

A critical look at imprecatory prayers in Psalm 109 and their usage among present-day Christians in Nigeria

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The Psalter is an anthology of religious poetry consisting of both songs and prayers. A category of the prayers contains imprecations, where the psalmist laments about the injustice meted out against him by his adversaries and calls on God for divine judgement. Imprecatory prayers are rooted in a deep desire for justice in situations of oppression and suffering. They express strong emotions of anger, frustration, pain, grief, anxiety and perplexity, acknowledging one's vulnerability and complete dependence on God's sovereignty. Although these prayers contain extremely harsh and hateful expressions, many Christians have embraced them as an appropriate prayer pattern when they are faced with various life challenges. This article employs the historical-critical method to interpret Psalm 109, offering insights into its application among present-day Christians in Nigeria who use it as a means of spiritual warfare against their enemies, regardless of its implications for the focal teaching of Christianity, which exhorts one to love one another, even one's enemies, and to bless instead of curse. Therefore, a theological reading of Psalm 109 is valuable in delving into the rich underlying value of imprecatory psalms in contemporary Nigerian Christian practice.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The study posits that the ongoing horrific activities of religious extremists, Fulani herdsmen and unknown gunmen in Nigeria have necessitated the increased use of imprecatory psalms by many Christians and, therefore, contributes to scholarship in the area of religion and society, theology, Old Testament studies, biblical interpretation and African biblical hermeneutics.

Keywords: The Psalter; imprecatory psalms; Psalm 109; imprecatory prayers; vengeance; justice.

Introduction

The Psalter is an anthology of religious poetry consisting of both songs and prayers. This collection of sacred poetry and prayer illuminates the core beliefs and religious experiences of the Israelites (Gillingham 1994:237). The German theologian Martin Luther expressed his profound appreciation for the Book of Psalms, describing it as the 'book of books' of the entire Bible – a 'little Bible' (Hossfeld 2014:78). In this all-encompassing book, a category commonly referred to 'imprecatory psalms' contains extreme emotional expressions of pain, sorrow and anxiety, providing insights into the complexities of human emotions and the need for justice. McCann (2008:163) asserts that 'The theme of retribution or vengeance is prominent in the psalter, and the psalms in this category are traditionally known as "imprecatory psalms" or "psalms of vengeance"'. Imprecatory psalms are typically prayers laced with laments and petitions.

Their major characteristic is a call for immediate divine judgement against enemies. Allen (1983:77) and Day (1990:136) explain that the psalmist believed that God's judgement on his adversaries had to be instantaneous if the presumed short life was to be meaningful and fulfilling. Thus, he desires that God's judgement on his enemies should be immediate, in his lifetime, rather than in the hereafter. In the psalms, the psalmist gives an explicit description of the oppression he is faced with, acknowledges his state of powerlessness and invokes God, the righteous judge, to bring divine punishment upon his enemies. He praises God by recounting his past acts of deliverance, building up his confidence in the sovereignty of God.

Imprecatory prayers are abundant in the Psalter, with the most striking examples found in Psalms 69, 109 and 137, where the psalmist implores God to vindicate him by bringing pain, harm, shame or destruction upon the psalmist's oppressors. These prayers contain unimaginable curses upon

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one's enemies and household and are premised in the context of injustice, oppression or betrayal, thereby reflecting the psalmist's deep emotional distress and defenselessness. Kuntz (2012:357) describes imprecatory psalms as fervent prayers of the powerless whose hope in divine deliverance is the sole source of their strength. Many imprecatory psalms allude to the experiences of David, particularly his struggles with betrayal, false accusations, opposition and conflicts. The psalmist expresses faith in God's righteousness and ultimate sovereignty, trusting Him to uphold justice in delivering judgement to the wicked. God is recognised as the only judge who can reward injustice justly, in the same measure as the psalmist was oppressed.

This article aims to critically examine the imprecatory prayers in the Book of Psalms, exploring their distinctiveness and theological significance. It offers discussions on various debates concerning the imprecatory language of the Psalter, particularly its use by present-day Christians, providing different perspectives through which one can approach these psalms. The primary text chosen for this study is Psalm 109, being the most elaborate text with intense imprecatory expressions. Mays (1994:348) reiterates that Psalm 109 contains the most vehement of the imprecations in the Psalter. Similarly, DeClaissie-Walfard (2020:98, 101) says that 'The psalm's imprecatory language is vivid and abundant, affirming that there is no other example of individual complaint with an equal share of imprecative and ill-wishing affirmations'.

Among many present-day Christians in Nigeria, Psalm 109 and similar texts are used as weapons of spiritual warfare against the violent attacks from extremist groups and Fulani herdsmen (Amevenku & Boaheng 2015:86; Awojobi 2024:1), whose cruel activities have led to loss of lives and destruction of properties and church buildings (Vandi 2023:39), among other things. The efforts of the government have not yielded the desired result of significantly reducing these attacks. Hence, in their state of defenselessness, Christians resort to prayer by passionately reading out the imprecations while expressing their pain and beseeching God for immediate justice. A thorough examination of the theological dimensions of these controversial prayers helps to gain a deeper understanding of their significance for Christians in contemporary Nigeria.

Literary type of Psalm 109

Psalm 109 has largely been categorised as an individual prayer of lament (Allen 1983:75; Anderson 1972a:758, 1972b:437; Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:128; Toombs 1971:292), in which the psalmist laments about his life condition and calls on God for vindication and vengeance. In a typical vengeance psalm, there are three actors: the petitioner, God and the petitioner's perceived enemies. The text, according to Exell (1978:417), Jones (1974:170) and many others, is a song of imprecation, a classic example of an imprecatory psalm in the Old Testament. Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:473) describe it as the most difficult and most embarrassing psalm

because of its raw expression of imprecations. Similarly, Clifford (2003:171) notes that 'Psalm 109 has the unenviable reputation as the most vehement of the cursing psalms'. Many imprecatory psalms are also regarded as psalms of justice (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:128) because of their judicial settings and language. The petitioner invokes the God of justice, believing that He will judge rightly and deliver him from the hands of his accusers.

Delineation of the concept of 'Imprecatory prayers'

The verb 'imprecate' means 'to pray evil against' or 'to invoke disaster' (Bullock 2014). Imprecatory prayer, also referred to as 'vengeance prayer', is characterised by strong emotions of pain and anger, where one passionately calls on God to bring instant judgement upon one's enemies. They consist of sincere laments about one's condition of suffering, injustice and hopelessness, expressing a deep desire for God to intervene and punish the wicked. The intensity of the language of imprecation is usually determined by the level of precarious nature of one's challenges. Rather than seeking to carry out vengeance, the petitioners affirm their inefficiency to vindicate themselves and invoke God to avenge their cause. Imprecatory prayers are usually filled with provocative and horrible expressions directed against one's real or perceived enemies. For example (Luc 1999):

[L]et my enemies be wiped out, catch fire and die, fall and die, die in their sleep, etc. The elements of punishment called for in the imprecations may include shame, physical infliction, death, misfortune for family members, and unspecified retributive punishment. (p. 396)

On the grounds of God's sovereignty and righteousness, the petitioner believes that his enemies will not go unpunished. Although the violent language of these prayers' conflicts with the message of God's grace and love (Willmington 2008:73), the inclusion of imprecatory prayers in the Psalter has led many afflicted Christians to believe in the appropriateness of using such expressions during prayers, as it offers them a wide range of such prayers. Waltke (2007:878) notes that in the Psalter, there are about 35 psalms that contain imprecatory prayers.

More insights into imprecatory prayers: A close reading of Psalm 109

Psalm 109 is a prayer laced with praises, laments and mainly imprecations. It is generally believed to have five parts: invocation, complaint, imprecations, prayer and promise of gratitude. The text presents a picture of an innocent person surrounded by false accusers. Hossfeld and Zenger (2011:128) write that 'The psalm is the cry of a person to God for help and rescue in and out of the most intense mortal danger'. It begins with an expression of total confidence in God by giving adoration to him 'O God of my praise', followed by a sincere plea for an answer from him (v. 1). The psalmist

acknowledges that he had praised God in the past and will praise him again. In the expression 'Do not be silent', the psalmist appeals to God to remain inactive no longer (Anderson 1972a:759) and to give ear to his petition. Schaefer (2022:700) opines that God's silence contrasts with the verbal attack against him (vv. 1–2) and his eloquent plea for God's help. A description of the reason for which the psalmist needs God's attention is shown in verses 2–5: an explicit account of the misdeeds of his accusers, described as vicious and destructive slander by Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:473). In verse 2, לִשְׁוֹן שָׂקָר [lying tongues] probably has a legal connotation of giving false evidence (Allen 1983:72). Verses 4–5 provide an idea of the initial disposition of the petitioner towards his adversaries; he loved and prayed for them. Hence, his curses (v. 29) against them were a reflex. It should, however, be noted that the psalmist's testimony of himself as an innocent man in verses 2–5 contrasts with that of the accusers in verses 16–19, because they were determined to tarnish his innocence with their hateful words.

Psalm 109:6–19 is an extensive imprecation that occupies the centre of the text, thereby sustaining a reader's attention. This unit is a list of terrible disasters that begins with a hopeless trial, runs through total ruin and reaches its climax with the eradication of the family (Mays 1994:348). Clifford (2003:174) notes that 'The extraordinary length of the complaint shows how deep a wound the enemies' hateful words have left'. Verses 8–11 are targeted at his life, family and property, whereas in verses 12–16, their imprecations turn into curses, and in verses 17–19, the accusers report their wishes; that the accused should suffer the effects of his own alleged 'habit' of cursing (Allen 1983:77). The most intense of the maledictions is the extinction of the family name (v. 13), especially in a society where it is being handed down through the generations. Ross (2016:331) opines that 'For their name to be forgotten means that they will cease to exist. It is a prayer that the line of the wicked should come to an end'.

Among many scholars, such as Toombs (1971:292), Anderson (1972b:437), Allen (1983:72), Mays (1994:349) and Hossfeld and Zenger (2011:126), there are intense controversies surrounding this unit of the text vis-à-vis whether the maledictions are the psalmist's direct curses on his accusers or a citation of the accusers' curses against the psalmist by which they have sought to destroy him. The latter is well taken by many interpreters (Allen 1983:72–73; Anderson 1972b:437; Clifford 2003:171; Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:126; Mays 1994:349) who argue that the curses are spoken against an individual (the psalmist), as shown in the use of the singular pronoun 'He'. At the beginning and the end of the psalm, the enemies are spoken of in the plural, while in the imprecation, only one person is addressed. Similarly, Allen (1983:72–73) argues that verses 6–19 cite the accusers' maledictions against the psalmist because of the change to a singular throughout, in differentiation from the psalmist's plural references in verses 1–5 and 20–31. In individual lament psalms laced with imprecations, the psalmist's prayers for retribution are always couched in direct address

to God (69:23–29; 109:22–28), whereas oblique divine references are a feature of a psalmist's quotation of his enemies' curses (71:11; 109:14–15).

On the other hand, some interpreters have understood them as the psalmist's curses against his enemies (collectively designated by a singular pronoun) or his chief enemy, arguing that it is questionable whether one would venture to repeat such curses originally directed against oneself (Anderson 1972a:758; Toombs 1971:292). Admitting the maledictions as the utterance of the psalmist's accusers against him is a serious attempt to 'soften' the imprecatory character of the psalm, according to Rogerson (1977:59), whose position is that 'they are the words of the psalmist against his enemies, but they are occasioned by the false accusations brought by the enemies'. In a similar vein, Hossfeld and Zenger (2011:126) and Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:473–474) acknowledge the absence of the words 'they say' in the Hebrew text and therefore argue that verses 6–20 are a continuation of the speech of the psalmist from verses 1–5, submitting that the maledictions are the words of the psalmist who has experienced the social destructiveness of the adversary and urges the righteous God to punish the adversary appropriately.

Be that as it may, verse 20 explicitly indicates that the psalmist invokes the same maledictions on his accusers, because there was no justification for their curses on him; he was not guilty of the charges. Moreover, there is no controversy that the psalmist also cursed his accusers (v. 29). Therefore, a mediating position is that the psalmist and his accusers invoked curses against each other. The maledictions, according to Schaefer (2022:669), signify 'a strong yearning for the annihilation of evil. The violent imagery articulates the revulsion against unjust systems and the hunger pang for a proper world order'. The psalmist desires that evil be completely eradicated so that God may be recognised as the universal sovereign. Verse 20 serves as an introduction to the psalmist's exemplary prayer for deliverance in verse 21. While he prays that the malicious wishes (vv. 6–19) of his accusers should be redirected to them, he knew that only God could deliver him, and he acknowledges this in various verses.

Amidst the storms, the psalmist acknowledges his defenselessness and resorts to prayer. Jones (1974:171) opines that 'He prays intensely as one who has no recourse to any other means of defense'. In verse 21, the expression לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ [for your name's sake] highlights the sincere nature of the plea and the great faith of the psalmist. Ross (2016:333) notes that 'The prayer is a righteous prayer offered in faith with an emphatic addition to God's name'. God's name represents the character of God. His character is centred on justice and mercy: protection of the oppressed, rewarding the righteous and punishing evildoers. This is followed by a description of the psalmist's pitiable condition in verses 22–25; in the words of Exell (1978:417), 'deep, sorrowful complaint like a flood of tears'. He is physically weak because of the voluntary fasting

(v. 24) he engaged in while anticipating God's deliverance. It could also refer to an involuntary fasting occasioned by a depressed man's lack of appetite (Anderson 1972a:765). Verse 21 is repeated in verse 26, where the psalmist cries out to God again, stating that his prayer for deliverance is based on God's steadfast love. The expressions *עֲזֵרֵנִי* [help me] (Ps 35:2; 38:22; 40:13; 70:1; 71:12; 106:4; 109:26; 119:86, 173, 175) and *הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי* [save me] (Ps 7:1; 22:21; 31:2,16; 44:6; 54:1; 55:16; 57:3; 59:2; 69:1; 71:2,3; 109:26; 119:94, 146; 142:6; 143:9) are a typical 'cry for help' and are usually seen in psalms of lament. In the expression *אַתָּה יְיָהוָה עָשִׂיתָהּ* [You, O Lord, have done it], the psalmist again conveys his confidence in God's power to vindicate him (v. 27). Ross (2016:334) writes that 'His prayer for deliverance has an additional purpose: that they will know that it is the Lord who has taken vengeance on them and vindicated his servant'. Although he invokes curses on his accusers (v.29), he emphatically buttresses that he depends totally on God's justice.

The psalmist's innocence can be established only if God hears his prayers by redirecting the maledictions to his accusers and nullifying their curses with blessings (vv. 20, 28). The psalmist's prayer in the first part of verse 28 further shows that cursing and blessing are God's prerogative. In other words, foes may curse, but God has the exclusive right to decide on whom the disaster will fall (Mays 1994:349). God can thwart the curses invoked on a man through his superior power by blessing him. Unlike the long maledictions of verses 6–19, there is no controversy regarding who the speaker of the imprecations in verse 29 is; the petitioner invokes curses against his accusers. The psalmist, in verse 30, re-expresses his confidence in God's power to deliver him. Exell (1978:417) notes that 'This deliverance will call forth his thanks, which will not be private but expressed in the presence of a multitude'. Because he protects the poor (v. 31), the psalmist vows to thank God before a religious community.

Use of imprecatory prayers among present-day Christians in Nigeria vs. the theological significance of Psalm 109

Imprecatory prayers are commonly used among Christians in contemporary Nigeria, particularly in Pentecostal and white-garment churches. They are driven by a desire for divine judgement and a belief that God will contend with one's enemies, expressing complete reliance on God in the face of challenges. Ross (2016:335) opines that 'In situations of extreme danger and malicious attacks by people who hate them, it is natural and not inappropriate for the righteous to pray that the Lord avenge their suffering and shame by delivering and vindicating them'. When faced with unexplainable situations, many Christians express their defenselessness by beseeching God through passionate and dramatic warfare prayers, sometimes involving rituals such as fasting and the use of physical objects (ropes and canes) to symbolise the tying and destruction of enemies (Amevenku & Boaheng 2015:86). Christians use imprecatory prayers to

confront their adversaries or those who are perceived to be the cause of their predicament. More so, imprecations serve as a mechanism to avert or reverse the evil plans and curses targeted at a person. During public worship, a leader reads out specific imprecations from the psalter, while the members echo 'Amen'; the imprecatory psalms are also used during personal prayers, and at both levels, are usually accompanied by expressions such as 'fall and die', 'back to sender' and 'Holy ghost fire'. Some examples of imprecatory prayers (Amevenku & Boaheng 2015:87) are 'By fire, by thunder, Lord, kill my enemies for me', 'Lord, destroy my enemies', 'May thunder strike and devour my devourers in the name of Jesus' and 'I destroy my destroyer by Holy Ghost fire'.

The prevalent use of imprecatory prayers among Christians in Nigeria is mainly prompted by the ongoing horrific activities of religious extremists (Boko Haram), Fulani herdsmen and unknown gunmen, who launch murderous attacks on Christian communities, affecting their personal and communal operations, further revealing the nature of the nation's ethno-religious intolerance and violence. In 2009, Christians in Northern states started experiencing unprecedented violence at the rise of Boko Haram, an extremist movement. The persecution of Christians in Nigeria has left many tortured, raped, maimed, displaced and dead (Hussein 2025:93); many church buildings have been destroyed (Vandi 2023:36). Fulani herdsmen launched attacks on Christian communities in Benue, Nasarawa, Adamawa, Kaduna, Taraba and Enugu states, leading to loss of lives and destruction of farmlands (*Aljazeera News* 2021; Dan-Azumi 2025:109; Egbejule 2025). There are reports of abduction of Christians (both the clergy and laity) by unknown gunmen who demand a huge ransom to release the abductees (Vandi 2023:39).

Several incidents of attacks on Christians have been reported, but it is outside the scope of this study to give details of many occurrences. Vandi (2023) notes that:

[N]igerian Christians have always been subjected to systemic persecution for many years due to the pluralistic nature of the country. The emergence of Boko Haram has aggravated the level of persecution to more than it has ever been in the history of Nigeria. (p. 36)

Noteworthy attack is Boko Haram attack of 2014 at Chibok Government Girls Secondary School, where they kidnapped 276 mostly Christian pupils; a recent report confirms that 82 of the girls remain captives (Amnesty International 2024). In any given year, the number of Christians killed by extremist groups is rarely less than 4000 (Persecution Reports: Nigeria 2025), and as a result, some churches have been out of operation, while others carry out religious activities minimally in a fear-driven atmosphere. From October 2022 to September 2023, 4118 Christians were killed, 3300 abducted and 100 000 internally displaced, owing to the activities of bandits (U.S. Department of State 2023). In 2024, about 3100 Christians were killed and more than 2000 kidnapped in Nigeria (Nzwili 2025). Between 01 January and

10 August 2025, 7087 Christians were killed, and 7800 were abducted (Persecution Reports: Nigeria 2025). Most of the attacks took place in Benue State, with at least 1100 deaths, including the Yelewata massacre in June, when 280 Christians were killed (King 2025). In a country whose citizens have freedom of worship, there are threats of attacks on Muslims who convert to Christianity (U.S. Department of State 2023). Unfortunately, Nigeria has become known as the world's centre of Christian martyrs because it has more Christian martyrs than anywhere else on earth (Chimtom 2023).

Undoubtedly, the government has taken some measures to abate these attacks on Christians. There have been attempts to de-radicalise religious extremists by providing support for those seeking to stay off; however, these efforts proved futile because of poor implementation (Hendricks et al. 2023:18). Stigmatisation and threats by the communities that the de-radicalised individuals belong to could also urge them to revert to their inhumane activities. Regarding the Fulani herdsman and Christian farmers crisis, the government has proposed the creation of rural grazing areas for herders, designed to provide housing, pasture and basic amenities (Awodola 2021:2). Because this was not accepted by farmers, who regarded it as a form of jihadist conquest of their land, the herdsman kept launching attacks on Christian farmers, forcefully dispossessing them of their lands (Dan-Azumi 2025:109; Egbejule 2025). Occasionally, the government calls the kidnappers to turn a new leaf, promising them rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Adeniyi 2025; Hendricks et al. 2023:18); however, because of the allure of quick money, many return because the amnesty payments cannot sustain their lifestyle. Furthermore, the government has enhanced security by recruiting forest guards, vigilante groups, hunters' associations and special task forces (Adediran & Salman 2025). Although these efforts have not fully eradicated violence, partly because of Nigeria's extensive porous borders with Cameroon, Chad and the Niger Republic, Nigerian security forces have reportedly attacked the terrorist groups. Importantly, a recent attack by the Nigerian Air Force on 10 August 2025 on terrorists in Zamfara state killed over 400 terrorists (Adeniyi 2025). On 08 August 2025, Nigerian security forces attacked Boko Haram terrorists, leaving eight terrorists dead (Abu-bashal & Cebi 2025).

Amidst this continuing turbulence, Christians have relied on the God of vengeance, believing that the perpetrators of evil will never go unpunished. At individual and corporate levels, Christians in Nigeria have resorted to seeking God's intervention through prayers (Adamo 2008:586), echoing the universal suitability of prayer for Christians (Exell 1978:417). Prayer is essential in building one's confidence in God by strengthening one's faith amidst the vicissitudes of life. The Book of Psalms offers one explicit expression of human feelings, such as doubt, confidence, depression and exultations (Jones 1974:171). Using various imprecations in the Psalter, Christians in Nigeria present their situation to God, depending on Him to judge their enemies and deliver

them from destruction (Adamo 2008:586). The imprecatory psalms offer them a variety of violent language for a spiritual fight with their adversaries. Schaefer (2022:669) gives a list of imprecatory prayers in the Psalter: Psalm 12:4-5; 35:4-6, 8, 26; 40:15-16; 58:7-11; 59:12-14; 69:23-29; 70:2-3; 71:13; 79:12; 83:10-18; 109:6-19, 28-29; 137:8-9; 139:19-22 and 140:9-11. These texts portray God as a just judge who will vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked.

Many authors have expressed their concerns about the suitability of imprecations as a prayer pattern among present-day Christians, arguing that their contents contradict the teachings in the New Testament and therefore, are not a prayer model for contemporary Christians. Allen (1983:77) argues that the imprecatory psalms are not a model because of the conspicuous absence of the New Testament standard of loving one's enemies and blessing persecutors (Mt 5:44; Rm 12:14) observable in the psalms. This position fails to recognise the existence of imprecations in the New Testament, however, scanty. Besides, some portions of Psalms 69 and 109, which are regarded as the most intense imprecatory psalms, are quoted in the New Testament. Likewise, Rogerson (1977:59) opines that Psalms 109 contains sentiments that not only display Old Testament religion at its worst but also ought to be abhorrent to any vaguely enlightened person. On this, Luc (1999:398) submits that the Old Testament does not judge these imprecations as unacceptable. Hossfeld and Zenger (2011:138) describe Psalms 109 as the most misunderstood psalm, acknowledging that it has been misused, especially in Christianity, where it is viewed as a 'cursing psalm' instead of a 'justice psalm'. Hossfeld and Zenger add that until the 19th century, Psalm 109 was used for cursing and praying for the death of perceived or real enemies. The findings of this study contrast with their submission because, in recent times, Christians in Nigeria engage in spiritual violence against enemies by prayerfully reading the imprecatory psalms. Although this practice is more common among Pentecostals, it is also a growing tradition in some mainline churches, particularly those adversely affected by violence and injustice. For Longman (1988:138), Christians do not have the type of enemies that the psalmists had, and therefore, they should not pray these prayers. In fact, one could reason that Christians in contemporary Nigerian society have enemies who operate at a higher level of wickedness than those of the psalmist; what other category of enemies can unleash great terror and violence more than those who kill and abduct Christians daily in large numbers because of extremism and self-centred interest?

Modern readers can look beyond the maliciousness of the psalm to understand their central message: God's hatred for injustice. According to DeClaise-Walfard (2020:102), Psalm 109 suggests that evil, injustice and oppression must be confronted, opposed and hated because God hates them. The psalmist's desire for vengeance is driven by a desire for justice and righteousness in society. Although the imprecations are incongruent to the New Testament teachings

of love and forgiveness, in times of depression and sorrow, one can seek relief by expressing one's grief to the God of justice (Jones 1974:172). According to Melancthon (2014):

[T]he Psalter has a significant place in both the individual and corporate lives of people and communities, and our task is to wrestle with the theological and social issues arising from these Psalms and to constructively relate them to our communities of faith in this century. (p. 33)

Hence, to grasp the theological import of the imprecatory psalms is crucial in understanding their appropriateness for Christians in Nigeria, who daily experience all sorts of violence, injustice, exploitation and discrimination. Schaefer (2022:670) notes that 'the presence of violent language and malevolent wishes in the Psalter attests to the unfairness and exploitation that inhabit our world'.

Christians in Nigeria use Psalm 109 and related texts to engage in spiritual violence against their enemies (Amevenku & Boaheng 2015:86; Awojobi 2024:1; Olarewaju 1998:iv). They use the text as a prayer for divine vindication and judgement on their enemies. Their anger is expressed to God through intense prayers, usually said in loud voices and 'unknown tongues', while clapping their hands, stamping their feet and shaking their heads. Amevenku and Boaheng (2015) aver that:

[I]t is not uncommon to find Christians gathered on playgrounds, in classrooms, in various chapels and buildings, 'decreeing' and 'declaring' with loud voices and commanding God to put their 'enemies' to death or to harm them in one way or the other. (p. 87)

Adamo (2008:575) argues that in African Christianity, Psalm 109 is considered one of the prayers of appeal to God for justice. It is a prayer for God to fight for the righteous and the poor. In contemporary Nigerian society, the increasing rate of injustice, oppression, killing and other unfortunate events validates that the psalms of vengeance still remain relevant.

The core message of the text is that deliverance from injustice comes from the God of justice through prayer, providing a model for lamenting and praying in the face of injustice, oppression and suffering. According to Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:475–476), the psalm is a prayer model that exhorts one to seek vengeance from God through prayers, rather than destructive ways. Psalm 109 does not support anyone to thirst for vengeance but teaches that vengeance can be sought from God, who is indeed 'the God of vengeance'. The imprecatory psalms provide a way to express one's anger, frustration, hurt, discomfort and thirst for revenge, to God whose rule is characterised by faithfulness and compassion, suggesting that God is not unconcerned with human emotions but rather is willing to engage with us in our difficulties. In the face of evil, it is innate in man to manifest violent, spontaneous reaction; in such situations, one must surrender one's thought to God and allow him to avenge. While human vengeance is often driven by anger and a desire for revenge, divine vengeance is motivated by a desire for justice and righteousness.

Therefore, rather than engage in a physical fight with their enemies or consulting herbalists and diviners, Christians in Nigeria pray to God that evildoer should be supernaturally exterminated from the land. The sovereign God has control over all things, including the fate of the wicked. Imprecatory prayers emphasise the need to establish justice in the world and a return to the world that God created (Melancthon 2014:34). In moments of fear and uncertainty, one should seek God's deliverance, believing that justice will prevail in accordance with God's steadfast love. Although Christians desire God's immediate punishment of evildoers, they are also encouraged by their belief in the eschatological day of judgement (Allen 1983:77), when everyone will be judged, both the righteous and the wicked, with the righteous receiving rewards and the unrepentant wicked facing consequences of their evil deeds.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complexities and nuances of imprecatory prayers in the Psalter, particularly Psalm 109, and their significance for present-day Nigerian Christians who use such prayers as a means of spiritual warfare against their enemies, often in the context of persecution and violence. Using imprecatory psalms, they express their defenselessness, handing over the battle to God. It is a means of engaging in spiritual violence through prayers, rather than physical violence with weapons. Although the use of imprecatory prayers raises several questions about their conformity to the New Testament teachings on love and forgiveness, one can appreciate their rich underlying theological significance through an in-depth study. Imprecatory prayers emphasise the need for justice and the establishment of a world order that reflects God's righteousness. They provide a model for expressing anger and discomfort to God, rooted in a deep affirmation of faith in God's sovereignty. Amidst the injustice and oppression, Nigerian Christians can trust in God's justice to find relief, peace and hope.

Overall, the use of imprecatory Psalms in Nigerian Christianity has significant implications for African biblical hermeneutics and global theology. This study, therefore, draws attention to the importance of contextual interpretations that acknowledge the realities of persecution, violence, marginalisation and other related social issues. Undoubtedly, reading the Bible through the lens of one's experiences makes the text more relatable and relevant. The study also challenges traditional Western interpretations that often spiritualise these Psalms, instead of using their honest language to express resistance and seek justice. Both perspectives should appreciate that the imprecatory psalms reveal God's justice and vindication of the oppressed, thus encouraging honest prayer and lament in the face of suffering as well as understanding God's character. By this understanding, these Psalms serve as powerful tools for communities where injustice and oppression are prevalent, thereby adding unique insights to the global understanding of prayer and spirituality.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Onyekachi G. Chukwuma: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review and editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without any direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

The data used for this work were generated from secondary sources such as journal articles, newspapers, Bible commentaries and online materials. The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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