

The Imprecatory Psalms (Part 2)

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Psalms 7, 35, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, and 139

The Problem

“Perhaps there is no part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible rejection to the belief that the psalms are the production of inspired men than the spirit of revenge which they sometimes seem to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness with the writers seem to manifest.”

Albert Barnes

Critical, Explanatory, and Practical on the Book of Psalms

1. They seem grossly out of place to both skeptics and Christians
2. “Explaining Away” the Cursing Psalms with Inadequate Explanations
 - [The Imprecatory Psalmist Lacked the Superior Illumination Available Only Later Through Christ](#)
 - [The Imprecatory Psalms are Prophetic in Nature](#)
 - [The Imprecatory Psalms Represent the Humanity of the Psalmist](#)

In Defense of the Imprecatory Psalms

- The legitimacy of the Imprecatory Psalms is found in their connection to both the character of God and the Abrahamic covenant, and can be better understood and affirmed through:

A Better Cultural and Ethical Understanding of the Psalmist’s Perspective

- **Calling on YHWH to Honor the Covenantal Promise**
 - David and the other Psalmists are calling on God to fulfill His promises going back to the covenant He made to Abraham

Genesis 12:3 “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.”

- Curses were part of the normal social environment of the ancient Near Eastern culture.
- “Ancient Near Eastern texts are filled with curses...most of these texts indicate that it was the god’s duty to execute blessing or curses.”
- The brutal calls for judgment in the imprecatory psalms were not bloodthirsty demands for personal revenge, but rather highlighted the promise of God to protect His people.

▪ Vindication not Vindictiveness

- The passion and intensity of the language of the imprecatory psalms were motivated by a desire for justice, not by personal vindictiveness or revenge-seeking maliciousness.
- David, for instance, always cosigned the matter to God to avenge injustice
 - **Ps. 7:6; 35:1; 58:6; 59:5**
 - David often showed humility, generosity, and patience in enduring personal attacks **(2 Sam. 16:11; 19:16-23)**

David exhibited just the opposite of a vindictive or revengeful spirit in his own life. He was personally assaulted time and time again by the likes of a Shimei, a Doeg, a cunning Saul, and his own son Absalom (1 Sam. 24:1-7; 26:5). Never once did he attempt to effect his own vindication or lift his hand to exercise what many may have regarded as his prerogative as royalty.

Walter C. Kaiser
Toward Old Testament Ethics

▪ David's Concept of Kingship

- David believed that kingship was an extension of God's absolute and authoritative rule.
 - He refused again and again to take any adverse or disloyal action against King Saul, despite his madness and jealous desire to destroy David.

1 Samuel 24:1-5

After Saul returned from fighting the Philistines, he was told that David had gone into the wilderness of Engedi. ² So Saul chose 3,000 elite troops from all Israel and went to search for David and his men near the rocks of the wild goats.

³ At the place where the road passes some sheepfolds, Saul went into a cave to relieve himself. But as it happened, David and his men were hiding farther back in that very cave!

⁴ "Now's your opportunity!" David's men whispered to him. "Today the Lord is telling you, 'I will certainly put your enemy into your power, to do with as you wish.'" So David crept forward and cut off a piece of the hem of Saul's robe.

⁵ But then David's conscience began bothering him because he had cut Saul's robe. ⁶ He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this to my lord the king. I shouldn't attack the Lord's anointed one, for the Lord himself has chosen him." ⁷ So David restrained his men and did not let them kill Saul.

- He saw his role as king in sync with zeal for God's kingdom and the destruction of wickedness.

▪ **The Abhorrence of Sin and Evil**

- The Psalmist had a holy abhorrence for sin and all that was evil – anything that would raise itself up against God.

Psalm 139:21-22

“Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with utmost hatred; they have become my enemies”

- This intense hatred for evil is lost on modern ears.
- The people of God understood well that God’s character included that of terrible wrath and infinite love...something our generation has either forgotten or rejected.

“Against all this the ferocious parts of the Psalms serve as a reminder that there is in the world such a thing as wickedness and that it (if not its perpetrators) is hateful to God.”

C. S. Lewis
Reflections on the Psalms

Jesus’ and New Testament Writer’s Affirmation of Their Inspiration and Validity

NT Speaker	NT Reference	Imprecatory Psalms Quoted
John	John 2:17	69:9
Jesus	John 15:25	35:19; 69:4
Peter	Acts 1:20	69:25; 109:8
Paul	Romans 11:9-10	69:22-23
Paul	Romans 15:3	69:9

- **New Testament validates the place of imprecatory psalms in the canon.**
 - Jesus, Paul, and Peter all quote the imprecatory psalms.
 - Of all the Psalter, other than the Messianic psalms, the imprecatory psalms are the most frequently quoted in the New Testament.

Imprecation is present in both the theology and language throughout the New Testament (e.g. **Matt. 11:20-24; 23:13-39; Mark 11:14; Acts 8:20; 13:10-11; 1 Cor. 16:2; Gal. 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:14; Rev. 6:9-11; 14:19-20; 18:4-8, 20; 19:1-3, 15**).

The Spiritual and Therapeutic Value They Offer for those Victimized by the Devastating Power of Evil in the World.

▪ Comfort and Hope for the Oppressed and Victimized

- They are a gift encouraging those suffering to “hold fast to their human dignity while at the same time, endure hardship nonviolently.”

Revelation 6: 10

“How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on earth”

- Much like the souls under the altar, the psalmist represents those oppressed by sin and evil, whose hope lies with the One and only Righteous Judge who will “make all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

In a world marred by sin and evil, God’s coming in judgment is a source of hope, not fear, because this coming will be in order to establish justice, to make everything as it should be. The imprecations in the psalms are the expressions of someone who is suffering from oppression and longs passionately for justice to be done by God.

Ernest Lucas

Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms

It is not difficult to understand why the imprecatory psalms have been for skeptics and believers alike a source of confusion, doubt, bewilderment, and even disgust. Erich Zenger suggests that the reason Western Christianity finds them uncomfortable is due to a theology that focuses on personal sin, and seems to ignore issues of social justice and its consequences. But these issues of evil and sin in the bigger context of social injustice were very familiar to both the writers of the Psalms and to the Hebrew prophets. Regardless of the reasons behind our tendency to want to reject or hide away this part of Scripture, the fact remains that the imprecatory psalms play a vital role, both then, and now in the lives of the people of God. When one is able to weed through the inadequate explanations of these psalms, and understand the ethical and cultural perspective of the psalmist, see the New Testament’s affirmation of the deep truths within, and appreciate the gifts of hope and justice granted to the oppressed and victimized of this world, the imprecatory psalms breathe new life into faith, and an anticipation that God will indeed, set things right. As Lessing states, “In times of acute and ongoing distress we must invoke the severity of God as expressed in the imprecatory psalms. It is our way of coming before the Lord and throwing the sword to Him, for ‘the battle belongs to the LORD’ (1 Sam. 17:47).