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PSALMS OF IMPRECATION: VINDICTIVE OR CALLS FOR VINDICATION?

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Abstract

Biblical scholarship has continued to face the challenge of how to interpret and explain the most troubling aspect of the Psalter: the psalms of imprecation against enemies and the call for their destruction. While the imprecatory psalms have been a subject of scholarly debate and many helpful interpretations have been advanced, each successive interpreter would point out some inadequacies of earlier proposed solutions in dealing with some basic questions that confront the reader. One problem with the imprecatory psalms is the ethical challenge it poses to both Jews and Christians alike: how can a passionate spirit of vengeance and a vehement call for the enemy's extermination be reconciled with the command to love one's enemy (Lev 19:17–18; Matt 5:44)? Are the psalmist's adversaries necessarily God's enemies too? Are these strident cries for vengeance and retribution congruent with other inspired portions of the Psalter that elevate God's attributes, or should they be excised from the Psalms? What are the functions and theological implications of the imprecatory psalms in the Old Testament? In considering some of these questions, this paper will argue that these psalms are hinged on divine justice and retribution. Yahweh is depicted as the sovereign and exclusive just judge of creation, and is called upon to execute justice on behalf of the oppressed and thus establish his reign of righteousness. In invoking God for assistance, the petitioner often appeals to the covenant

theological basis of Yahweh's relationship with the chosen people, Israel.

Key words: Imprecation, Psalms, Old Testament, Covenant, Hermeneutic, Vengeance, Justice.

Introduction

For both Jews and Christians, the book of Psalms is perhaps the most wide-ranging repertoire of spiritual, theological, liturgical, and literary heritage in the entire biblical tradition. This anthology of religious poetry encompasses all facets of Israel's cultic life as the people of God, "from profound praise to the utterance of unspeakable anger and doubt".¹ For Christians, beginning from the New Testament period, the Psalms have been used as a manual of worship and constitute the bulk of prayers for daily recitation in the Liturgy of the Hours of the Catholic Church as well as in other Christian denominations. Yet, despite the many uplifting psalms of praise and thanksgiving that extol God's magnificence, others appear to be dominated by harsh and bitter expressions. Any reader of the Psalms is immediately struck by the ubiquitous mention of enemies, adversaries, and oppressive forces that surround, ambush, threaten, aim at, and attack the psalmist. It is evident that the lamenter is in a life-threatening situation of distress, danger, or fear since these are often mentioned in the poems.² The complaints are frequently

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, OTS (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 15.

² Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyrics of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon: Mercer University Press,

those of an individual: “O Lord, my God, in you I take refuge; from all my pursuers save me and deliver me!” (Ps 7:2), though other psalms present a communal lament: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept, as we remember Zion” (Ps 137:1).³

The most pervasive aspect of the lament psalms, both individual and communal, is contempt of the enemy. The psalmist complains about their violence, injustice and abuse of power, and generally portrays them as *rāšā'*; that is, they are persecutors, adversaries, slanderers, impious, arrogant, and wicked.⁴ A stark distinction is generally drawn between the petitioner and his⁵ enemies. The psalmist describes himself as “poor” and “humble” in contrast to the “godless rich” and “proud” who speak false accusations, procuring false witnesses in tribunal to harass the poor (Ps 35:11). The “poor” one believes himself “pious” while the “rich” are “wicked,” persecuting him because of his religion, without any fear of Yahweh in them (Ps 73:12).⁶ The enemy

1998), 130; Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 50.

³ All the psalms are quoted in their original Hebrew verses, which often differs slightly from the numbering in English versions. For a full list of individual lament psalms, see Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 121, and for communal lament psalms, see Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. AP-Thomas, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:194. By the way, these lament psalms share many contextual and literary similarities with the book of Lamentations.

⁴ Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 139–140; Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:198.

⁵ I use only the masculine pronoun for consistency since the psalms were supposedly composed exclusively by males, but without any prejudice to gender inclusiveness. See Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 126.

⁶ Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 149–150.

employs malicious words and schemes evil plans to wound or destroy the lamenter. Not only do they attack him with taunting comments (Pss 3:3; 42:4, 11), but they also defy and disparage Yahweh (Pss 10:3–4; 14:1). As Sigmund Mowinckel has pointed out, all such words were considered by the ancients as powerful and fatal curses against an enemy, as lethal and effective as wielding physical weapons in battle.⁷ Thus, the victim of these injurious remarks turns to God for help by means of the lament psalms, or “psalms of disorientation” in Walter Brueggemann’s terminology.⁸

The lament psalms, whether individual or communal, generally follow a more or less well-defined literary structure: (a) *summons* or *address* where the lamenter invokes God (Ps 5:2); (b) *complaint* and *petition*, which often includes imperatives and wishes expressed in the jussive mood that call for the destruction of the petitioner’s adversaries (Ps 109:6–19); (c) *vow of thanksgiving* and *praise*, whereby the speaker is assured that God has heard the petition and will surely act (Ps 56:13–14).⁹ Within this literary framework, petitions and wishes directed against the adversaries of the psalmist often predominate, and are sometimes even found in other psalms that celebrate God’s grandeur and benevolence (Pss 8; 149). These wishes express bitter repugnance and unmitigated calls for vengeance on the petitioner’s opponents. In some cases, prayers to God for the extermination of the enemy seem to be the predominant goal of the psalm,

⁷ Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 1:199–200.

⁸ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 20–21, 51ff.

⁹ For the general structure of the psalms, see Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 152–185; Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 54–58.

thereby distinguishing the genre as curse and revenge psalms, or psalms of imprecation.¹⁰

Biblical scholarship has continued to face the challenge of how to interpret and explain this most troubling aspect of the Psalter, namely the psalms of imprecation against enemies and the call for their destruction. While the imprecatory psalms have been a subject of scholarly debate and many helpful interpretations have been advanced, yet each successive interpreter would point out some inadequacies of earlier proposed solutions in dealing with some basic questions which confront the reader.¹¹ In what follows, we will first delineate the nature and context of the imprecatory psalms, and then highlight some theological perspectives on the imprecations. Next, we will offer hermeneutical lenses for interpreting these psalms theologically and, finally, situate them in our own context. The approach is mostly literary critical and historical analysis.

¹⁰ Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 188; Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:202.

¹¹ For a select bibliography, see Johannes G. Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 4 (1942): 123–138; Carl J. Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 35–45; Gerald Pauls, "The Imprecations of the Psalmists: A Study of Psalm 54," *Direction* 22 (1993): 75–86; Allan M. Harman, "The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter," *The Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 65–72.

Identifying the Nature and Context of the Psalms of Imprecation

Johannes Vos articulates imprecations as involving the invocation of calamity, curse, or destruction on certain individuals.¹² Following Vos, Carl Laney indicates that these invocations could include either the enemies of the petitioner or those of God, a tradition that is found in both Old and New Testaments.¹³ Here, the ancient covenant curse formula (in Deut 27–28) finds variegated expression in these psalms which include the following: Pss 7; 35; 55; 58; 59; 83; 94; 109; 137 and 139.¹⁴ Evidently, the emotions of bitter hatred and raw thirst for revenge in these poems may sound barbaric and repugnant to modern sensibilities, yet the psalmist utters them with a clear conscience in the hope that Yahweh will intervene decisively. As Walter Brueggemann has observed, the petitions made to Yahweh may be scandalous and devoid of religious sensitivity, yet the speakers are wholly committed to addressing God who is present in, participates in, and is attentive to the darkness and misery of the laments.¹⁵

¹² Vos, “Ethical Problem,” 123.

¹³ Laney, “A Fresh Look,” 35–36. Some of the imprecations in the Bible include Num 10:35; Judg 5:31; Gal 1:8–9; 1 Cor 16:22 among others.

¹⁴ Scholars are not agreed on the precise number of psalms of cursing. Besides, imprecation is not the only element of many of these psalms listed above. See Vos, “Ethical Problem,” 123; Laney, “A Fresh Look,” 36; Nancy deClaissé-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 77–92, at 77.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 52–53.

The lamenter who cries out to God is evidently in some kind of mortal danger that threatens his/their very life, and so calls on God for deliverance from the grip of adversaries. Again, the psalmist here is either an individual or the collective voice of the community expressing its anguish as a result of a national threat or calamity. These psalms do not make any pretense of acceptance or approval of the distress, false accusations, or danger to life posed by the enemies. Rather, they employ extremely poignant and evocative imagery and hyperbole in depicting the lamenter's situation of distress before Yahweh in order to attract his intervention. The appeal to God's *justice* is an important motif in imprecatory psalms. Yahweh is depicted as the sovereign who, as the sole just judge of creation, can and should execute justice and establish his reign of righteousness by rewarding good deeds and punishing evil actions.

With regard to the life-setting, it is noteworthy that the imprecatory psalms are established within the tradition of laments and imprecations in the Bible. For instance, while journeying to the Promised Land through the desert, Moses would invoke an imprecation on Yahweh's enemies: "Arise, O Lord, let your enemies be scattered; let those who hate you flee before you!" (Num 10:35).¹⁶ Again, Jeremiah's imprecations against his adversaries in the so-called "confessions" (Jer 11:18–12:6; 15:15; 17:18; 18:18–23; 20:10–13) sometimes occur in the narrative setting of Jeremiah's struggles with his opponents and may provide a concrete illustration of the context in which the

¹⁶ Laney, "A Fresh Look," 35.

psalmist's contention against enemies may be understood.¹⁷ Most of the psalms have superscriptions or incipits that seem to provide some historical information about the composer of the psalm in question. Of all the psalms attributed to specific figures (Moses, Solomon, Jeduthun, Heman, Asaph, Ethan the Ezrahite, and to the Korahites), the most common ascription is to king David, often with a description of the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of the psalm in question. For instance, Ps 56 is entitled "To the music director (לַמְנַצֵּחַ): concerning Jonath-elem-rehokim, a Miktam for David; when the Philistines seized hold of him in Gath."

These historical references and Davidic authorship are taken for granted by rabbinic exegetes and early Church Fathers.¹⁸ However, modern scholarship sometimes ignore the superscriptions and Davidic attribution for several reasons, especially on the grounds that they are late additions to the psalms and that they do not provide accurate historical information.¹⁹ But need we dismiss the psalm titles as artificial and thus unreliable historical headers altogether? Even if one can no longer retrieve the precise historical context of their original composition, there is still a sense in which the superscriptions can

¹⁷ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 57–63.

¹⁸ See an illustration of this with Ps 58 in Gary A. Anderson, "King David and the Psalms of Imprecation," *Pro Ecclesia* 15 (2006): 267–280.

¹⁹ This is an observation by Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 26. Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 123–127 argues for a cultic setting behind the composition of much of the lament psalms, but insists, contra Mowinckel, that some poems portraying harassment by enemy indicate a life setting away from the worship location, where the poet suffers, separated from Yahweh's help.

provide us with a hermeneutical key for unlocking the profound significance of the psalms as prayers for both Jews and Christians; in this case, the imprecatory psalms.

In the first place, the incipits suggest a historical circumstance in which the specific psalm would be appropriate, thus providing a clue to its interpretation and even ongoing application.²⁰ For instance, the superscription of Ps 56 mentioned above refers one immediately to David's encounter with the Philistines in Gath in 1 Sam 21:11–15 and thus can shed some light in interpreting the content of the psalm, which is evidently a lament psalm of one beset by foes. Reading or praying this psalm against that historical setting helps one to appreciate the anguished tone of suffering and strident pleas for help by David; it becomes appropriate for everyone beleaguered by persecution and woes. Likewise, psalms of communal lament suggest a background of real enemies, especially those psalms that seem to reminisce on the devastation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587/6, namely Pss 44, 74, and 79. Ps 83 explicitly mentions the names of Israel's oppressive enemies that scheme evil plots against the Lord's people: Edom, the Ishmaelites, Moab, Ammon, etc.²¹

Secondly, David is known in the biblical tradition as a composer of songs for Israel. He is called the pleasant (singer) of Israel's songs (נעים זמירות ישראל) in 2 Sam 23:1. Postexilic literature remembers him as the one responsible for the installation of

²⁰ See Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 26; see 53–54 for a practical illustration with Ps 51; Anderson, “King David and the Psalms of Imprecation,” 271–279.

²¹ Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:197.

Levitical singers and musicians in Jerusalem (1 Chr 15:16–24), and his directions for worship were still followed in the Second Temple era (Neh 12:24).²² Moreover, the historical narratives recorded a number of poems of lament and thanksgiving attributed to David, some of which appear very similar to some of the poems in the Psalter (2 Sam 1:17–27; 2 Sam 22//Ps 18; 1 Chr 16:8–36).²³

Theological Perspectives on the Imprecations

A major theological difficulty with the imprecatory psalms is twofold, namely the ethical and liturgical challenges they pose to both Jew and Christian. How can a passionate spirit of vengeance and a vehement call for the adversary's extermination be reconciled with the command to love one's enemy (as clearly stated in Lev 19:17–18 and Matt 5:44)? Are the psalmist's foes necessarily God's enemies too? Are these strident cries for retaliation and retribution congruent with other inspired portions of the Psalter that elevate God's attributes, or should they be excised from the Psalms? What are the functions and theological implications of the imprecatory psalms in the Old Testament, and should we pray or ignore them?²⁴

Curiously, while the Roman Catholic Church in its reform of the divine liturgy insists that the psalms must remain the substance

²² Vos, "Ethical Problem," 128; Shepherd, "The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms," 32.

²³ Shepherd, "The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms," 32.

²⁴ Cf. Vos, "Ethical Problem," 124; Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 2;

of the Liturgy of the Hours, this is not without some censorship of particular psalms or sections of psalms. The Divine Office omits psalms 58, 83, and 109 entirely, along with verses from about nineteen others. The *General Instructions on the Liturgy of the Hours* §131 gives the reason for this censorship as follows:

Three psalms are omitted from the current psalter because of their imprecatory character. these are Ps 57, Ps 82 and Ps 108. For similar reasons verses from several psalms are passed over; these verses are noted at the beginning of the psalm. *Such omissions are made because of certain psychological difficulties*, even though the imprecatory psalms themselves may be found quoted in the New Testament, e.g. Rev 6:10, and in no way are intended to be used as curses.²⁵

A similar “psychological difficulty” with praying the imprecatory psalms finds resonance in Erich Zenger’s book, where he recalls the reservations of Gemma Hinricher, prioress of the Carmelite convent at Dachau, Germany in 1980:

As early as 1965, we received permission to pray the Office in the vernacular. However, this vernacular prayer, which had become necessary and requisite for the sake of tourists, also brought with it serious problems for our recitation of prayer in choir, because of the so-called imprecatory or vengeance Psalms, and the cursing passages in a number of psalms. We were soon tempted to return to Latin, for no matter how much the vernacular

²⁵ *The Divine Office*, vol. 1 (1974), lxi. Italics mine. The Psalter in the breviary follows the LXX numbering. Thus Ps 57=Ps 58; Ps 82=Ps 83, and Ps 108=Ps 109.

brought home to us the riches of the psalms, the Latin had at least covered up the weaknesses of the psalms as prayer. In the immediate *vicinity of the concentration camp*, we felt ourselves unable to say out loud psalms that spoke of a punishing, angry God, and of the destruction of enemies, often in hideous images, and whose content was the desire for destruction and vengeance, in the presence of people who came into our church agitated and mentally distressed by their visit to the camp. It often happens that these people are not only moved by the hideousness and brutality they encounter in the documentation in the concentration camp museum and in viewing the camp itself, but also by their own feelings of hatred and revenge because of the dreadful thing that happened in this place ... Our prayer should be such that it can encourage people to reconciliation, forgiveness, and love ... In our praying and singing together, Jesus Christ is experienced as present, as the loving one whose reconciling and forgiving love overcame hatred. So it was clear to us that, for us today, all the biblical-theological, literary, and hermeneutical objections to the elimination of the cursing psalms and passages were of no avail. For us here, pastoral service to people who visit this place and this church comes first ...”²⁶

The prioress of Dachau is evidently concerned about the pastoral needs of the tourists who visited their oratory. However, can these arguments that are based on ‘religious sensitivity’ be sustained from a theological standpoint? Such protests and censorship of

²⁶ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 20–21. Emphasis in the original. The text is quite lengthy, but I decided to shorten it for the purposes of our limited scope.

the psalms deemed unworthy of public worship and devotion have not escaped scholarly scrutiny.²⁷ The fundamental hermeneutical challenge posed by the imprecatory psalms or cursing sections in the Psalter as a whole appears most acute when they are interpreted as texts produced in pre-Christian Judaism, and when a sharp distinction is made between the Old and New Testaments. In this case, the Psalter is subjected to “the judgment seat of the New Testament christology and ecclesiology, there to be “Christianized” or even rejected as partly “unchristian.””²⁸ This approach, known as “modern dispensationalism,” views the psalms as belonging to the dispensation of law, and not to the dispensation of grace and love ushered in by Christ.²⁹ According to this interpretation, David (supposing him as the author of the imprecatory psalms) lived under the dispensation of the Old Covenant where retaliation was the norm, whereas Christ has ushered in the Gospel of love and forgiveness for Christians.³⁰

²⁷ See the introductory remarks in Shepherd, “The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms” 27; Patrick D. Miller, “The Hermeneutics of Imprecation,” in *Theology in the Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Gillespie*, ed. Wallace M. Alston, Jr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 153–163, at 153.

²⁸ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 13.

²⁹ Vos, “Ethical Problem,” 124–125; Laney, “A Fresh Look,” 38–39; Pauls, “The Imprecations of the Psalmists,” 76–77.

³⁰ Other proposed solutions of the imprecatory psalms include a more philosophical approach: as prophetic; or to be understood in a spiritual or figurative sense; or as expressing the humanity of the psalmist devoid of inspiration. See Vos, “Ethical Problem,” 124–130; Laney, “A Fresh Look,” 37–40; Jack P. Lewis, “Difficult Texts from the Psalms and Proverbs” in *Difficult Texts of the Old Testament Explained*, ed. Wendell Winkler (Hurst, TX: Winkler Publications, 1982), 311–323, esp. 315–317; Pauls, “The Imprecations of the Psalmists,” 76–78.

This dispensational interpretation, which regards the psalms of imprecation as “pre-Christian,” “unchristian,” or even as “less than Christian” is no doubt a revival of Marcion’s heresy for which he was condemned in the second century for creating a sharp discontinuity between the God of Judaism and the one of Christianity.³¹ There is no gainsaying that dispensationalism undermines the inspiration of Scripture as a canon that includes both Old and New Testaments. Moreover, it ignores the fact that the Old Testament upholds the ethics of love, forgiveness, and non-retaliation (Lev 19:17–18; Prov 17:9), exemplified in the life of king David (1 Sam 24; 26) and that, conversely, the New Testament contains a few cases of imprecations (Gal 1:8–9; 1 Cor 16:22). Thus, precisely because the imprecatory psalms are recorded and preserved as part of the canon of Scripture, they are to be taken seriously and interpreted within the context of the overall Psalter and the broader framework of the Old Testament.³² Against this backdrop, the question is how we should interpret these psalms of imprecation theologically as part of the canon of Scripture and appropriate them as Christian prayer without excising any part of them out of ‘religious sensitivity’.

Towards a Hermeneutic of the Psalms of Imprecation

There is no doubt that prayers for revenge do not accord with the injunction of Christ to love one’s enemy (Matt 5:44–48; Luke 6:27–36), nor is it congruous with the Torah prohibition of hatred and retaliation in Lev 19:17–18 (cf. Exod 23:4–5). However, in order to understand these psalms that apparently seethe with

³¹ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 14.

³² Shepherd, “The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 32.

undiluted emotions of vengeance and bitterness against adversaries, one should recall that they are hinged on divine justice and retribution. Mowinckel reminds us that in ancient Israel, the quest for vengeance indicates that the sense of justice is operative and may not be violated. That Yahweh is called upon to avenge the wronged person is anchored on the belief that God will not allow justice to be violated, even outside the confines of Israel, as sovereign Lord of all creation.³³ As discussed earlier, the Psalter reveals a dramatic conflict between the righteous and the wicked, the powerless poor and the powerful rich, Israel as God's people and other nations often depicted as "impious" or "idolatrous". That this conflict is ultimately to be decided by a "God of vengeance" who fights on the side of the righteous/poor/Israel is the string that joins all the individual psalms together. This is why the lament psalms, especially those with imprecations, are saturated with theological themes of Torah.

Thus, in invoking God for assistance, the petitioner often appeals to the covenant theology of Yahweh's relationship with his chosen people, Israel. Interpreters have long noted this covenantal basis for cursing Israel's enemies within the broader framework of the Old Testament. While the term "covenant" (ברית) is used sparingly in the psalms as well as in prophetic literature, occurring only nineteen times in the Psalter, both psalms and prophets were clearly operating within the covenant

³³ Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:203–204.

framework.³⁴ It is instructive that the Abrahamic covenant in Gen 12:1–3 promised blessing (ברכה) on Abraham and his posterity and cursing (אָר) on those who cursed Abraham and his progeny, and made Abraham the source of blessing for the whole earth. Not only did God make Abraham a paradigm of universal blessing, but he also became a channel of divine imprecation on whoever would curse him. The theology of covenant is more fully developed in the Sinaitic stipulations of Exod 20–23, and the blessings and curses in Lev 26 and Deut 27–29.³⁵ Thus, when the psalmist (as an individual or as the nation) invokes a curse on his enemies, he expresses the faith that God will fulfill his promise to the chosen community in accordance with the terms of the covenant. As Laney puts it, “the cries for judgment in the imprecatory psalms are appeals to Yahweh to carry out His judgment against those who would curse the nation—judgment in accordance with the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant.”³⁶

In addition, God’s covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 (the promise of Davidic dynasty and election of Zion) both ties in with and extends the election of Abraham in Genesis and continues the theme of Israel’s chosenness as God’s own possession; a theme that Solomon expands in his Temple dedication prayer in 1 Kings 8. Remarkably, Ps 89 is a thoroughgoing reminiscence of God’s covenant with David as the basis of the petitioner’s plea for help, evidently hinged on 2 Samuel 7: “I have made a covenant with

³⁴ Allan M. Harman, “The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter” *The Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 65–72, at 65.

³⁵ Harman, “The Continuity of the Covenant Curses,” 68.

³⁶ See Laney, “A Fresh Look,” 42.

my chosen; I have sworn to David my servant ... I will beat to pieces his foes before him, and smite those that hate him... Where are your former *mercies* (חסדֶיךָ),³⁷ O Lord, which you swore to David?” (Ps 89:2, 24). In many instances, when the psalmist implores Yahweh for help against his adversaries, he undergirds his petitions with covenant motifs, including “your servants,” “your people,” “your inheritance,” “your anointed,” “your sanctuary” (Pss 74:2; 79:10, 13).³⁸ That the psalmist identifies himself as the Lord’s “servant” and Israel as God’s “people” indicates that he is appealing to a known practice that is based on the covenant with Abraham and David.

Moreover, the lamenters often recall Yahweh’s magnificence towards the chosen people from times past by means of covenant motifs: “O God, we heard with our own ears, our fathers related to us, how you indeed worked in their days, in days long past ... all this have befallen us though we have not forgotten you, though we had not been false to *your covenant* (בבריתך) ... Arise; Come to our help! Redeem us because of your *kindness* (חסדֶיךָ)” (Ps 44:2, 18, 27). Even a psalm that apparently seethes with outrageous vituperations against the adversary, like Ps 109 (one of the psalms omitted in the divine office!) still employs covenant themes that appeal to Yahweh’s fidelity and loving kindness (חסד).³⁹ This psalm, like many others, ends with an anticipation of praise and thanksgiving, because the petitioner is assured of being heard: “I will thank the Lord exceedingly with my mouth;

³⁷ חסד can be interpreted as “kindness,” “mercy,” “love”.

³⁸ Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 1:204.

³⁹ Ps 109:21, 26.

in the midst of many (people), I will give him praise!” (Ps 109:30).

It is noteworthy that the lamenter does not call for the extermination of enemies out of personal vindictiveness nor bitter malice, but precisely because they defy Yahweh’s sovereign authority over creation and disrupt the moral order. That is, their wickedness and assaults on the life of the innocent have caused a moral breakdown and chaos in human society. Thus, the petitioner presses an urgent call on Yahweh as the God of justice to restore harmony in the world by taking vengeance on the wrong-doers and vindicating the righteous. The petitioner is convinced that Yahweh’s own cause is at stake since any assault on any human being is ultimately a sin against God himself. Thus, he desperately implores Yahweh to act decisively so that the wicked will acknowledge divine sovereignty, so that “people may say, ‘Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.’” (Ps 58:12). In this way, both parties—the righteous and the wicked—“will know that God is concerned with justice and that he executes judgment on the earth.”⁴⁰

The Psalms of Imprecation and Our Own Context

In view of the foregoing analysis, what then should be the proper attitude of readers and interpreters of the imprecatory psalms? We have already seen that the psalms of imprecation are based on covenant theology and that the imprecator can express curses

⁴⁰ Laney, “A Fresh Look,” 41.

on his foes in accordance with the covenant terms in the Hebrew Bible. Nonetheless, are the psalmist's adversaries necessarily Yahweh's enemies as well? This pertinent question has not escaped the attention of critical psalm scholarship. In order to address it, there is a need to emphasize that the adversaries in question are depicted as Yahweh's own "enemies" and not just those of the psalmist. This is a significant point worth noting, especially when reading or praying the imprecatory psalms, bearing in mind their rootedness in the lament tradition.

As discussed earlier, not only do the opponents mock and wound the lamenter with all kinds of false accusations and attacks, but they also defy God. They fail to acknowledge that there is a God who executes judgment on the earth, who rewards righteousness and punishes wickedness, a God of justice who is in absolute control of world affairs. Hence the petitioner calls on God to destroy the wicked (*rešā'im*) because "they have rebelled against you!" (Ps 5:11; cf. 79:12). Noteworthy in this regard is Ps 139:19–24 where the petitioner is convinced that the enemies whose destruction are called for are not just "my/our" foes but are in fact God's adversaries: "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not feel disgust at those who rise up against you?" (v. 21). And it is on this ground that the psalmist calls for divine action; Yahweh's honour and cause are at stake. Unfortunately, Ps 139 is one of the psalms that has not escaped censorship in the Liturgy of the Hours, where vv. 19–24 have been excised.⁴¹

⁴¹ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 28–34 argues vehemently against the excision of vv. 19–22 from the Liturgy of the Hours since it distorts the rich poetic and theological import of the psalm as a whole.

Miller addresses the question of vengeance in the psalms from a twofold perspective. Using the same Ps 139:19–24 as his point of departure, he argues that one's enemies are *not always necessarily* God's enemies.⁴² The contemporary reader or one who prays the imprecatory psalms should not equally appropriate them without proper discernment since erroneous human judgment could confuse one's enemies as those of God. In other words, vengeful bitterness or personal vindictiveness could make one use the psalms against one's own *personal* enemies, whereas the targets may be otherwise innocent. This is particularly significant for the context of the church in Africa (especially Nigerian!) where people sometimes invoke the "Holy Ghost fire" against their own perceived enemies to destroy them. (As an aside, should the Christian even have enemies?) On the other hand, Miller points out that this does not preclude the fact that God does have enemies. All those who oppose Yahweh's plan by the use of oppression, violence, and wickedness to distort peace and harmony in the world that God has created as good constitute themselves as God's adversaries. Precisely because they continue to defy Yahweh's authority by persisting in flagrant and presumptuous wickedness, the psalmist could call on God to act so that moral order will be restored, and so that evildoers will acknowledge his sovereignty of justice and righteousness (Ps 83:16–18).

As several scholars have aptly indicated, it is significant that the psalmist's quest for vengeance is both addressed to Yahweh and handed over to Yahweh as the sole dispenser of reward and

⁴² See Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 150–153.

retribution.⁴³ It is perfectly normal for rational humans to express revolt at the overwhelming number of violent crimes, bloodletting, poverty, structures of oppression, exploitation, corruption, and wanton atrocities perpetrated by insensitive governments and individuals in our contemporary world, especially in Africa. When the victims of these oppressive structures and crimes employ the imprecations of the psalter, they call on God to render justice in a world of stark injustice. For Zenger, when the lamenters call on their God as righteous Judge, they avert vengeance from themselves and hand it over to a God of justice who considers, decides, and punishes, not out of a pleasure in punishing, but rather to restore and defend the damaged order.⁴⁴ But this also means that God may decide to forego the deserved punishment, even after judgement has been announced. This is the theological message of Jonah's book, since divine judgement does not also desire the death of sinners but their repentance, as is clearly illustrated in Ezekiel 18 and 33.⁴⁵

The fact that the psalmist hands over his rage to God equally means he recognizes that he should not take vengeance into his own hands. Thus, Ps 94 begins with an ardent cry: "O Lord, avenging God; avenging God shine forth! Judge of the earth, arise! Unleash retribution upon the proud!" The one calling on God here recognizes that vengeance is God's prerogative and not

⁴³ Pauls, "The Imprecations of the Psalmists," 76–77; Miller, "The Hermeneutics of Imprecation," 161–163; DeClaissé-Walford, "The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms," 91–92

⁴⁴ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 71.

⁴⁵ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 72.

ours. Even when the imprecations are expressed with such unmitigated cries of vengeance as seen in Ps 109:6–19, the lamenter ultimately hands them over to God: “This will be the lot of my accusers from the Lord, those speaking evil against me.” (Ps 109:20). Such giving over means that the petitioner is no longer free to take revenge on their own, but must allow God to act in his own sovereign freedom. Ps 109 acknowledges that Yahweh is a God of justice as well as a God full of gracious divine attributes. As Miller puts it, “the human word that calls for God’s judgment or vengeance cannot become the human deed of vengeance. The prayer for God’s vengeance is once again the prayer for God’s will to be done.”⁴⁶ We should bear this in mind, as we exercise our right to be outraged at injustices and oppressive structures in society, and do our best to create a just society.

In view of the foregoing, how then should the Jew and Christian appropriate the imprecatory psalms as part of inspired Scripture without excising any part of them in personal prayers or liturgical use, and without using them as weapons of revenge against personal enemies? First of all, Zenger argues pointedly that no psalm, in part or in whole, should be excised from the Psalter without damaging the literary and theological value of the psalm itself and the overall Psalter. As noted above, the psalms of imprecation form an intricate part of the Psalter and thus should be interpreted in relation to other psalms and within the Old Testament covenant theological framework in order to have a more balanced grasp of their theology.⁴⁷ Secondly, we have seen

⁴⁶ Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 153.

⁴⁷ Harman, “The Continuity of the Covenant Curses,” 72.

that reading the psalms in a certain historical context, especially those with superscriptions, can provide a hermeneutical insight into how they can be understood by today's audience, especially the imprecatory psalms.⁴⁸ Thirdly, Christians cannot subject some of the psalms to a christological scrutiny that judges them as either "pre-Christian" or "unchristian" without violating their status as inspired Scripture and even risking the danger of Marcionism. Finally, the one reading the psalms of imprecations should bear in mind that such prayers for vindication are not calls for revenge but appeals to the God of justice to act decisively as sovereign Lord of all creation.

⁴⁸ DeClaissé-Walford, "The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms," 91. For a more nuanced view, see Anderson, "King David and the Psalms of Imprecation," 279.