

## INSPIRATION AND THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

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### Introduction

Christians who have used the Psalter in public worship and for personal devotions have been seriously disturbed by the presence of imprecatory language in some of the psalms. The number of imprecations is significant, and these have led some scholars to refer to certain psalms as "imprecatory psalms." However, since no literary type of psalm appears in the Psalter that could be called "imprecatory,"<sup>1</sup> it is better to say that there are imprecatory passages in some of the psalms.

Another clarification needing to be made is that these imprecations are not primarily curses, but prayers—entreatings God to punish the enemies of the psalmist in a particular way.<sup>2</sup> It is true that at times we find what could be called a formula of cursing<sup>3</sup> (e.g. "may the enemy be destroyed"), but it is used as part of a prayer addressed to God.

Nevertheless, for the Christian, this in no way eliminates the apparent distastefulness of this aspect of the Psalter. A few examples from the psalms will illustrate the point:

Ps 35:4\* "May those who seek my life  
be disgraced and put to shame;  
May those who plot my ruin  
be turned back in dismay."

54:5(7)\*\* "Let evil recoil on those who slander me;  
in your faithfulness destroy them."

55:15(16) "Let death take my enemies by surprise;  
let them go down alive to the grave . . ."

59:13 "Consume them in wrath,  
consume them till they are no more."

109:9 "May his children be fatherless  
and his wife a widow.

10 "May his children be wandering beggars;  
May they be driven from their ruined homes.

15 "May their sins always remain before the Lord,  
that he may cut off the memory of them from  
the earth."

137:8 "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is he who repays you  
for what you have done to us—  
he who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks."

The thoughts expressed and the language used seem to suggest an incompatibility with the message and spirit of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Was the psalmist inspired by God when he wrote down those passages? Did God reveal to him that "the righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked?" (58:10)

### Imprecations and Inspiration

**Proposed Solutions.** The issue of the inspiration of such passages has been raised by others;<sup>4</sup> and different, complimentary, and contradictory answers have been given. Those who deny any inspiration to the imprecations suggest they are the expression of the vindictive spirit of the psalmist.<sup>5</sup> Others argue that the petitioner, although committed to God, was yet "estranged from

God's spirit," and expressed thoughts that were unworthy and sub-Christian.<sup>6</sup> Still others have suggested that inspiration was operative in the recording of the imprecation but not in its content.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of progressive revelation is used by some to clarify the perceived unsurmountable differences between imprecatory prayers and the NT. It is stated that "the inspiration of these hopes and prayers indicates that a progress in the revelation was wanting to attain the degree of ethical standards divinely willed for man."<sup>8</sup> This progress reached its zenith in Christ, making obsolete such prayers.

Dispensationalist interpreters believe that the Psalter belongs to the dispensation of law. Consequently, they consider the ethical concepts expressed in the imprecatory passages incompatible with the new dispensation of grace.<sup>10</sup> The implication is that *what was right* in the OT is no longer right for the believer in Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Some who believe in the inspiration of the psalmist have tried to downplay the imprecatory force of the prayers, arguing that the petitioner used poetical exaggeration in the expression of his thoughts.<sup>12</sup> Others contend that the enemies are impersonal forces, spiritual ones,<sup>13</sup> or national enemies of the theocratic kingdom of God.<sup>14</sup> This, supposedly, justifies the use of imprecatory language. A common view is that the imprecations are prophetic descriptions of what will happen to the ungodly at the eschaton.<sup>15</sup>

A number of scholars find the imprecatory passages meaningful in terms of their theological content and pedagogical function. Theologically, the key element, some say, is the vindication of God's justice<sup>16</sup> revealed in the vindication of the oppressed. They teach us about Israel's understanding of justice and God's reaction to sin;<sup>17</sup> according to others, we learn about the human tendency to resentment, and also about the need to oppose evil.<sup>18</sup> Ethically, it is argued, it is right to make such prayers because there is a hatred to evil based on love. This hatred is compatible with divine inspiration because "it does not violate the law of love."<sup>19</sup>

**Inspiration of the Psalter.** The Scriptures themselves testify on behalf of the inspiration of the Psalter. David, who wrote many psalms, affirmed that the Lord spoke through him in the composition of his songs. He says:

The oracle of David son of Jesse, the oracle of the man exalted by the Most High, the man anointed by the God of Jacob, Israel's singer of songs:

The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me

his word was in my tongue

The God of Israel spoke,

the Rock of Israel said to me . . . (2 Sam 23:1-3).

There is no valid reason to deny that revelation and inspiration were also operative in the composition of his other psalms. We will show that even in the psalms in which there is no explicit reference to revelatory acts, the author bases the composition of the inspired song on a previous act of divine revelation.

It is significant that in some of the psalms where we find imprecatory language we also find divine oracles in which the psalmist quotes God's speech (e.g. Pss 12:3-5; 68:1-2, 22-23). Revelation and inspiration must be operative in both cases. In addition, the NT quotes from some of the so-called imprecatory psalms in order to strengthen the divine authority of the argument being developed (Rom 3:13 [Pss 5:9; 140:3]); and also to uncover the prophetic nature of a particular passage (Rom 15:3 [Ps 69:9]; Rom 11:9-10 [Ps 69:22-23]).<sup>20</sup>

The problem we confront, therefore, is not whether the imprecations were inspired, but why the biblical writer felt free to use this type of language to express God's thoughts.

### The Language of the Imprecations

At this point we will turn to the text of several psalms and explore the origin and purpose of the language used in the imprecatory passages. The most radical imprecations have been selected because they illustrate clearly the purpose and the source of the language used in these kinds of passages.<sup>21</sup>

#### 1. Psalms 5:10 (11)

Declare them guilty [*'āšam*], O God!

Let their intrigues be their down fall.

Banish [*nādah*] them for their many sins [*peša'*],  
for they have rebelled [*mārāh*] against you.

This psalm is designated as an Individual Lament in which a falsely accused person is described as seeking protection from the Lord against his enemies. Perhaps, it may be better to call it a psalm of innocence or a psalm of confidence.<sup>22</sup> The setting is a legal one in the court of the Lord.<sup>23</sup>

The verb *'āšam* = "to declare guilty," or "to punish" expresses in legal language a negative verdict against the enemy. This petition is based on the fact that the worshiper knows, according to Psalms 34:21-22, that "the foes of the righteous will be condemned [*'āšam*]" and that "no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned [*'āšam*]."

The second request is that the enemies may "fall by their own schemes,"<sup>24</sup> which is "a picture of misfortune in general."<sup>25</sup> The wicked person is often described in the OT, and especially in the Psalms and Proverbs, as brought down by his own wickedness (e.g. Prov 11:5; 28:14, 18; Ps 35:8; 141:10).

The third request is for banishment (*nādah* = "to scatter, disperse"). It implies the removal of the person from his or her place of security and self-confidence. The dispersion of the Israelites is one of the covenant curses announced by the Lord against His rebellious people (Deut 30:1). It is a punishment for sin.

The reason for the imprecations is provided: the petitioner's enemies have committed many sins (*peša'* = "rebellion, crime"), and they are obstinate (*mārāh*) against the Lord. These two terms indicate that the sin of the enemies was premeditated, intentional, an act of rebellion against God. If *peša'* denotes open "rebellion," *mārāh* "denotes callous defiance."<sup>26</sup>

We should notice that this prayer is based on the manner God said He would deal with the wicked. The psalmist knows that God condemns those who rebel against Him, upsetting the religious and social order established by Him. Secondly, the petitioner is fully acquainted with the concept of divine retribution. It is through God's intervention that the evil plans of the wicked fall back on them. Thirdly, the psalmist is motivated by the fact that God's honor is adversely affected by the defiance of the wicked.

Therefore, we should not read into the passage a spirit of personal vengeance on the part of the psalmist.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the language used here points to a legal setting in which the enemies are described as violators of the covenant and deserving the covenant curses.

## 2. Psalm 28:4

Repay [*nāthan*] them for their deeds  
and for their evil work;

Repay them for what their hands have done  
and bring back [*šûb*] upon them what they deserve  
[*g<sup>l</sup>mûl*].

This psalm places the imprecatory element between a lament (vss. 1-3) and a thanksgiving (vss. 5-9). Apparently the psalmist was falsely accused of a crime by his enemies.<sup>28</sup> The imprecation seems to be used in part to disassociate the singer from the wicked.

The thought expressed in the imprecation, using synonymous parallelism, is based on the *lex talionis*. The wicked should be paid (*nathan* + *l<sup>e</sup>* = "give to/repay;" e.g. Jer 17:10) according to their crimes. The idea of retribution is clearly expressed by the combination of the verb *šûb* = "to return" and the noun *g<sup>l</sup>mûl* = "reward."<sup>29</sup> The OT testifies again and again that God is in charge of the retribution of the enemies of His people and that He repays them according to their works (e.g. Isa 3:11; 59:18; Jer 17:10; 51:56). This is part of God's self-disclosure to Israel and lies at the very foundation of covenant justice and order.

The imprecation is, therefore, based on the psalmist's knowledge of God as He revealed Himself to him and to Israel. The background of the imprecation is the covenant relationship with its legal system of justice which assures proper punishment for each crime. The imprecation is motivated by the disrespect for God manifested in the conduct of the wicked (vs. 5). It is important to notice that in the thanksgiving the psalmist praises God because He heard his cry for help (vs. 6). God heard and answered this prayer which included an imprecatory element.

## 3. Psalm 35:4-9 (cf. Pss 40:14; 70:2)

May those who seek my life

be disgraced [*kālam*] and put to shame;

May those who plot my ruin

be turned back [*sûg*] in dismay [*hāphār*].

May they be like chaff [*mōš*] before the wind,

with the angel of the Lord driving them  
away [*dāhāh*];

May their path be dark and slippery [*hālāq*]

with the angel of the Lord pursuing [*rādaph*] them.

Since they hid their net for me without cause

and without cause dug a pit for me,

May ruin [*šō'āh*] overtake them by surprise—

May the net they hid entangle them,

May they fall into the pit for their ruin.

Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord

and delight in his salvation.

This psalm is the prayer of a person who is being persecuted by his enemies without any reason. The language suggests that the author was involved “in a legal case and a war with his ‘enemies’.”<sup>30</sup> This may very well be a royal psalm.<sup>31</sup> The main terms used in the imprecation are taken from the context of war and military defeat.

The verb *kālam* = “be disgraced” is used in military contexts to designate the humiliating shame of having to flee from battle in defeat (e.g. 2 Sam 19:3). The OT indicates that it is the Lord who disgraces and puts to shame the enemies of His people in the battlefield (e.g. Ps 44:10-11; Isa 41:11; 45:16-17). God as a warrior fights for them.

This experience of defeat is referred to in the parallel line as a turning back (*sûg* = “draw back”). This is another military term. God had promised His people that He will do that to their enemies (e.g. Isa 42:17; Jer 38:22; 46:5) and the psalmist was aware of that

promise (cf. 129:5). The enemy was to turn back and “be ashamed” (*hāphar*). The primary emphasis of this verb is on suffering “the consequences of one’s own actions,”<sup>32</sup> cf. Jer 15:9.

The image of chaff blown away is well known in the Bible and is used to indicate absence of strength and firmness (e.g. Ps 1:4). It is also used in military contexts to describe the defeat inflicted by God on His enemies (Isa 17:13; 29:5).

The verb “to be slippery” (*hālāq* = “to be smooth” from which the noun in the psalm is derived) is not a military term but the concept is used here to describe soldiers trying to escape from a persecuting army while running on slippery ground. In other words, the defeated army will not escape. According to Psalms 73:18 God places the wicked on slippery ground causing their ruin (cf. Jer 23:12).

God’s instrument in defeating the enemies is “the angel of the Lord.” He drives them away (*dāhāh* = “to push down;” cf. Jer 23:12; Prov 14:32), and pursues them (*rādaph* = “to persecute”). The salvation history recorded in the OT provides examples of the military involvement of the angel of the Lord on behalf of Israel (e.g. 2 Kgs 19:35). The enemies will be persecuted because they persecuted the psalmist (vs. 3). This is, once more, the principle of divine retribution, which is further developed in vss. 7-8.

The psalmist wishes the enemies would fall in the traps they prepared for him and that ruin (*šō'āh* = “devastation”) will overtake them. This is exactly what God decreed over Babylon, the enemy of His people (Isa 47:11), and what overtakes the wicked, according to Proverbs 3:25. This term is also used to describe the result of a military defeat (e.g. Isa 10:3). The petitioner knows that God’s justice is revealed when the nations fall into “the pit they have dug” and when “their feet are caught in the net they have hidden” (Ps 9:15-16).

The example of *lex talionis* in these verses “does not vindicate vendettas and revenge but states a law of reality: we become in our heart and facial features as well as in the events of life what we think and do. Violence breeds violence. Liars are caught in the web of their own lies.”<sup>33</sup>

Through the imprecations the psalmist is really asking for a

revelation of God's salvific power. Then his "soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation" (vs. 9).

We have noticed that the language used by the author is taken from the wars of the Lord. His prayer is based on the firm theological conviction that God is a warrior who fights for His people. He is asking the Lord to reveal Himself again as a divine warrior. The concept of retribution (*lex talionis*) is used to provide a legal basis for God's punitive intervention. The worshiper is not asking God to inflict an arbitrary punishment on his enemies but one commensurate with the crime. The psalmist considers God's intervention to be a revelation of His justice that will restore justice on the land and in society.

#### 4. Psalm 58:6-8, 10 (7-9, 11)

6 Break [*hāraṣ*] the teeth in their mouths, O God;  
tear out [*nāthaṣ*], O Lord, the fangs of the lions!

7 Let them vanish like water that flows away;  
when they draw the bow, let their  
arrows be blunted.

8 Like a slug melting away [*mā'as*] as it moves along,  
like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun.

10 The righteous will be glad [*śāmah*] when they are  
avenged [*nāqām*]  
when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.

This psalm is a community lament which condemns, in an almost prophetic style, the corruption of the leaders of the people.<sup>34</sup> The language used is colorful, loaded with impressive images. The imprecations ask God to intervene and put an end to the corruption of the rulers.

The enemies are compared to poisonous snakes (vs. 4). The first imprecation addresses that simile and asks God to neutralize the mortal threat of the serpent by breaking its teeth. The verb "to break" (*hāraṣ* = "to destroy, tear down") is used by God in the OT to describe the effects of His judgment on His enemies (e.g. Exo 15:7; Jer 50:15),<sup>35</sup> defeating them permanently (cf. Ps 28:5).

The parallel imprecation applies the image of a lion to the enemy. God is asked "to tear out" (*nāthaṣ* = "break up") its jaw bones. This verb is also used in the psalms to describe God's

judgment on the wicked (e.g. Ps 52:5 (7); cf. Jer 4:26). At times the enemies are compared to lions (Ps 35:17; Jer 2:15). The simile seems to have been a common one (cf. Job 4:10). God had promised to destroy the lions (enemies of His people) and the psalmist is asking Him to do it.

Verses 7-8 contain several different figures to describe what the author wishes for his enemies.<sup>36</sup> They are compared to the disappearance of the water in a wadi. The verb *mā'as* = "vanish" is probably a variation of *māsas* ("dissolve, melt, become weak") which is also used in the OT to describe the effects of God's presence or power on His enemies (e.g. Josh 5:1). People who hear about God's coming judgment become weak like water (Ezek 21:7 [12]). As the heat evaporates the water in the wadi, the wicked vanishes before the Lord. The Hebrew text in vss. 7b and 8 is not clear, making it difficult to understand the other figures. All we can say is that the psalmist seems to be asking God to put an end to the wicked.<sup>37</sup> "Since the wicked are obstinate in their wickedness, they must be rendered powerless or destroyed."<sup>38</sup>

Verse 10 is not an imprecation but it could be interpreted as revealing the real feelings of the petitioner. It describes the experience of the righteous when their enemies are destroyed. A literal translation of v 10a would be, "the righteous will be glad when/because he sees vengeance." The righteous in the OT experience joy, gladness (*śāmah*) when God delivers them from their enemies (e.g. 1 Sam 2:1; 19:5). God is the source of that joy (Ps 30:12; 2 Chr 20:27); in fact He promises it to them (Isa 65:13; Zech 10:7). The psalmist very often exhorts the worshipers to rejoice in the Lord, that is to say, in the salvation He has brought (e.g. 32:11; 64:10; 97:12; 104:34).

The term "vengeance" (*nāqām*) is used here to indicate that the wicked received what they legally deserved for their crimes. It would be right to translate *nāqām* here as "just recompense."<sup>39</sup> The joy of the psalmist is based on his commitment to justice, not on a revengeful spirit.

More difficult to interpret is vs. 10b: "When they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked." Obviously, this image is taken from the field of military conflict and defeat. It is important to notice that the wicked were not killed by the psalmist but by the Lord. He is

an observer, while God gives them their just reward. The phrase "bathe their feet in the blood" is being used here metaphorically to express the idea of total and absolute victory over the enemy. The psalmist feels free to use this terminology not just because it probably was a common allusion in warfare, but because God Himself has used the concept to describe His total victory over the enemies of His people.

We read in Psalms 68:22-23 (23-24):

The Lord says, "I will bring them [the enemies] from Bashan  
I will bring them from the depths of the sea,  
that you may plunge your feet in the blood of your foes,  
While the tongues of your dogs have their share."

The last part of the verse is evidently a reference to Jezebel's violent death (2 Kings 9:35-37). It is important to observe that this passage contains an oracle from the Lord given to the psalmist. The purpose of the imagery is to assure His people that He will defeat their enemies once and for all.<sup>40</sup> God does perform blood revenge on the enemies who oppress the righteous. Through the imprecatory language the psalmist is looking forward to the fulfillment of divine promises.

The psalmist is not really cursing the wicked but asking God to exercise His saving and judiciary power by giving them what they deserve. The language is taken primarily from the context of war and is used metaphorically to describe the triumph of the Lord over the wicked. We find, once more, legal terminology used to convey the idea that the punishment corresponds to the magnitude of the crime. The motivating factor is not the satisfaction of personal hatred but the revelation and recognition of God's justice: "Then men will say, 'surely the righteous still are rewarded, surely there is a God who judges the earth'" (vs. 11). "There can be no thought here of a wish for revenge and retribution."<sup>41</sup>

##### 5. Psalm 109:6-20

- 6 Appoint an evil man to oppose him;  
let an accuser stand at his right hand.
- 7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty,  
and may his prayers condemn him.
- 8 May his days be few;  
May another take his place of leadership.

- 9 May his children be fatherless  
and his wife a widow.
- 10 May his children be wandering beggars;  
May they be driven from their ruined homes.
- 11 May a creditor seize all he has;  
May strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.
- 12 May no one extend kindness [*hesed*] to him  
or take pity on his fatherless children.
- 13 May his descendants be cut off [*kārat*]  
their names blotted out from the next generation.
- 14 May the iniquity of his fathers be  
remembered [*zākar*] before the Lord;  
May the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
- 15 May their sins always remain before the Lord  
that he may cut off the memory of them from the  
earth.
- 16 For he never thought [*zākar*] of doing a kindness [*hesed*],  
but hounded to death the poor  
and the needy and the brokenhearted.
- 17 He loved to pronounce a curse—  
May it come on him;  
He found no pleasure in blessing—  
may it be far from him.
- 18 He wore cursing as his garment;  
it entered into his body like water,  
into his bones like oil.
- 19 May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,  
Like a belt tied forever around him.
- 20 May this be the Lord's payment to my accusers,  
to those who speak evil of me.

The imprecatory section is long and occupies a central place in the psalm. This has led some to refer to it as an imprecatory psalm.<sup>42</sup> But, since there are other elements present in the psalm, it is better to classify it as "an individual complaint."<sup>43</sup> The petitioner had been unjustly accused by those to whom he was kind (vss. 2-5). In

response he goes before the Lord seeking justice from Him. The background is a legal one.<sup>44</sup>

The court setting is clearly indicated in the first imprecation (vs. 6). In court the petitioner wants the enemy to be without anybody to defend him (cf. Zech 3:1). In essence, he is asking that the enemy be found guilty and that his lack of religiosity be unmasked. The petition is based on the broad legal and theological concept that the Lord will not allow the righteous to be condemned in His court (Ps 37:33).

Once the person is declared guilty, his life should be shortened. The psalmist knows that the wicked live only "half of their days" (55:23; cf. 37:35-39). Because the wickedness of the evildoer was proven in court, he should be removed from his office (*p<sup>e</sup>quddāh*), that is to say, from his position of authority.<sup>45</sup> This may have been a common practice in legal procedures. The petitioner also asks that the children of the enemy "be fatherless and his wife a widow" (vs. 9). This phrase is used in the OT to describe a divine punishment over certain individuals (e.g. Exod 22:24 [23]; Isa 9:16-17; Lam 5:3).<sup>46</sup> Left without the protection of the father, the children are to become homeless and their inheritance taken by creditors (vss. 10-11). However, the covenant law was very much interested in the protection of orphans and widows (e.g. Exod 22:22 [21]; Deut 24:17; 27:19; Isa 10:2; cf. Deut 10:18). God Himself was interested in the rights of the orphan (e.g. Ps 10:14, 18). Yet the psalmist is asking God to show total disregard for the family of his enemy, to treat them as if they were no longer part of the covenant community.

For the author, the descendants of the wicked are no longer part of the covenant family and therefore no one should show them kindness (*ḥesed*) or pity (*ḥānan*), vs. 12. This is terminology associated with the covenant relationship (cf. Jos 2:12, 14; Ps 143:12). There were times when God commanded His servants not to show any mercy to their enemies (Deut 7:2, 16). At other times God Himself is described as not willing to show mercy to the enemies of His people (e.g. Isa 27:11; cf. Ps 59:5; Isa 26:10-11).

The idea of removal from the covenant community is overtly expressed by the use of the extirpation formula: "May his descendants be cut off [*kārat*]." God had stated in the Pentateuch that those who sin defiantly were to be cut off from among His people

(e.g. Num 15:30-31; cf. Exod 12:15; 30:33; 31:14). The Psalter also says that the "offspring of the wicked will be cut off" (37:28, 38); that their names will be blotted out for ever (9:5). This was precisely what God said would happen to those who would say, "I will be safe even though I persist in going my own way" (Deut 29:19-20). Such individuals would be blotted out of the book of life and would not be listed among the righteous (Ps 69:28).

In verse 14 the psalmist seems to have in mind Deuteronomy 29:16-20. He prays that God will remember always the sin of the father and never blot out the sin of the mother (vs. 14). The verb "to remember" (*zākar*) expresses a punitive judgment when associated with terms for sin (here we have *āwōn* = "iniquity").<sup>47</sup> If God does not remember the sin of a person, that means that forgiveness was granted (Jer 31:34; Isa 43:25; 64:9 [8]). But if He remembers them there is a punitive action (Hos 7:1-2; cf. Ps 25:6-7; 79:8-9).

In verse 15 the psalmist asks God to cut off the memory of the wicked from the earth. Blotting out the memory of someone "refers to death and annihilation."<sup>48</sup> This is exactly what the Lord said would happen to the wicked (Ps 9:6). God was going to do this particularly to the Amalekites (Exod 17:15; Deut 25:19).

The author proceeds in vss. 16-18 to provide reasons to justify the imprecatory language. The first thing we are told is that the wicked "never thought [*zākar*] about kindness [*ḥesed*]." The verb *zakar* was used in vs. 14 and the noun in vs. 15; the term kindness was used in vs. 12. The imprecatory language is based on the law of retribution (*lex talionis*): he did not show kindness to any one, no one should show kindness to him; he never thought about kindness, God will never stop thinking about his sin. This evildoer broke the covenant relationship, and he is expected to receive the covenant curses.

A person shows kindness (*ḥesed*) by respecting and protecting the widow and the orphan, those who were needy and poor (e.g. Deut 24:12-14; Zech 7:9-10).<sup>49</sup> According to Exodus 22:22-24 the punishment for those who violated the right of a widow or an orphan was that their "wives would [become] widows" and their "children fatherless." This seems to be a reference to the *lex*

*talionis*. The imprecation in vs. 9 is based on this covenant violation and is not an expression of the cruelty of the psalmist.<sup>50</sup>

The imprecations listed in vs. 17 are also based on the *lex talionis*: The enemy cursed and never blessed the poor, therefore, the curse should fall on him and blessing should be “far from him.” The concept of cursing the one who curses and blessing those who bless others is found very early in the Bible as a promise from God to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3). The psalmist prays that his enemy may receive exactly what he deserves, based on the way he has acted. This particular enemy was beyond redemption<sup>51</sup> and was to be removed from the covenant community.

The psalmist’s enemy was characterized by a cursing disposition and attitude (vss. 18-19).<sup>52</sup> “Cursing was his outer fabric. . . . Cursing also became his inner fiber. He drank curses like water, and imprecations healed and soothed his frame like oil.”<sup>53</sup> The psalmist describes his enemy here as a person trapped in his own curses, becoming himself a cursed person (cf. 2 Kgs 22:19; Jer 24:9). Accursed persons were cut off [*kārat*] from the land by the Lord (Ps 37:22). This explains why the petitioner requested that the enemy be cut off from the land. These imprecations, the psalmist says, should be the reward or punishment of his enemy (vs. 20).

The imprecations in this psalm should not be interpreted as expressing a spirit of hatred, revenge, and cruelty on the part of the psalmist. He is asking God to punish his enemies, but to do it with justice, basing the judgment on their behavior and attitudes.

The law of retribution provides the legal backbone for these imprecations. The legal language used is taken from the covenant law, and the imprecatory request is based on the penalty stipulated for its violation. The fundamental motivation of the psalmist is an intense thirst for divine justice and for the reestablishment of the social, religious and psychological order created by God’s covenant which the defiant enemy has dared to upset.

#### 6. Psalm 137:7-9

7 Remember [*zākar*], O Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. “Tear it down,” they cried, “Tear it down to its foundation!”

8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy [*’ašrê*] is he who repays [*šillam*] you for what you have done to us—

9 He who seizes your infants [*’ôlāl*] and dashes [*nippeš*] them against the rocks.

This psalm has some characteristics of an individual lament<sup>54</sup> but is probably a song of Zion (vs. 3).<sup>55</sup> The author is reminiscing his painful experience in exile and the intense pain of knowing that Zion was in ruins. This leads him to express several strong imprecations against the enemies of Zion. For the Edomites he asks God to “remember” (*zākar*) how they encouraged the Babylonian armies in their work of destruction (vs. 7). The implication is that God at some point will punish the Edomites.

The strongest wish is against Babylon. The psalmist knows that Babylon will be destroyed (vs. 8).<sup>56</sup> The imprecation is somewhat veiled because the petitioner is simply declaring happy (*’ašrê*) the person “who executes God’s judgment against the enemies of His chosen people.”<sup>57</sup> The punishment is described by him as “repaying” Babylon for what it did to Zion. The verb used expresses the idea of a retributive judgment (*šillam* = “reward, repay”). The *lex talionis* is being invoked in a context of war.

The next image—dashing children against the rocks—is taken from the battlefield and sounds very cruel. It is a common one used to express the idea of military defeat (e.g. 2 Kgs 8:12; Isa 13:18; Hos 10:14). It says more about the insensitivity and cruelty of ancient wars than about the true feelings of the psalmist. Nevertheless, the question to be addressed is to what extent was this inspired writer expressing God’s message or thought through that language.

It is significant that the psalmist is using in these verses concepts and terminology found in the prophetic speeches of Jeremiah and Isaiah against Babylon. This is particularly true in the case of Jeremiah 51. The concept of divine retribution runs throughout that chapter using the same terminology found in the psalm. Notice the linguistic connections:



137:8-9		Jer 51	
8	<i>bath-bābel</i> "daughter of Babylon"	33	<i>bath-bābel</i>
	<i>haššēdūdāh</i> "the destroyer"	48	<i>haššōddīm</i> (pl) cf 53, 56
	<i>šillam</i> "to repay"	6	<i>šillam</i>
	<i>gēmūl</i> "reward"	6	<i>gēmūl</i> (cf vs. 56)
9	<i>niphēš</i> "to smash"	20-22	<i>niphēš</i>
	<i>sela'</i> "rock"	25	<i>sela'</i>

We even find in Jeremiah 51:35 the Lord quoting an imprecation from the people: "May the violence done to our flesh be upon Babylon, . . ." And the Lord answers them: "I will defend your cause and avenge you" (vs. 36). Almost every noun and verb used in Psalms 137:8 is found in Jeremiah 51. The psalmist seemed to have been well acquainted with Jeremiah's oracles against Babylon and used that special revelation to phrase, under divine inspiration, his imprecation.

However, Jeremiah does not describe the defeat of Babylon as the dashing of children against the rocks. He comes very close to that language when he writes "I shatter [*nippēš*] young man and maiden" (vs. 22). There are linguistic differences, but the concept seems to be the same.

But it is Isaiah who provides the best parallel to Psalm 137:9. In one of the oracles against Babylon the Lord says, "Their infants [*ōlāl* = "child"] will be dashed to pieces [*raṭaš* = "smash to pieces"] before their eyes" (13:16). The term for "child" use in Isaiah is the same found in the psalm. The verb is a synonym of *nippēš* = "smash," used in the psalm. The psalmist was using a concept and terminology used by God to describe the collapse of Babylon. God's instrument in that task of judgment, not identified in the psalm but in Jeremiah (51:28), is proclaimed happy because he is doing justice by executing the punitive judgment of God on His enemies.

It is clear that the author of Psalm 137 was not venting a spirit of personal vindictiveness and using the cruelest language he could come up with to express his hatred against Babylon. He was simply

expressing thoughts which God had already expressed; he was appropriating divine revelation forecasting the ultimate destruction of Babylon. There is no spirit of a hatred that knows no limits to the damage to be inflicted on an enemy. On the contrary, since this punitive judgment is based on the concept of retribution, it is considered to be a righteous one.

### Summary

Our study of the language in the imprecatory passages has brought to light several significant theological elements. These enable our western mind-set to better understand them.

First, it is evident that the imprecations are based on a previous act of divine revelation that provided the theological concepts and the language employed by the inspired psalmist. Some of the language comes from the covenant curses or from the stated punishment for specific sins mentioned in the biblical legislation. In other cases concepts and phraseology seem to be taken from or point to some divine punitive activity within history against sinners (e.g. destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the rebellion of Korah).

In many cases the language is legal and expresses—using different images or similes—the biblical concept of divine retribution. This retribution expresses itself not only in the court of law but also in the battlefield, where God defeats the enemies of His people. The psalmist uses concepts and language from both contexts.

This language of war is used in the OT not only to describe how God dealt with the wicked in the past but also to indicate how He will deal with them in the future. Hence, this language is used by the prophets also.<sup>58</sup>

It is, therefore, proper to conclude that the imprecation passages contain aspects of the biblical concept of God. In fact, they convey in a very peculiar way a revelation of God's saving and punitive power which is also well attested in the rest of God's special revelation to Israel.

Second, the psalmist is not primarily interested in his own honor but in the honor of the Lord. A victory of the wicked over the psalmist would be a victory of wickedness over righteousness, casting a shadow on God's justice. It is God, then, who should

intervene to vindicate His own name and to reveal that He is a righteous God. The imprecations ask God to act once more, as He acted in the past or as He promised He would act, to vindicate His justice and His righteous servant.

Third, the imprecations are pronounced against two types of wicked persons: (1) Those who are redeemable; and (2) those who are beyond redemption and should be cut off from among God's people and from the land. For the first group, the imprecation, if granted by God, may have a positive function and may lead the person to a real knowledge of the Lord. For the second group, the imprecation, if granted, will result in their extermination. In either case God's justice will be revealed, and both groups will come to recognize, in one way or another, that the Most High is Lord over His people and the whole earth.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, we notice that very often the principle of retribution, the *lex talionis*, provides a legal background for the punishment requested by the petitioner. This is very important, because through it the justice of divine vengeance is indicated. The judgment is not arbitrary or unnecessarily cruel, but is based on the principle of a punishment that meets the magnitude of the crime. God judges individuals and nations on the basis of their deeds, and that is what the psalmist is requesting through his imprecatory language.

### Hate and Imprecations

The idea of hatred toward the wicked is associated with imprecatory language in Psalm 139:21-22. It is necessary to explore the biblical meaning of this attitude. The Hebrew verb *sānē'* is not the exact equivalent of the English "to hate." The Hebrew term expresses such ideas as "disregard," "despise," "dislike," "love less" as well as malicious hatred. The OT knows about hatred as an "innermost disposition of hostility and enmity" and condemns it (Lev 19:17-18).<sup>60</sup> The challenge is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). This attitude of love was also to be extended to the alien (Deut 10:19).

In the psalms the verb "to hate" is used by the psalmist to disassociate himself from the wicked and their evil ways. When he states, "I hate the assembly of the evildoers" he is confessing his

loyalty to the Lord; he is refusing "to sit with the wicked," that is to say, he will not identify himself with them in any way (Ps 26:5). A similar confession of fidelity to the Lord is contained in Psalm 31:6-7 "I abhor [*sānē*, hate] those who cling to worthless idols; I trust in the Lord." This is indeed a very peculiar way of stating that he is not an idolater. At times the psalmist states that he hates the deeds of faithless persons (101:3), which probably means that he does not support them in what they are doing.

The hatred of the righteous psalmist is not indiscriminate or blind, not is it based on an oversensitive ego. His hatred is directed against those who hate God, because God's enemies are also his own enemies (139:21-22). Not to hate them is to be one of them, to identify with their deeds and enmity toward God. Therefore, this hatred is not an emotion of the unregenerate heart but "a passionate disowning in faith of the evil or the evil person whom God Himself has rejected."<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the most important thing about this kind of hatred in the Psalter is that it is not a natural reaction of the human heart. Rather it is based upon and motivated by love for God: "Let those who love the Lord hate evil" (97:10). This type of hate is demanded, required by the Lord. Without love for God it is not possible for the human heart to hate evil (Ps 45:17). This hatred is developed through a study of God's revelation in His Torah. The psalmist says, "I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path (119:104). Because one loves the law one is able to hate double-minded persons (119:113) and falsehood (vs. 163). This kind of hatred is natural only for the righteous person."<sup>62</sup>

What we have just described does not seem to be significantly different from what we find in the NT. When Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy' (Matt 5:43), he was not referring to the OT because this command is not found there. He may have been quoting a popular maxim or "the command of the Qumran sect to hate the sons of darkness."<sup>63</sup>

However, Jesus recognizes that in order to be one of his followers an element of hatred is necessary.<sup>64</sup> One must be willing to hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even oneself (Luke 14:26). What Jesus is requiring from his followers is "a radical departure of natural ties which could com-

promise their absolute dedication to the Saviour and his saving mission."<sup>65</sup> This type of repudiation is derived from love, as in the OT, and is an expression of the person's total and absolute commitment to the Lord.<sup>66</sup>

We have, then, to agree with those scholars who have argued that the hatred mentioned in the psalms is not incompatible with the law of love but rather presupposes that one is fully committed to it.<sup>67</sup> Imprecations do not automatically presuppose a natural spirit of open hostility and anger toward the wicked. This is clearly illustrated in the very strong imprecation pronounced by David against his general Joab after Joab murdered Abner (2 Sam 3:28-29, 38). Even after this incident he continued to serve David, which suggests that the imprecation was not based on David's personal hatred against Joab but against what he did to Abner. Through the imprecation David disassociated himself from the crime of his general and reaffirmed his innocence.

### Vengeance and Retribution

The concept of vengeance is used in some of the imprecatory passages in the Psalms (e.g. 58:10). Studies made on the meaning of the root *nāqam* indicate that it is used in two different ways. On the one hand it may designate the "rendering of a just punishment upon a wrongdoer." On the other hand it can refer to "vindictive revenge inflicted by wicked people upon the innocent."<sup>68</sup> In most cases the meaning of the verb seems to be "avenge, to give recompense," and the noun may be translated "vengeance, recompense, retribution."<sup>69</sup> This root is used quite often in legal context to express the idea of a just recompense, "a just payment for a crime, and not simply brutal revenge."<sup>70</sup>

Private, vindictive revenge is condemned in the Bible (Deut 32:35; Lev 19:18; Rom 12:19). However, under the theocratic law there was a legal, private revenge which allowed a person to avenge the murder of a relative (Num 35:19-21).<sup>71</sup> In order to limit excessive vengeance "the *lex talionis* established that the punishment was to be in accordance with the crime."<sup>72</sup>

Of more value and permanency is the theological statement that the Lord is the avenger of His people (Deut 32:43; Ps 18:47). The psalmist has renounced any other type of vengeance except the

divine. In asking the Lord to avenge him, he has given up human vengeance and has decided to rely on the Lord.<sup>73</sup> Those cries for vengeance "are cries for redemption, restoration, health, and healing, even though such redemption and healing may involve Yahweh's retributive justice."<sup>74</sup> The prayers, by associating vengeance with the *lex talionis*, are a request for God to give to the wicked their proper reward.

The *lex talionis* has been considered by some to be primitive and barbaric. By associating it with the imprecatory passages it would be tempting to conclude that this confirms the inhuman attitude of the psalmist toward the wicked. But studies made in the history of this legislation have revealed that it is not a primitive law and that it is concerned with the proper administration of social justice.<sup>75</sup>

It is quite probable that the biblical legislation is phrased in standardized language and that the expression, "an eye for an eye . . ." is a rhetorical formulation used to express a "law of equivalence (Exod 21:23-25; Lev 24:17-21; Deut 19:21)."<sup>76</sup> Leviticus 24:18 suggests that the phrase "a life for a life" could be used to express the idea of monetary compensation.<sup>77</sup> The *lex talionis* legislates "the principle of punishing a wrongdoer with exactly those injuries or damages he has inflicted upon someone else."<sup>78</sup>

The *lex talionis* was a just law which required a punishment in proportion to the crime. This law affirms also the personal responsibility and accountability of the criminal, limiting the punitive measures only to him or her. It was equally applied to Israelites and foreigners in Israel (Lev 24:22). Therefore, the court of law was responsible to enforce it in an attempt to preserve and/or restore social order.

For the psalmist the enforcement of the *lex talionis* is under the jurisdiction of God. He has no right to enforce it himself. Rather, he must depend on the Lord and on His justice. The law embodies the biblical concept of retribution, the rewarding of people according to their deeds.<sup>79</sup> In the Psalter retribution is the prerogative of God.<sup>80</sup> This is also the case in the NT (Rom 12:17-19). The God of the Old and New Testaments is the same; He is going to "render every man according to his works" (e.g. Rom 2:6; Ps 62:12; Rev 22:12). This theme "stands as a constant reminder of the serious-

ness with which the biblical writers understood God's hatred of evil and injustice and His will to overcome them."<sup>81</sup>

Divine vengeance and retribution belongs to the biblical concept of God and brings theological unity to both Testaments. The imprecatory passages in the Psalter radicalize the legal enforcement of those elements by removing them from the human court-of-law and placing them exclusively in God's realm of justice. The psalmist, rather than being in opposition to the NT, anticipated it.

### Conclusion

We have observed that the language used by the psalmist in the imprecatory passages embodies the revelation God had given to His servants, the prophets. The psalmist does not create his own vocabulary to express himself. The imprecations are placed linguistically and theologically within God's self-revelation to His people. In no way do the imprecations indicate a lack of spiritual maturity on the part of the petitioner. Rather, they express a profound grasp of certain fundamental aspects of God's character as revealed to him and to his people by God Himself.

The phrasing of the Divine revelation in terms of imprecations raises the question of why this form of expression was employed. Some have suggested that the psalmist was influenced by similar imprecations found in Babylonian hymns and prayers.<sup>82</sup> But the subject of the influence of Babylonian literature on the Psalter is a very debated one, and scholars are now very careful when arguing for possible parallels or influences.<sup>83</sup>

The best background for the OT imprecatory passages is probably the covenant curses used by God Himself when instituting His covenant with Israel. This provides the legal background found in the imprecations. Some scholars have suggested that there was in Israel a practice of pronouncing curses before the Lord when one was involved in a legal case in order to demonstrate one's innocence.<sup>84</sup> If this is true, we could argue that in the imprecatory passages we find an example of divine condescension. God is using a common legal practice in Israel to reveal to His people His attitude toward evil and the persistent sinner, His power to save, and the ultimate triumph of His loving justice.

Nevertheless, we still wonder, how else could the psalmist have

asked God to intervene and save him without using imprecatory language? His salvation meant in fact retribution to his enemies. Our analysis of the imprecatory passages suggest that the safest way for the psalmist to express his thought was to use the language God Himself used to describe His attitude toward evil. Then he could petition God to act once more as He acted in the past or as He promised He would do in the future.

We should recognize that the psalmist wants God to defeat, punish, and even destroy his enemies. But what is very significant here is that *he has renounced his spirit of vengeance by asking God to avenge him*. We cannot and should not condemn the psalmist for his dislike of the wicked, because he has not allowed this "hatred" to express itself in private vengeance. Through the imprecation he rejected human vengeance. "These psalms document—contrary to our initial impressions—a decisive step toward a world free of violence."<sup>85</sup>

The final question is to what extent can we or should we pray like the psalmist. Those prayers, we have argued, were written under divine inspiration. We should use them as our prayers as long as we can express through them the spirit of the psalmist: rejection of personal revenge, deep concern for God's honor and justice, a desire for God's justice to be revealed by bringing sin and impenitent sinners to an end, and a strong faith in God's power to save. It may well be that the problem we confront when reading the imprecatory passages is not so much that they seem to be incompatible with the Christian spirit, but that we are not yet ready to pray with the psalmist.

### Endnotes

\* Biblical citations are from the New International Version

\*\* Figures in parentheses designate verse location in the Hebrew Bible when different from the English numbering.

1 With, Noticer Füglistner, "Vom Mut zur ganzen Schrift," *Stimmen der Zeit* 184(1969):188.

2 Ibid.

3 Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), vol 1, p. 202.

4 E.g. J. W. Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Elements in the Psalms," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8(1897):490-505; J. L. McKenzie, "The Imprecations of the Psalter," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 111 (1944):81-96; M. D. Tuya, "El problema bíblico de las imprecaciones," *Ciencia Tomista* 78(1951):171-92; 79(1952):3-29; Othmar Schilling, "Noch

einmal die Fluchpsalmen," *Theologie und Glaube* 47(1957):177-85; and J. Blenkinsop, "Can We Pray the Cursing Psalms?" *Clergy Review* 50(1965):534-38.

<sup>5</sup> For an evaluation of this interpretation see, Beardslee, "Imprecations," p. 492; J. G. Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," *Westminster Theological Journal* 4(1942):127; and J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138(1981):38.

<sup>6</sup> John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1967), p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> McKenzie, "Imprecations," pp. 87-88, describes this view and evaluates it. He counter argues that it was the psalmist himself who while or soon after experiencing the feelings of hatred was moved by the Spirit to record them. By recording them he is approving of them. We can add that it would have been impossible for the psalmist to know that what he was writing did not have the approval of the Spirit who was inspiring him, particularly when there is no evidence in the text that God rejects the content of the prayer. In fact we find in some psalms clear evidence indicating that the imprecatory prayer was answered by God (e.g. Ps 28:4, 6; cf Jer 51:35-36).

<sup>8</sup> Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning* (New York: Alba House, 1974), p. 152. For a critique of this view see Beardslee, "Imprecatory," pp. 495-97, who, among other things, argues that to suggest "that David's moral eyesight was so defective and the work of God's Spirit in his heart so incomplete that he did not know the difference between blessing and cursing; that he could in one sentence revel in the thought of the divine compassion and in the next utter imprecations so full of bitterness that our tongue almost fears to repeat them, is utterly to confine and pervert the truth" (pp. 495-96). See also McKenzie, "Imprecations," p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> J. Carl Laney has commented that "this solution to the problem of the imprecatory psalms is inadequate because it underestimates the Old Testament's provision of ethical guidelines. Christians do enjoy the benefits of progressive revelation, but that progress is not from error to truth" ("Fresh Look," p. 39).

<sup>10</sup> This seems to be the position taken by Laney, "Fresh Look," p. 44, when writing, "It would be inappropriate for a church-age believer to call down God's judgment on the wicked." He adds that they are like the ceremonial dietary laws of the Old Testament, not applicable to the church-age.

<sup>11</sup> Vos, "Imprecatory," p. 125 criticizes the dispensationalist interpretation on two counts. First, the dispensationalist scheme lacks any biblical foundation; and, second, it "virtually makes Scripture contradict Scripture."

<sup>12</sup> For an evaluation of this argument see McKenzie, "Imprecatory," pp. 83-84. He denies that the poetical exaggerated language does not mean what it says but rather that it does "express the essence of hatred, which is to wish evil to another" (p. 84).

<sup>13</sup> For reactions to this view see Vos, "Imprecatory," pp. 126-27; and Laney, "Fresh Look," p. 39. This view has been called by George S Gunn, the allegorical interpretation because it makes the foes the spiritual enemies of the soul against which the sufferer wages this deadly polemic (*God in the Psalms* [Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1956], p. 100). See also, Beardslee, "Imprecatory," pp. 497-98.

<sup>14</sup> McKenzie, "Imprecations," p. 85, describes this view and then comments that it is quite clear that at least in some of the psalms the imprecations are addressed against the worshipper's fellow-citizens; but that, in any case, the ethical problem is not solved.

<sup>15</sup> This was the position taken by Augustine (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps 108); see the evaluations of Beardslee, "Imprecatory," pp. 498-501; Vos, "Imprecatory," p. 125; McKenzie, "Imprecations," p. 86; and Laney, "Fresh Look," pp. 39-40. Rudolf Schmid, looking at the imprecations in the Psalter from the perspective of the New Testament, suggests that these psalms should be understood eschatologically as describing God's judgment at the end ("Die Fluchpsalmen im Christlichen Gebet," in *Theologie im Wandel* [München: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1967], p. 389-91). Füglistler takes a similar position. In his study of the imprecatory psalms he uncovers two key soteriological concepts present in them: war and judgment. These theological concepts are also found in the New Testament and they

have there, as well as in the Old Testament, a demonic-eschatological coloring ("Vom Mut," pp. 191-94).

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Chalmers Martin, "Imprecations in the Psalms," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, edited by W. C. Kaiser, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 121; Blenkinsop, "Pray," pp. 536-37; Vos, "Imprecatory," p. 131; and Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Page H. Kelley, "Prayers of Troubled Saints," *Review and Expositor* 81(1984):379-80. Gunn states that these psalms "embodied necessary and valuable truth, albeit in a strange and unfortunate way" (*God*, p. 102). They have much to say, according to him, about justice and moral order.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Jacquet, *Les Psaumes e le coeur de l'homme* (Belgique: Duculot, 1975), I:140-43.

<sup>19</sup> McKenzie, "Imprecations," pp. 92-93; see also, J. L. Lille, "The Sacred Duty of Hating and Imprecating," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 115(1946):271-77; Tuya, "Problema," 79(1952):28; and C. M. Cherian, "Attitude to Enemies in the Psalms," *Bible Bhashyam* 8(1982):117. Vos, "Imprecatory," pp. 137-38, suggests that Christians can only pray for the temporal judgment of God's enemies and for the death of the reprobates.

<sup>20</sup> On quotations from psalms containing imprecations in the New Testament see, Hans K. LaRondelle, *Deliverance in the Psalms* (Berrien Springs, MI: First Impressions, 1983), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> The list of imprecatory passages in the Psalter varies because of translation difficulties. See, e.g., Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervon, 1991), pp. 830-31; Carroll "Psalms," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, edited by James L. May (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 435; and Luis I. J. Stadelmann, "As Maldicões nos Salmos," *Perspectiva Teológica* 20(1988):317. We consider the following texts to be imprecatory: 5:10; 7:9; 9:19-20; 10:15; 28:4; 31:17-18; 35:4-9, 26; 40:13-14//70:1-3; 54:5; 55:9, 15; 56:7; 58:6-10; 59:5-13; 68:1-2; 69:22-28; 71:13; 74:11; 79:6, 10, 12; 83:9-18; 94:2; 104:35; 109:6-20; 129:5-7; 137:8-9; 139:19-22; 140:9-11; 141:10; 143:12; 144:6; 149:6-9.

<sup>22</sup> See, Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:152.

<sup>25</sup> A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, vol I (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 85.

<sup>26</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:157.

<sup>27</sup> With, Craigie, *Psalms*, p. 88.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 237; and Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:341.

<sup>29</sup> K. Seybold, "Gamal," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1978), p. 29 (hereafter quoted as *TDOT*).

<sup>30</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:392.

<sup>31</sup> Craigie, *Psalms*, p. 285.

<sup>32</sup> G. J. Botterweck, "Hapar," *TDOT* 5:111.

<sup>33</sup> Stuhlmüller, "Psalms," p. 449.

<sup>34</sup> Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> G. Muderlein, "Hāras," *TDOT* 3:462.

<sup>36</sup> See, Tate, *Psalms*, p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:536. On the textual problems see Tate, *Psalms*, p. 83.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson, *Psalms*, 1:432.

<sup>39</sup> Suggested by Wayne T. Pitard, "Amarna *ekemu* and Hebrew *naqam*," *Maarav* 3 (1982):17.

<sup>40</sup> God very often announces a bloody punishment to the nations (e.g. Jer 46:10; 51:35; Ezek 28:23; Jer 48:10). See, B. Kedar-Kopfstein, "Dam," *TDOT* 3:249.

<sup>41</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:537

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Kraus, *Psalms*, 2:337.

- 43 Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 75.
- 44 Scholars have been debating whether the imprecations are being quoted by the psalmist from those pronounced by his enemies or whether they are his own imprecations. Kraus has argued quite persuasively that in vss. 6-19 the worshiper is quoting his enemies (*Psalms* 2:238; also Allen, *Psalms*, pp. 72-73). Even though the evidence seems to suggest that we may be dealing here with a quotation, I will deal with them as if they were the petitions of the psalmist against his enemies. The main reason for this is that, if they are a quotation, in vs. 20 the psalmist makes them his imprecations and throws them back on the wicked.
- 45 Allen, *Psalms*, p. 73.
- 46 H. Ringgren, "Yatôm," *TDOT* 6:481.
- 47 R. E. Clements, "Zakhar," *TDOT* 4:71.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 49 See, H-J Zobel, "Hesed," *TDOT* 5:49.
- 50 Cf. Ringgren, "Yatôm," p. 480.
- 51 Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1970), p. 106.
- 52 Cf. Anderson, *Psalms*, 2:764.
- 53 Dahood, *Psalms*, 3:106.
- 54 See, *ibid.*, p. 269.
- 55 So, Kraus, *Psalms*, 2:501; cf. Allen, *Psalms*, p. 238.
- 56 Cf. D. N. Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 137," in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of W. F. Albright*, edited by Hans Goedicke (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971), pp. 202-03.
- 57 H. Cazelles, "'ashrê," *TDOT* 1:446. Howard Osgood provided a good list of biblical passages where it is said that God dashes to pieces His enemies, including at times His rebellious people ("Dashing the Little Ones Against the Rock," *Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903):26-37). He saw some connection between Jeremiah 51 and this psalm but did not develop it (p. 29). Walter C. Kaiser follows Osgood very closely in his interpretation of this psalm (*Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988], pp. 171-75). Both of them point out that the term "child" in Hebrew does not specify age, it could designate a very young or a grown child. According to Kaiser, "The word focuses on a relationship, and not an age; as such, it points to the fact that the sins of the fathers were being repeated in the next generation" (p. 174).
- 58 This was also noticed by Stadelmann, "Maldicões," p. 322.
- 59 There is some evidence in the Old Testament which suggests that a person guilty of a crime deserving capital punishment was asked and expected to give glory to God confessing that the Lord was just in demanding the death penalty (cf. Josh 7:19). See, G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 358-59.
- 60 G. F. Hasel, "Hate; Hatred," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, edited by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: W. G. Eerdmans, 1982), p. 630.
- 61 O. Michel, "Miseo," *TDNT* 4:687.
- 62 Hasel, "Hate," p. 630.
- 63 H. Giesen, "Miseö," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 431.
- 64 Hasel, "Hate," p. 632.
- 65 F. L-R Stachowiak, "Hatred," in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 355.
- 66 Michel, "Miseö," p. 693, argues that the New Testament purifies the Old Testament concept of holy hatred by arguing that it is now to be directed against the thing and not against the person. But he overlooks the fact that in the Old Testament hatred is also directed against the sin and not only against the person. After referring to Luke 14:26 he states, "There is in the New Testament a holy repudiation and abnegation (*misein*), but it is embraced and interpreted by love as the power and content of the New World of God." This seems also to be the case of the Old Testament.
- 67 See, McKenzie, "Imprecations," p. 94; and Lilly, "Hating," pp. 271-73.

- 68 Wayne T. Pitard, "Vengeance," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, edited by David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 786.
- 69 Pitard, "Amarna," p. 16.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 71 Lipinski, "Nāqam" *TWAT* 5(1986):605.
- 72 Pitard, "Vengeance," p. 786.
- 73 See, Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1986), p. 72.
- 74 W. J. Harrelson, "Vengeance," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, edited by G. A. Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), p. 748.
- 75 See, Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 183-85; Maurice Gilbert, "La loi du talion," *Christus* 32 (1984):74; Guillaume Cardascia, "Le place du talion dans l'histoire du droit pénal à la lumière des droits du Proche-Orient ancien," in *Melanges offerts à Jean Dauwillier* (Toulouse, France: Centre d'histoire juridique méridionale, 1979), pp. 169-83; cf. J. M. Renger, "Lex Talionis," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplementary Volume*, edited by Keith Crim (Nashville, TN: Augsburg, 1976), p. 545 (hereafter *IDB Supp.*).
- 76 See, Sarna, *Exploring*, p. 186.
- 77 *Ibid.*, p. 185; Gilbert, "Loi," pp. 76-78.
- 78 Renger, "Lex," p. 545.
- 79 W. S. Towner, "Retribution," *IDB Supp.*, p. 742.
- 80 See Bernard Hall, "The Problem of Retribution in the Psalms," *Scripture* 7 (1955):84-87.
- 81 Towner, "Retribution," p. 743.
- 82 E.g. G. Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents: A Comparative Study* (Stockholm: Bokforlags Aktiebolaget Thule, 1937), pp. 292-310.
- 83 See, Klaus Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), pp. 191-93.
- 84 See, H. C. Brichto, *The Problem of 'Curse' in the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1963), pp. 63-71; J. Scharbert, "'alah," *TDOT* 1:263; Mowinckle, *Psalms*, 2:32; Stadelmann, "Maldices," p. 323.
- 85 Norbert Lohfink, "'Holy War' and the 'Ban' in the Bible," *Theology Digest* 38(1991):110-11.