypothesis

Some have proposed that the imprecations are not to be understood as personal sentiments but as divine statements involving prophetic predictions.^{ix} As Luc points out, this does not explain the form in which the imprecations actually occur, with a dominant use of jussives, accompanied by some imperatives. It is not a natural reading of the text to construe such formulations as future predictions.

Are the Imprecations Primitive Words of Hate?

Scholarly Denouncements

Ringgren describes curse formulae of the Psalter as being “of an especially crude and primitive character, which in some cases still reveal traces of ancient ideas of sympathetic magic.” Thus assuming that Israelite religion is but a development of prior ancient practices, he reasons, “Originally they may have been ‘effective spells,’ which were thought to work automatically. Once they were pronounced their effect necessarily followed.”^x The same applies, of course, to the word of blessing.^{xi} This position treats the curses of the Psalter as being of at best a semi-primitive nature, belonging to a pre-Gospel age. However, Ringgren recognises, against Pedersen’s stress on blessing as a mysterious power, that in the Psalms all blessing comes from God.^{xii} What Ringgren fails to adequately appreciate, however, is the theocentric nature of the imprecations in the Psalms (see below).

Hempel believes such sentiments are expressive of the hate of the psalmist, a hate “springing from all his anxieties and needs” which arises because he has “neglected” the “faith that Yahweh is acting in calamities”, and has wrongly allowed his enemies to occupy “the foreground” of his “consciousness.”^{xiii} Similarly Weiser claims the psalmist concerned

is...neither able nor ready to give himself up wholly to God, trusting [God] absolutely, and accept his suffering from [God’s] hand, enduring it patiently. Human self-will and [human] low instincts of vindictiveness and gloating retain their power over his thoughts and affect also his idea of God and his relationship to [God].^{xiv}

With respect to Psalm 109 Duhm comments, “The curses in this psalm are to a particular degree ‘unchristian’.”^{xv} Mertens speaks for many when he says,

Christians at prayer will keep in mind that, in praying [the psalms] they find themselves within a pre-Christian and sub-Christian ethos, on a level far surpassed by the Sermon on the Mount.^{xvi}

John J. Owen said of the psalms of imprecation that these “forms of expression are of such cold-blooded and malignant cruelty, as to preclude entertaining the idea for a moment that they were inspired of God.”^{xvii} Craigie, considering the sentiments to be “evil”, similarly prognosticates: “these Psalms are not the oracles of God.”^{xviii} Surprisingly, Halley’s Bible Handbook states that the imprecatory psalms

are not God’s pronouncements of His wrath on the wicked; but are the prayers of a man for vengeance on his enemies, just the opposite of Jesus’ teaching that we should love our enemies.^{xix}

Even C.S. Lewis denounces the imprecatory psalms as “devilish” and “diabolical”, stating, “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.”^{xx} For Lewis, in his overall approach to the Psalter, “the point is precisely this: that these same fanatic and homicidal Hebrews, and not the more enlightened peoples, again and again - for brief moments - reach a Christian level of spirituality.”

One obvious difficulty with these perspectives is the fact that such imprecations are not unique to the Psalms. See also, for example, Judges 5:31; Jeremiah 11: 18ff; 15:15ff; 18:19ff; 20:11ff. In these other instances, as in the Psalms, it is felt to be

fully consistent for *godly ones* to call down God's curse on those who confront the faith. Further, Leviticus 19:17-18 demonstrates that the law is supposed to be in the heart, showing that it is not valid to say that one should not expect to find a New Testament faith in the Old Testament.

The New Testament and Imprecations

In Acts 1:20 Peter cites Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8. Both of these psalms are imprecatory psalms and both of these quotations contain a prayer that the evil persons concerned experience God's judgment and be stripped of the privileged position they once knew. Peter believed that God had answered such cries for vengeance with respect to Judas Iscariot. None other than Jesus himself, picking up the language of Psalm 41:8-10, uttered the fundamental word of curse upon Judas (Mt 26:23-24). Here is clear evidence that the New Testament regards OT imprecations as legitimate.^{xxi} Further, Jesus himself uttered woes, that is, curses, upon the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (Mt 23). The clear implication of Galatians 3:13 is that unbelievers are subject to the curse of the law. Paul pronounces a most extreme and most emphatic curse on any who would preach another gospel (Gal 1:8-9). Indeed Paul utters the following general imprecation: "If anyone does not love the Lord - a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!" (1 Cor 16:22). It should be carefully noted that not one of these instances of uttering curses in the NT is occasioned by personal vindictiveness and a desire for personal vengeance, which would indeed be alien to the spirit of the NT (Mt 5:38-48; Rom 12:19-21).

Special Considerations Concerning OT Imprecations

A Moral World and Judgment

Von Rad draws a contrast between the operation of law in Israel and that reflected in the Codex Hammurabi.^{xxii} In the latter the administration of justice and the punishment of crime were much more matters of state action. In earlier Israel there were no authorities to take over the expiation of an offence on behalf of the private individual. In such a context the blood-feud functioned as a valid institution for the repression of violence. However, later the Israelite state took over much more of community life and blood-feuds were restricted. Despite this change in circumstances the private individual was "incapable... of acknowledging the state itself as the custodian of law." For to do this would be a violation of faith in Yahweh; it would be to divorce all law from the absolutely immediate jurisdiction of Yahweh. The essential thought was that all life belongs to Yahweh. In contrast to the Law of Hammurabi, all law in Israel is much more closely tied to religion; all law is of divine origin. In such a world the individual who has been wronged looks to Yahweh to deal with the perpetrators of injustice.

Yet, more is involved in the imprecatory psalms than the psalmist's nose being put out of joint by unfair treatment; than an experience of injustice exciting a passion for vengeance. Thomson draws attention to the importance of Psalm 139:21-22: "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies." Thomson comments,

That is to say, the psalmists are not motivated by desires for personal revenge but zeal for the Holy One of Israel who must exercise retribution in the present moral order in the world. Behind the imprecations is a recognition of a divine moral governance in the world, a belief that right and wrong are meaningful for God, and that therefore judgment must operate in the moral world order as well as grace.^{xxiii}

Observing parallels between imprecations and prophetic 'judgment predictions', Luc (400-407) argues that the imprecations of the Psalms are best understood as prophetic proclamations intended to be used in a public context. In many ways this observation makes it all the more mandatory to understand the worldview which lies behind imprecations since they are deemed acceptable not merely to the pious individual author but also to the entire worshipping community of faith.

(For more special considerations download Volume 1 of the Psalms)

ⁱ Psalm 10 contains only one imprecation and this is why I have chosen to classify it as a lament rather than as an imprecatory psalm proper. But the entire psalm constitutes a rationale for the curse prayed upon the wicked in verse 15.

ⁱⁱ It is possible to regard Psalm 79 as an imprecatory psalm, though I have chosen to emphasise its character as a corporate lament.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alex Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms" in *JETS* 42:3 (1999) 396.

^{iv} J.G.S.S. Thomson, "Psalms, Book of" in *The New Bible Dictionary* (eds. J.D. Douglas et al., London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968) 1056.

^v *A God of Vengeance?*, vii.

^{vi} See explanation in Zenger, vii-viii.

^{vii} *A God of Vengeance*, viii.

^{viii} Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, "The Psalms-Israel's Prayers and Ours" in *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982) 182-183.

^{ix} Luc cites examples, p398.

^x Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmists* (SCM Greenbacks; London: SCM Press, 1963) 31.

^{xi} Ringgren, 32.

^{xii} *Faith*, 32.

^{xiii} "Psalms, Book of" in *IDB* 3, 956-957.

^{xiv} Cited by E. Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) 15.

^{xv} Cited by Zenger, 14.

^{xvi} Cited by Zenger, 14; Similarly, A.F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms: With Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge University Press, 1902) lxxxix.

^{xvii} Cited by James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1991) 8.

^{xviii} Adams, 10.

^{xix} Adams, 9.

^{xx} Adams, 9.

^{xxi} Adams, 12. See also pp 42ff. for many of the examples cited here.

^{xxii} Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology. Volume One. The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (trans. D.M.G. Stalker; London: SCM Press, 1977) 31.

^{xxiii} *NBD*, 1058.