

An Overview of the Study of Imprecatory Psalms: Reformed and Evangelical Approaches to the Interpretation of Imprecatory Psalms

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at some interpretive issues regarding the so-called imprecatory psalms, focusing on the debate within reformed and evangelical circles. Introductory issues regarding these psalms abound, such as their definition and scope and the question whether they constitute a specific genre or subgenre within the Psalter. More important are hermeneutical issues regarding the rationale or motivation behind these psalms, namely the reasons why they were written in the first place. These issues also inform the relevance for the present day reader, specifically the New Testament reader, or vice versa: the perceived relevance informs the interpreter's stance on the rationale of these psalms. The article argues that reformed and evangelical scholars' interpretations of imprecation Psalms are largely led by their presuppositions about the relation between the Old and New Testament. The article concludes by suggesting that the deadlock in approaches could be resolved by an in-depth exegesis of the specific psalms taking into account the divergent presuppositions of contemporary interpreters.

KEYWORDS: Imprecatory Psalms; Evangelical Approach; Reformed Approach; Covenant; Prophetic Books.

A INTRODUCTION

The book of the Psalms is one of the most read and most popular books of the Bible in the church. It is often used for devotional readings in the life of the church and believers.

Despite its popularity, the study of the Psalter is problematic in academic circles because of the numerous questions surrounding authorship, setting, composition, interpretation, theology, and application.¹ Not least of all is the

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problem of the interpretation and use of the “imprecatory psalms.” There are few areas in Old Testament theology that have puzzled scholars as much as the “imprecatory psalms.”

This article gives an overview of the state of the debate regarding the imprecatory psalms. The authors summarise the major views on the study of imprecatory psalms, thereby providing a platform for the reader to understand the hermeneutical premises and theological implications of how the imprecatory psalms have been interpreted. The article concludes by suggesting that the deadlock in approaches could be resolved by an in-depth exegesis of the specific psalms taking into account the divergent presuppositions of contemporary interpreters.

Before discussing views on the basis of imprecatory psalms (section D) and their applicability in the light of the New Testament (section E), two introductory questions are raised regarding the definition of these psalms (section B) and their scope (section C).

B DEFINITION OF IMPRECATORY PSALMS

The characterising element of imprecatory psalms is a cry for divine vengeance, an appeal to God to pour out his wrath on the psalmist’s enemies. The psalmist asks or prays “for judgment on the wicked, usually the perceived enemies of the psalmist.”² Some psalms “contain extremely harsh judgments upon the enemies of the psalmists.”³

Scholars are divided on whether the term “imprecatory psalms” is an appropriate or accurate description of psalms containing imprecations. A number of scholars seem comfortable with the use of the term “imprecatory psalms” when referring to such psalms.⁴ However, some scholars argue that it

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¹ John H. Walton, “Psalms,” in *A Survey of the Old Testament*, ed. Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 341.

² Cyril Okorocho, “Psalms,” in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 606.

³ Hassel C. Bullock. *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 228.

⁴ For example Johannes Geerhardus Vos, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” *WTJ* 4 (1942): 123-38; Carl J. Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 35-44; John N. Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics” (PhD. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001), 1-205; John N. Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (2002): 166-85; Cyril Okorocho, “Psalms,” 606.

is inaccurate to speak of these psalms as “imprecatory psalms.”⁵ Martin says that the phrase “imprecatory psalms” is misleading because it seems to imply that imprecation forms a major element in these psalms, yet this is not always the case. In many instances, the imprecatory element is but a minor element, embodied in a single line or a single verse.⁶ Martin argues that it is more accurate to speak of “imprecations in the psalms” rather than of “imprecatory psalms.”⁷ In his monograph on these psalms, Zenger doubts whether the terms “psalms of cursing” and “imprecatory psalms” are appropriate because these psalms “do not curse; they present passionate lament, petition, and desires before God.”⁸

In this article, the term “imprecatory psalm” is used for Psalms where imprecations represent the major thrust of a particular psalm. The fact that these imprecations may also reflect lament, petition, and desires before God, does not negate the imprecatory character of a psalm.

C THE SCOPE OF IMPRECATORY PSALMS

There are various opinions with regards to the number of imprecatory psalms. Martin argues that there are “not more than 18 psalms in the whole Psalter that contain any element of imprecation.”⁹ Luc considers Martin’s calculation to be conservative, so he suggests that there are “28 psalms that contain one or more verses of imprecation.”¹⁰ VanGemeran lists 24 psalms in the category of imprecatory psalms.¹¹ Day suggests that there are 14 psalms which may rightly be classified as imprecatory psalms.¹²

The following psalms in the Psalter are generally considered to be imprecatory psalms in the sense that a major part of each psalm contains imprecations: Psalms 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109 and 137. Simango

⁵ See Chalmers Martin, “Imprecations in the Psalms,” in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 113; Ernst R. Wendland, *Analyzing the Psalms* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1998), 48; Hendrik G. L. Peels, *Shadow Sides: the Revelation of God in the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 90.

⁶ Chalmers Martin, “Imprecations in the Psalms,” 113.

⁷ Chalmers Martin, “Imprecations in the Psalms,” 113.

⁸ Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), viii.

⁹ Chalmers Martin, “Imprecations in the Psalms,” 113.

¹⁰ Alex T. Luc, “Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms,” *JETS* 42 (1999): 395–96.

¹¹ Willem A. VanGemeran, “Psalms,” vol. 5 of *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 832.

¹² Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” 170. Day mentions the following psalms as imprecatory psalms: Psalms 7, 35, 52, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137 and 140.

identifies imprecatory Psalms by considering the number of scholars who classify them as imprecatory psalms since more research regarding the criteria for identifying these psalms is necessary.¹³ He regards the imprecatory psalms as individual or communal laments.¹⁴

The mere definition of imprecatory psalms and the scope of these psalms make the study of these psalms a challenging enterprise.

The study of these Psalms becomes all the more an intricate task when the rationale for imprecations is considered and when these Psalms are regarded in the light of the New Testament. The subsequent two sections give a brief survey and assessment of solutions offered by scholars to these two issues:

- The basis of the imprecatory prayers in the psalms; and
- The relevance of imprecatory psalms to the New Testament believer.

D THE BASIS OF IMPRECATORY PRAYERS IN THE PSALMS

Every genre has its distinctive features, setting, and rationale. The latter are the underlying reasons, the rationale or motivation behind the genre. The question to be answered is what moved the psalmists of imprecatory prayers if these psalms are to be regarded as a separate genre or sub-genre to pray for vengeance.

It is also important to note that imprecatory prayers were fairly common in the Ancient Near East. Although the Old Testament imprecatory psalms are specifically set within the framework of monotheism and the worship of Yahweh, they may reflect not only many traits but also motivations of general Ancient Near Eastern imprecations.

Various solutions are offered by commentators to the questions why psalmists appealed to God to pour out his wrath on their enemies:

1 Personal sentiment

Through the ages, there has been a popular belief that words as such can cause harm to those against whom the words are directed. Words were thought to have effectuating power. One may regard the curses directed at enemies as an outpouring of personal resentment and a means of destroying the enemies. If the biblical psalms are interpreted as products of popular belief or reflections of Ancient Near Eastern exorcism, the interpretation of the imprecations will run

¹³ Daniel Simango, "An Exegetical Study of Imprecatory Psalms in the Old Testament" (PhD. diss., North-West University, Potchefstroom, 2012), 18, 284.

¹⁴ Daniel Simango, "An Exegetical Study of Imprecatory Psalms in the Old Testament," 267.

along these lines. Rudolf Kittel argues that imprecatory psalms express sentiments that originated from men who thought of revenge.¹⁵ This view implies the imprecations in the psalms are personal sentiments and should not be treated as inspired words.¹⁶ The imprecation cannot be applied to someone other than the intended person in his/her personal context.

Evangelical scholars who adhere to the premise that these psalms belong to God’s inspired Word and that the imprecations in the psalms are specifically directed to God as the champion of the aggrieved, generally do not regard the imprecations merely as the personal sentiment of the psalmists. However, there are some scholars who point out that one must distinguish between the canonical setting of the psalms and specific statements in the psalms. According to these scholars, the imprecatory psalms still reflect the psalmists’ own sentiments and real intention to do their personal enemies harm.

According to Peter Craigie, the argument is that the psalmists made these utterances when facing extremely painful realities of human life. Craigie views imprecations as “not the oracles of God”¹⁷ but as “Israel’s response to God’s revelation”¹⁸ in the context of suffering, pain, and suffering.¹⁹ Therefore he sees the imprecatory psalms as “expressions of vindictiveness”²⁰ and he does not regard them as “holy.”²¹ Clive Staple Lewis, in a similar vein, writes that the language of imprecatory psalms breathes of “refined malice” and borders on being “devilish.”²² William Holladay echoes the same point when he argues that the imprecations display “a very different spirit” to the teaching of the New Testament.²³ The New Testament exhorts believers to love their enemies, but the psalmists hate their enemies and their sin instead of distinguishing the sinner from sin.²⁴

¹⁵ Rudolf Kittel, *The Scientific Study of the Old Testament* (New York: Putnam, 1910), 143.

¹⁶ See Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” 38.

¹⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50. Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 41.

¹⁸ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 41.

¹⁹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 41.

²⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 41.

²¹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 41.

²² Clive Staples Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1958), 23-25.

²³ William L. Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians may Hear the Old Testament Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995), 308.

²⁴ William L. Holladay, 308.

2 Prophetic revelation

Some scholars see the psalmic imprecations as prophetic predictions, thus implying that these are divine announcements and not personal sentiments. When interpreting Psalm 109, Herbert Lockyer argues that the curses should not be viewed as imprecations but predictions of the wicked.²⁵ This view implies that the psalmists were more than poets; they were also prophets. Alex Luc points out that David, who is connected to many of the imprecatory psalms, is called a prophet in Acts 2:30 and 4:25.²⁶ As Laney points out, this view seems to put the responsibility for the imprecation on God and it relieves the psalmist from the charge of speaking from a vindictive and revengeful spirit.²⁷ St. Augustine considers the imprecations in Psalm 109 as future predictions "under the appearance of wishing evil"²⁸

Advocates of this view often argue that some of the imprecations in the Psalms are quoted in the New Testament (Ps 69:25 and Ps 109:8 in Acts 1:20; and Ps 69:22-23 in Rom 11:9-11) and that these quotations characterise the imprecations as prophetic of the messianic age. Alex Luc mentions that the prophetic role of the psalmists is recognised by the New Testament (e.g. Ps 41:9 in John 13:18 and Matt 26:23-24; Ps 35:19 in John 15:25).²⁹ Franz Delitzsch interprets the imprecations in Psalm 109 as foretelling the future being a "mirror of warning to the enemies and persecutors of Christ and His Church."³⁰

Chalmer Martin, although he entertains a covenantal approach (see section D.2), also calls the psalms lyric poems composed under the influence of the Spirit of inspiration, which are part of God's revelation of himself. Therefore from these psalms, we may learn how God feels towards persistent sinners. David, as Peter informed his audience on the day of Pentecost, was a prophet. David was a prophet in the wider sense of being a spokesman for God and an official teacher of his will. So in the imprecatory psalms, David is warning men of divine wrath against sin and against persistent sinners.³¹

²⁵ Herbert Lockyer, *Psalms: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 446-47.

²⁶ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 398.

²⁷ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 39.

²⁸ Augustine. *Saint Augustine: Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, trans. H.M. Wilkins (London Oxford, 1853), 5.213.

²⁹ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 401.

³⁰ Delitzsch, Franz. 1978. *Commentary on the Old Testament in ten volumes. Volume 5. Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 177.

³¹ Martin, "Imprecations in the Psalms," 128-129.

A futuristic approach does not necessarily seek the fulfilment of the imprecations in the New Testament. God's justice calls for fulfilment even in the Old Testament and even more during the lifetime of the suppliant.

Luc suggests the imprecations in the Psalms should be interpreted as prophetic judgments against the wicked. He argues that the "language and content of these imprecations are not very different from the direct or indirect judgment speeches of the prophets."³²

Luc argues that his approach is supported in three ways.³³ Firstly, his approach is supported by the *prophetic role* of the psalmists. The fact that psalmists were writers does not mean that they could not be prophets. The approach that dissects the prophetic speeches and the Psalms into two very distinct genres imposes arbitrary patterns on these biblical texts.³⁴ He further argues that recent studies have shown that the imprecatory psalms are prophetic in nature and parallel to prophetic writings. He cites Tournay who says the "prophetic dimension" of the psalmist has too often been neglected in modern psalm studies, a dimension long recognised by the Judeo-Christian tradition.³⁵ For example, with regards to Psalm 14:1, the Targum interprets that the psalmist David is "in the spirit of prophecy" and in the interpretation of Psalm 46:1 the same description is used to describe the sons of Korah. The *Midrash Tehillim* says that the sons of Korah predicted the future.³⁶ Luc also points out that among the Dead Sea scrolls, 11QPs acknowledges that David "uttered through prophecy which was given him from before the Most High." Luc also points out that David uses prophetic language similar to that of many prophets. For example, David makes such statements as "the Spirit of the Lord spoke through me" (2 Sam 23:2; cf. 1 Chr 22:8; 28:6) and "the hand of the Lord was upon me" (1 Chr 28:19). Like the prophets, David is called "the man of God" (Neh 12:24, 26). In 1 Chr 25:2, 5 the other psalmists (e.g. Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun) are said to have prophesied.³⁷ Again, Luc observes that like in the prophetic books, there are psalms which contain divine oracles (e.g. Psalm 89) and the oracles are introduced in a similar way to prophetic speeches such as "says the Lord" (Ps 12:5; 110:1), "God says" (Ps 50:16) and "God spoke" (Ps 60:6). He argues that all these similarities show that psalmists were prophets and they had a prophetic role. Luc also compares judgment predictions in prophetic utterances with the imprecations in the Psalms and he discovers a

³² Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 400.

³³ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 400-5.

³⁴ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 400.

³⁵ Raymond Jacques Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 31-2.

³⁶ See Amos Chakam, *Sepher Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986), 13-5.

³⁷ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 401.

striking similarity between the two.³⁸ He argues that "we should not place a sharp distinction in function between the imprecation and judgment predictions."³⁹

Secondly, the imprecations have many parallels with the *prophetic speeches* in language and function. Luc gives a list of verses from the prophetic books that contain imprecations parallel to the psalmic imprecations (e.g. Isa 26:11; Jer 11:20-22; Jer 17:18; Jer 18:21 cf. Ps 109; Isa 14:20-21; 47:3; 44:11 cf. Jer 50:27; Dan 4:23; Jer 13:10; Mal 2:12).⁴⁰

Thirdly, like other prophetic judgments the psalmic imprecations *depend on prior biblical teaching* for their authority, especially that of the Pentateuch. Luc argues that behind many imprecations in the Psalms is the concern for social justice and the destiny of Israel amongst hostile nations. These two concerns are also echoed in the prophetic books and the Pentateuch. The covenants serve as the general biblical basis for the imprecations when the concerns are violated (e.g. Ps 58:6-7; 109:16; cf. 10:9-11, 18; 12:5; 55:9-11; 94:5-7; 79:6, 12, 2,7; cf. 9:17-18; 83:2-5; 129:1 and 137:3, 7).⁴¹ Frequently, the psalmist's desire is for God's glory to be manifested because his enemies have ridiculed and reviled God for not protecting his people (e.g. Ps 28:5; 64:5; 69:6; 74:10; 79:6-10; 83:2; 109:27; 137:3).⁴²

3 Covenant curses

Another line of thought is that the covenant underpins these psalmic curses. Since the covenant involves promises and warnings which will be fulfilled through future blessings and curses, this view is similar to that of prophetic revelation (see section D.2). Any injustice done to Yahweh's covenant people, a people regarded as his possession, is a transgression against him as the Great King. Imprecations are appeals to the Great King to uphold his covenant rights by executing justice.

According to Carl Laney, the basis for imprecations in the Psalms is the covenant.⁴³ Laney argues that "the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3) promised blessing on those who blessed Abraham's posterity, and cursing on those who would curse."⁴⁴ Since the psalmist was Abraham's posterity he had the right to pray curses on Israel's enemies. Therefore, the imprecations in the psalms are "appeals for Yahweh" to judge those who curse his people.

³⁸ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 400-2.

³⁹ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 402.

⁴⁰ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 403-5.

⁴¹ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 405.

⁴² Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 405.

⁴³ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 41

⁴⁴ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 41-42

Judgment comes on Israel’s enemies “in accordance with the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant.”⁴⁵

Allan Harman also argues that the imprecations in the psalms are Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenant curses that have been included in the in Psalter (i.e. the songbook of Israel) since some of the imprecatory psalms reflect covenant theology and structure.⁴⁶ He uses Psalms 5 and 109 to illustrate his point. He demonstrates that in Psalm 5, God is addressed as “my King and my God” (v. 2) and by his covenant name (vv. 6, 8, 12) which reflects the covenant structure: the relationship between God and his people, then the law of God (vv. 4-6) and finally blessings (vv. 7 & 11-12) and curses (vv. 9-10). He also points out that blessings and curses are important features of Psalm 109. For Psalm 137 Harman justifies the imprecations on the basis of prophetic texts (Hos 13:16 and Isa. 13:16), which incidentally also have a covenantal basis.⁴⁷

Several explications of psalmic imprecations in terms of covenantal curses usually point to the *pentateuchal roots* of these imprecations. John Day acknowledges the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:2-3) as the basis of the imprecations in the Psalms, but argues that the psalmic imprecations also “root their theology of cursing, of crying out for God’s vengeance, in the Torah, principally in the promise of divine vengeance expressed in the Song of Moses in Deut 32:1-43.”⁴⁸ According to Day, this theology is carried through to the end of the New Testament (Rev 15:2-4; 18:20). He discusses Pss 58, 137, and 109 and observes that they all refer to the Torah.

He argues that Ps 58 alludes to Deut 32:21-43 in three ways. Firstly in context - David felt powerless in the face of oppression and he cried in confidence to God. The same element runs strongly through the final verses of Deut 32 (vv. 36, 39, 40 and 41). Secondly, there are similar words and concepts in both passages (e.g. Ps 58:11 cf. Deut 32:37; Deut 32:39 cf. Ps 58:4). Lastly, the promise of divine vengeance in Deut 32 is central to the theology and hope of both testaments of Scripture.⁴⁹

With regards to Ps 137, Day says the severe imprecations of the psalmist are not based on revenge but the principle of divine justice in Exod 21:22-25, Lev 24:17-22 and Deut 19:16-21. He also argues that the psalmist was probably familiar with the prophecy of Jer 50-51. Moreover, the imprecation in Ps 137 is “based upon the very nature of God.... [God] is also a God of retribution” and

⁴⁵ Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” 42

⁴⁶ Allan M. Harman, “The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 66-72

⁴⁷ Harman, “The Continuity of the Covenant Curses,” 65, 69, 72.

⁴⁸ Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (2002): 168.

⁴⁹ Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” 171-2.

this is also seen in the law.⁵⁰ When commenting on the imprecations of Ps 109, Day says that they are based on the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3).⁵¹

God's justice that effects the vindication of his people is central to the covenant concept in the Old Testament. This is pointed out by two stalwarts of classical reformed theology.

Geerhardus Vos argues strongly that the imprecations in the Psalms are appeals to the justice of God and a prayer that God's justice be executed upon the wicked. Since the imprecations are inspired by the Holy Spirit, they must be regarded as free from the suspicion of immorality. They are consistent with God's nature: God is sovereign and righteous and he has the right to destroy all evil in his universe.⁵² Vos says that we should assume that the imprecatory psalms are "necessarily prayers for eternal doom of the wicked and they may also be regarded as prayers for severe temporary judgments on the enemies of God."⁵³

Chalmers Martin argues that the imprecations in the Psalms are not longings for vengeance but express the longing of Old Testament saints for the vindication of God's righteousness. The psalmists felt that their faith in God's goodness and righteousness was put to a severe strain and so they want God to reverse the situation as this would set their doubts and the doubts of others forever at rest.⁵⁴

Martin also connects the cries for vengeance to zeal for God and his *kingdom*. There is a close connection between the notion of the covenant and that of the kingdom since Yahweh, in terms of covenant terminology, is the Great King. David, as king, was a representative of God as the Great King and as such, his enemies ceased to be private enemies. They were regarded as God's enemies and of his cause on earth.⁵⁵

Still, within a covenantal framework, God's justice calls for a *sense of justice* among his covenant people, a sense of indignation and abhorrence, not only of sin but also of evil and apostasy. The enemies were fearful embodiments of wickedness. Doeg, Cush, and Ahithophel were examples of vile men in the story of David. They were characterised by falsehood, treachery, cunning, greed, hatred, cruelty, arrogance and pride.⁵⁶ The enemies in the imprecations are stereotypes of the reprobates who need to be punished

⁵⁰ Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics," 174-5.

⁵¹ Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics," 178-9.

⁵² Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 136.

⁵³ Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 137.

⁵⁴ Martin, "Imprecations in the Psalms," 120-1.

⁵⁵ Martin, "Imprecations in the Psalms," 123-4.

⁵⁶ Martin, "Imprecations in the Psalms," 124-5.

by God. Therefore, the imprecations give evidence of the fervour that God-fearing psalmists had for God's cause.

In his significant monograph about the imprecatory psalms, the Roman Catholic scholar, Erich Zenger, also argues along these lines. He contends that these psalms are laments that cry out against violence and injustice in the world. He argues that the imprecations are relevant for believers today.⁵⁷

4 Objurgations against evil spirits

It has also been suggested by some scholars that the psalmists pray curses or imprecations against spiritual forces rather than human enemies. "According to this view, evil spiritual forces are personified as evil men."⁵⁸ The imprecations are objurgations against these evil forces or spirits and are similar to exorcism. Sigmund Mowinckel interprets the imprecations in the Psalms as curses uttered against evil or demonic powers "which manifests themselves in illness and all kinds of evil"⁵⁹

5 Basis: Conclusion

Various reasons are given as to why the psalmists turned to imprecations when they were wronged, ranging from a desire to get even with their enemies to zeal for God's honour. Each of these reasons has to be subjected to the close scrutiny of an exegetical study of the imprecations in the Psalter.

Four main reasons stand out: personal sentiment (1), prophetic revelation (2), covenant curses (3), and the objurgations of evil spirits (4). The first and last of these reasons are the least plausible as a basis for biblical imprecations.

The Psalter is a reflection of the spiritual and emotional life of believers. It has often been called the "mirror of the soul."⁶⁰ In this sense, imprecatory psalms may reflect the resentment of individuals who have been wronged. Within a paradigm that recognises the Psalter as part of authoritative divine revelation, the psalms are seen as guidelines for behaviour. Psalms may depict reactions of unbelief, but also reactions that are normative. Sometimes psalmists came to a normative reaction through a process of doubt and little faith. To tell what is normative in a psalm and what not, is something that requires careful discernment from the interpreter. Merely to attribute all the

⁵⁷ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 92.

⁵⁸ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 39.

⁵⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel. *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. Daffyd R. Ap-Thomas, vol. 2 (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 48-49.

⁶⁰ See Tremper Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 75.

imprecations as vindictiveness, hatred, and malice is not plausible within such a framework. However, if the Psalter is regarded as a kaleidoscope of human experiences, it is most plausible to regard the imprecatory prayers as personal sentiment.

As Vos observes, the view that the imprecations are objurgations of evil spirits seems to be an attempt to find an easy way out by boldly explaining away the clear statements of Scripture.⁶¹ This view negates the setting in real life of the Psalms since it is perfectly obvious that the enemies of the psalmists were wicked men who slandered and did the suppliants harm. They were not mere spiritual forces.

Regarding the other two reasons given for imprecations, both agree that the psalmic imprecations, in spite of their historical context, were relevant to other contexts and may even be relevant to New Testament believers.

It is important to note that Baptist scholars like Spurgeon, Lockyer and Luc⁶² tend to favour the view that the imprecations are prophetic utterances, while Presbyterian and Reformed scholars, who emphasise the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, are inclined to view the imprecations as covenant curses. Among these Presbyterian and Reformed scholars are Vos, Martin, Harman, and Laney.⁶³ The next section will also refer to Presbyterian and Reformed scholars Lensch, and Peels.⁶⁴

The answer to the question what moved the psalmists to pray for vengeance, is thus not a very simple question to answer. As modern interpreters, we cannot question the authors themselves about their motivations. Scholars, therefore, revert to theories informed by hermeneutical premises about the continuity and discontinuity of the testaments to answer the question about the basis of the imprecations.

⁶¹ Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 42.

⁶² Herbert Lockyer was a Baptist. See <https://www.whitakerhouse.com/DeskTop.aspx?page=AuthorInfo&author=399>. Alex Luc is a Baptist too. See https://almanac.logos.com/Alex_T_Luc.

⁶³ Vos was a member of the Christian Reformed Church (<http://www.bsmi.org/vos.htm>). Martin was a member of the Presbyterian Church in the USA (<http://manuscripts.ptsem.edu/collection/154>). Harman is a member of the Presbyterian Church of Australia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allan_Harman) and Laney is the interim pastor at Proebstel Church in Vancouver (<http://www.westernseminary.edu/admissions/faculty/j-carl-laney>).

⁶⁴ Lensch is member of the Bible Presbyterian Church (<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/christopher-lensch/18/592/95b>). Beisner is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (<http://ecalvinbeisner.com/>) and Peels is a member of the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands (<http://www.tua.nl/index.php?paginaID=34>).

E RELEVANCE TO NEW TESTAMENT BELIEVERS

According to the New Testament, believers are to love their enemies (Matt 5:44), to "bless and not curse" (Rom 12:14). It has often been pointed out that the imprecatory psalms seem difficult to reconcile with this New Testament teaching.⁶⁵ Day observes that imprecatory psalms "naturally evoke a reaction of revulsion in many Christians."⁶⁶

This seemingly discrepancy between the psalmic imprecations and the New Testament teaching of love raises the question whether it is valid for New Testament believers (Christians) to use the imprecatory psalms normatively in their contemporary situation in relation to their enemies. Evangelical scholars are divided on this issue of the ethical problem of imprecatory psalms. Some regard the imprecatory prayers as irrelevant in the sense that the ethics reflected in these prayers may not be applied to New Testament believers. Others argue that the imprecatory psalms are still relevant and applicable.

1 Imprecatory prayers are irrelevant to New Testament believers

Laney argues that it is inappropriate for a believer to pray imprecatory prayers and thus to call down God's judgment on the wicked. He poses two objections: the Abrahamic Covenant and the lack of encouragement in the New Testament.⁶⁷

Laney argues that the imprecations in the Psalms are based on the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3), in which God promised to curse those who cursed Abraham's descendants. On the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant, the psalmist could ask God to effect what he had promised: cursing on those who cursed or attacked Israel.⁶⁸ Therefore, imprecatory prayers are only appropriate for national Israel on the grounds of the Abrahamic Covenant and inapplicable for New Testament believers because they are of a different covenant.

The New Testament does not encourage believers to pray imprecatory prayers. Instead, Paul exhorts believers saying, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not" (Rom 12:14). Paul also admonishes the believers saying, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom 12:19). In 2 Timothy 4:14, Paul does not pray imprecatory prayers regarding Alexander the

⁶⁵ See Albert Barnes, *Notes, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (London: Blackie & Son, 1868), xxv-xxvi; Raymond F. Surburg, "The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms," *The Springfielder*, 39 (1975): 88; Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 35.

⁶⁶ Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics," 166.

⁶⁷ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 42-44.

⁶⁸ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 41-42.

coppersmith; rather he says that "The Lord will repay him for what he has done."⁶⁹

Luc also argues that it is inappropriate for a New Testament believer to pray imprecatory prayers.⁷⁰ He sees psalmic imprecations as prophetic and therefore argues that the imprecations, just like judgment proclamations, cannot be pronounced by Christians on their contemporary enemies because of two reasons.⁷¹ Firstly, the psalmic imprecation had a historical context. "The original audience did not expect the exact terms of punishment to apply to someone other than the intended person," therefore "we should not use the exact terms on someone today."⁷²

Secondly, the prophetic views of history take cognisance of the Messianic era as the catharsis toward which all prophetic messages directly or indirectly make a contribution. Oracles of judgment must "be understood and interpreted in light of the coming of Christ, an understanding reflected in the NT."⁷³ The same is true of the psalmic imprecations. The New Testament interprets some of the imprecatory psalms of David as descriptions of the life of Christ or as prayers of Christ (e.g. Ps 69:21 in John 19:28). Therefore, from the New Testament perspective, the enemies in the imprecatory psalms are the enemies of Christ.⁷⁴ Christ teaches the believer to love his/her enemies and pray for those who persecute him/her (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:26).

2 Imprecatory prayers are relevant to New Testament believers

Geerhardus Vos says that it is right for saints to pray imprecatory prayers because these prayers, like the psalmic imprecations, are an appeal to the justice of God.⁷⁵ However, he cautions Christians not to offer petitions to God for the physical death of their enemies because they do not know which wicked persons, in the secret counsel of God, are reprobates and which are included in the election by grace.⁷⁶ Believers may pray for severe temporal judgments upon the enemies of God, but they must leave to God the application or outworking of such petitions. Christians may use imprecatory psalms in worship and may offer them as prayers to God. Vos also argues that the prayer for the death of the wicked person, who is a reprobate, is not an immoral act but a righteous one because the Kingdom of God cannot come on earth without Satan's kingdom

⁶⁹ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 44.

⁷⁰ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 408-409.

⁷¹ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 408.

⁷² Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 408.

⁷³ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 408.

⁷⁴ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 409.

⁷⁵ Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 136.

⁷⁶ Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 138.

being destroyed (as implied in the Lord's Prayer).⁷⁷ God's will cannot be done on earth without the destruction of evil, and evil cannot be destroyed without the destruction of wicked men.

Christopher Lensch argues that there is no conflict between the ethic of the Old Testament and the ethic of the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile when he addresses the believer's behaviour and attitude toward unjust, personal adversaries.⁷⁸ Jesus never set aside the *lex talionis* against social criminals who, as enemies of God, must be prosecuted.⁷⁹ Jesus himself not only pronounces a woe (a curse) upon Chorazin and Bethsaida, but he consigns Capernaum to Hades for its hard-heartedness in Matthew 11:21-24. Paul calls for a curse on anyone who does not love Christ (1 Cor 16:22) and who preaches a false Gospel (Gal 1:8, 9). He calls for justice against his and God's enemies, knowing that vengeance belongs to the Lord and that he will repay (2 Tim 4:22). John, the apostle, carries the message of the martyrs calling from the grave for retribution (Rev 6:10) (Lensch, 2000:20).⁸⁰ While Lensch maintains that the believer may pray imprecatory prayers, he acknowledges the fact that imprecatory psalms are not so unequivocally endorsed and appropriated by the Lord Jesus. At the same time, he is sure that Christ's disciples did not view these psalms as the products of an unsanctified and unchristian temper. He advises Christians not to rush and sling wholesale imprecations against God's present enemies or to be troubled when they come across imprecatory prayer. Instead, they should pray according to God's will knowing that justice belongs to him and that he will repay. He also mentions that the Christian's prayer should be "informed and shaped by God's objective Word and by an enlightened desire to seek His kingdom and His righteousness."⁸¹

Day argues that believers may pray imprecatory prayers, but the premise for his view is different from that of Vos. Because the character of God does not change, this also applies to his ethical standards. The imprecations were appropriate for Old Testament believers, therefore they are also appropriate for New Testament believers. He says that in both testaments, cursing and calling for divine vengeance are the believers' "extreme ethic and may be voiced in extreme circumstances, against hardened, deceitful, violent, immoral, unjust sinners."⁸² He argues that it is right for Christians to cry out for divine

⁷⁷ Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 138.

⁷⁸ Christopher K. Lensch, "Prayers of Praise and of Imprecation in the Psalms," *WRS Journal* 7 (2000): 20.

⁷⁹ Lensch, "Prayers of Praise and of Imprecation in the Psalms," 19.

⁸⁰ Lensch, "Prayers of Praise and of Imprecation in the Psalms," 20.

⁸¹ Lensch, "Prayers of Praise and of Imprecation in the Psalms," 20.

⁸² Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics." 171-168.

vengeance and violence because of the following reasons: ⁸³ (a) vengeance appealed for is not personally enacted. God is the one who is called upon and he is the one who executes vengeance; (b) these appeals are based on covenant promises (e.g. "whoever curses you, I will curse" Gen 12:3) and since God has given these promises to his people, it is not wrong in petitioning him to fulfil those promises; (c) both testaments record examples of God's people justly calling down curses or cries of vengeance, without any fear that God would reject their sentiments (e.g. Matt 11:20-24; 23:13-39; Day acknowledges that these examples are not identical to imprecations, but the cry of "woe" in the Ancient Near East bore a measure of semantic overlap);⁸⁴ (d) Scripture also records a situation in heaven, where there is no sin, but God's people cry out for vengeance and are comforted by the assurance of its near enactment (Rev 6:9-11).

Hendrick Peels argues that imprecatory prayers are applicable to Christians but in a different way than in the Old Testament. He points out that imprecatory prayers are not condemned in the New Testament since such prayers are cited (e.g. Ps 2, 35, 69, and 109).⁸⁵ He further asserts that the New Testament is very serious about God's wrath, judgment of sin and animosity against him.⁸⁶ The coming of Christ, the proclamation of the Gospel and the coming judgment alter the imprecatory prayers. In the preaching of the Gospel, judgment is executed by the salvation of all who believe and the total expiation of all their sins. In this present administration of mercy and grace, the Gospel spreads all over the earth and whoever rejects it will be finally judged.⁸⁷ God's judgment was executed in Christ. This explains why imprecatory prayers are less common in the New Testament in comparison to the Old Testament. In this present period, the attitude of the believers is determined by the words: "Bless those who persecute you; bless do not curse" (Rom 12:14). This does not diminish God's honour and justice, and his destruction of evil. Peels argues that imprecatory prayers are still heard in situations of emergency, even though times have changed. These prayers (in time of emergency) are prayers led by the Holy Spirit aimed at the enemies of God.⁸⁸

3 Relevance of Imprecatory prayers: Conclusion

The dividing line between evangelical and reformed scholars who favour a prophetic interpretation of the imprecatory psalms (section D, subsection 2) and

⁸³ Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics." 169.

⁸⁴ Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics." 183.

⁸⁵ Hendrik G. L. Peels, *Shadow Sides: the Revelation of God in the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 100.

⁸⁶ Peels, *Shadow Sides: the Revelation of God in the Old Testament*, 101.

⁸⁷ Peels, *Shadow Sides: the Revelation of God in the Old Testament*, 102-3.

⁸⁸ Peels, *Shadow Sides: the Revelation of God in the Old Testament*, 104.

those who favour a covenantal interpretation largely corresponds to the dividing line between scholars who insist that these psalms do not offer ethical guidelines to the New Testament believer (subsection 1) and those who do see an abiding ethic in these psalms (subsection 2).

Those who do not see a lasting relevance, also see a tension between the Old and New Testaments. Laney calls the present time the "Church-age"⁸⁹ and Luc calls it the "Messianic era."⁹⁰ These terms are commonly used in a dispensationalist hermeneutic where discontinuity between the Old and New Testament is emphasised.⁹¹ The Old Covenant, depicted in the Hebrew Bible, functioned within a specific dispensation centred around national Israel. The New Testament believer is of a different covenant, hence he/she should not make imprecatory prayers. The New Covenant in Christ reflects a new dispensation where the message of forgiveness and love are in the foreground. The curses in the psalms are only relevant as far as they were prophecies which were fulfilled in the life of the Messiah. The imprecations in the Psalms should be understood in light of Christ, and the New Testament interprets some of the imprecations of David as descriptions of the life of Christ or as prayers of Christ. Therefore, from the New Testament perspective, the psalmist's enemies in imprecatory psalms are Christ's enemies.⁹²

Reformed scholars like Vos, Lensch, and Peels emphasise the continuity between Old and New Covenant, the latter being a further administration of the same covenant.⁹³ They see no tension between the Testaments. The same blessings and curses operate in both the Old and New Testament. In the New Testament as well as in the Old Testament God is a God of justice and mercy. Imprecatory prayers, like the psalmic imprecations, are appeals to the justice of God. Because the character of God does not change, his ethical standards do not change. However, in the light of Christ's coming the administration of these aspects takes on a new form. The cries for justice in the imprecatory psalms should be regarded in the light of Christ's role as redeemer and final judge.

⁸⁹ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 42-4.

⁹⁰ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 408-9.

⁹¹ See Wayne Strickland, "The Inauguration of the Law of Christ with the Gospel of Christ: A Dispensational View" in *Five Views on the Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 262-75.

⁹² Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 409.

⁹³ See Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 136-138; Lensch, "Prayers of Praise and of Imprecation in the Psalms," 19-20; Beisner, *Psalms of Promise*, 178; Peels, *Shadow Sides: the Revelation of God in the Old Testament*, 101-103.

F CONCLUSIONS

There seems to be no consensus among scholars with regards to the exact *number* of imprecatory psalms. The reason for this is that there are no defined *criteria* for identifying these psalms. This calls for further study.

There is a wide range of views regarding the *basis* of imprecatory psalms. Scholars seem to be guided by their hermeneutical premises about the continuity and discontinuity of the testaments when they reflect on the motivations behind the imprecatory psalms.

Since no exegesis can be done free from presuppositions, one should be well aware of one's own premises when interpreting imprecatory passages in the psalms. It is also crucial to measure these presuppositions against a close reading of each of the imprecatory passages. Such a close reading should encompass a variety of approaches such as grammatical, literary, historical and canonical analysis. When commenting on imprecatory psalms, Wendland rightly observes that it is important to read them in their total context from the point of view of the cultural and religious setting of their time.⁹⁴

There is thus a need to study each imprecatory psalm to establish the basis of imprecation from the text itself and then give clarity on the "ethical problem" for New Testament believers.

Whether imprecatory psalms are really applicable to God's people of the New Testament or not, is a question that is determined to a large extent by extra-textual aspects such as one's view on the relation between the Old and New Testaments and broader ethical considerations. These issues were not directly the object of this article, but in the discussion these aspects did emerge as determinators for conflicting claims regarding the imprecatory psalms. An in-depth study of these psalms may further shed light on the extent and nature of the so-called imprecations and the apparent "ethical problem" they pose for New Testament believers.

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⁹⁴ Wendland, *Analyzing the Psalms*, 48.

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