

THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS¹

1. DEFINITION

An imprecation is the expressed wish or desire for calamity to befall one's enemies, or the enemies of God. In the Biblical context, it is always addressed to God, and it contains a desire for justice to be done.

2. THE TEXTS

The major "offenders" are²

Psalm 69:22-28 [MT 23-29]

Psalm 109:6-20 [MT 7-21]

Psalm 137:8-9

Psalm 139:19-22

3. THE PROBLEM

Christians have tended to have problems with these texts, especially in view of such NT passages as

Matthew 5:44

But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

Matthew 5:39

But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

4. THE QUESTIONS

A number of questions arise:

¹ Much has been written about the imprecatory psalms. Two excellent treatments are the following:

J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 35-45; John L. McKenzie, "The Imprecations of the Psalter," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 111 (1944): 81-96. Other works can be seen in the bibliography at the end of this essay.

² Laney lists Psalms 7, 35, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 139 (p. 36), and lists short, imprecatory fragments on p. 44, n. 3. Bush's list is on pp. 2-4, n. 2 (p. 4).

1. Are these texts inspired?
2. Are they as inspired as other Scriptures?
3. How do we explain them?
4. Do they apply today?
5. How should we use them?

5. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE IMPRECATIONS

1. These are imprecations by the psalmist's enemies, not by the psalmist himself.

This applies only to Psalm 109:6-19, if at all, and it does not speak to the many other texts. It does not address the fact that in Ps 109:20, the wish is expressed that these curses be turned back on the psalmist's enemies; thus, he would be "guilty" of the same thoughts as they would be.

2. These texts are directed to spiritual enemies, not human enemies.

This is a rather subjective judgment. Also, it fails to deal with the fact that the enemy's family is mentioned in some detail in Psalm 109.

3. These texts are prophetic predictions of what would happen to the ungodly.

This solution has a strong pedigree, having been held by Augustine, Calvin, and Spurgeon, among others. Thus, what many have seen as the major problem -- that the psalmists appear to be eager for *personal* vengeance -- is avoided; they are merely predicting what will happen.

Indeed, several of these texts are explicitly said in the NT to have been fulfilled then:

Acts 1:20

"For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, "'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, "'May another take his place of leadership.'"

This quotes from Psalms 69 and 109:

Psalm 69:25:

May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents.

Psalm 109:8

May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership.

Another text is Romans 11:9-10:

And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. {10} May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever." [Paul then applies this to to the Jews.]

This is also quoting from Psalm 69 (vv. 22-25):

May the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap. {23} May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.

The problem with this solution is that it is more theologically motivated than one based upon every imprecation. Also, note that in Ps 69:24-25, we have an imperative, followed by what are probably jussives

Psalms 69:24-25

Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. {25} May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents.

Furthermore, Psalm 137:9 *seems* to have a note of satisfaction about it:

Psalms 137:8-9:

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.

4. These texts are not so bad, since Old Testament believers only had a concept of this life, and not the life to come.

This position argues that the imprecations were not asking God to consign people to everlasting punishment, and so they are not as bad as they may sound.

However, this position is self-contradictory. If this life was all they cared for, then when the psalmists ask God to take the life of their enemies, they are asking for the worst possible thing they can think of.

Besides, it is not at all an assured position that Old Testament believers only believed in this life.³

³ See D. M. Howard, Jr., "Notes on Sheol."

5. These texts express the psalmists' personal frustrations, and they are not to be held to the same standards when in the midst of crisis that they are otherwise.

This is a popular opinion today. The psalmists are seen as "venting" their frustrations. They are angry cries of frustrations, which the psalmists would not utter in more reflective moments. Our anger is part of our humanity, and thus even this "sub-Christian" sentiment must be sanctioned.

This does not take into account several facts, however. First, the Old Testament presumes that one can distinguish righteous from unrighteous anger:

Psalms 4:4

In your anger do not sin;

when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

Psalms 139:22-24

I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. {23} Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. {24} See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Second, these texts are not the product of raw impulse, which burst forth untempered by mature reflection. Rather, they are careful, poetic compositions. The psalmists carefully wrote down -- in vivid, and skillfully balanced poetry -- the words that we find offensive.

6. These express the David's private sentiments, which are not sanctioned by God.

This is closely related to the previous point. The difference is that the previous argument attempts to absolve the psalmists by saying that it's OK to sin like this in certain circumstances, i.e., under extreme stress. The present argument blames David, and states that Christians can and should do better.

We should note, however, that nothing in the texts themselves tells us this. The Bible and the Psalms do record sins, and they contain eloquent prayers of confession, where the psalmists acknowledge these sins (see especially Psalms 32 and 51). But here, in the imprecatory psalms, there is no hint that the psalmists regret what they are saying. In fact, in Psalm 139, we find precisely the opposite:

{23} Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. {24} See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Furthermore, we should note that the narrative texts of the Old Testament shows us a very different side of David: he was *not* personally vengeful. We see him *twice* sparing

Saul's life, with self-conscious comments about sparing God's anointed one (1 Samuel 24:1-7, especially v. 6; 1 Samuel 26, especially vv. 9-11). He also was very forbearing in dealings with treacherous men such as Shimei, Doeg, and Absalom.

We should also note that the NT claims that David spoke or wrote moved by the Holy Spirit -- not on his own:

Matthew 22:43

He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, [quote from Psalm 110]

Mark 12:36

David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: "'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" ' [quote from Psalm 110]

Acts 4:25

[The disciples, praising God]:

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? [quote from Psalm 2]

Concerning other Old Testament authors, 2 Peter 1:21 states that

...prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Under almost any view of the inspiration of Scripture, this poses a problem for us. For some, the question is, How could the Holy Spirit inspire -- in the first place -- such things? Or, for others, assuming the words *became* Scripture, the question is How could the Holy Spirit have sanctioned such words *becoming* Scripture? Even if we take a purely naturalistic view of the development of Scripture, we can still ask, How could the same people -- those who usually exhibited such fine sensibilities and who included such texts as those about turning the other cheek, etc. -- countenance including such texts as these in the Scriptures they collected.

7. These texts express an inferior OT ethic.

This is a very popular view. This allows us to condemn the imprecations as "sub-Christian," and thus effectively to ignore them.

It is true that the NT tightens up on many OT laws. A good example is from the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:27-28: {27} "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' {28} But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Many would speak of a progressive revelation, or unfolding revelation, to describe the fuller knowledge of God revealed in the NT.

However, as Laney notes (39),

Christians do enjoy the benefits of progressive revelation, but that progress is not from error to truth; instead, it is a progression from incomplete revelation to a more full and complete revelation or divine disclosure.

Also, we should note that the OT has a much higher ethic than is commonly supposed. Deuteronomy 32:35 reserves vengeance to God. People are not to take their own vengeance: God states that

It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them."

This is the same sentiment found in Romans 12:19:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

and in Hebrews 10:30:

For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." [quoting Deut 32:35-36]

Also there are other texts in the OT that speak of loving one's enemies, rather than exacting vengeance from them.

Exodus 23:4-5

"If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. {5} If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.

Proverbs 24:17-18

Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, {18} or the LORD will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him.

Proverbs 25:21

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. [quoted by Paul in Romans 12:20]

Leviticus 19:17-18

"Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. {18} "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

8. These texts are nothing but poetic exaggerations.

By this, some explain the entire corpus away. Because they were exaggerating, the psalmists did not really mean what they said. Many ANE cultures had similar cursings, and they merely are reflections of a general hostility.

While some use this to go to an unacceptable extreme --namely, of completely dismissing the problem altogether -- this probably represents one of the keys to the answer. This is because there is some truth to this point. The psalms themselves do often use metaphors to express reality:

Psalms 6:6-7 [MT 7-8]:

I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. {7} My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes.

Psalms 42:3 [MT 4]:

My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

Psalms 80:5 [MT 6]:

You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.

Psalms 102:9 [MT 10]:

For I eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears

Notice that Psalm 69 itself begins with very dramatic metaphors, that no one takes literally:

Psalms 69:1-4:

{1} Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

{2} I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.

- {3} I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail,
looking for my God.
- {4} Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head;
many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me....

We should have little compunction, then, about taking the imprecations in vv. 22-28 in a similar way. It may be our contemporary sense of propriety that is offended more than anything else.

The fact that we take some of the imprecations as metaphorical -- particularly the ones that are more outrageous to modern ears -- does not mean that we strip them of any meaning at all, however. To the contrary, they still exhibit a great sense of outrage.

But, they are stripped of the personal vindictiveness -- even a delighted sadistic sense -- that is usually associated with these.

6. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE IMPRECATIONS

So, can the Old Testament imprecations be justified? I think they can, provided they are understood in a prescribed context.

A. Old Testament Justification.

Ultimately, the imprecations arise out of a sense of justice and fair play. If God's people are suffering at the hands of the wicked, then God is not being faithful to his own standards. These psalms, then, raise the same questions that Job and Habakkuk do: why do the innocent and the faithful suffer?

Seen in this light, the psalmists are merely calling God to be faithful to his own standards -- to his own promises. These are rooted in the Abrahamic Covenant, given in Genesis 12:3:

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This is what is behind Jeremiah's cry in Jeremiah 11:20:

But, O LORD Almighty, you who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them [the wicked ones in Judah], for to you I have committed my cause.

2. New Testament Justification.

We should note carefully that the problem is not just with the Old Testament. A strict, and false, dichotomy should not be made between OT curses and NT grace. Many times, the NT speaks harshly, too. Consider the following New Testament passages:

Acts 23:3

[Paul speaking to the high priest]:

"God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!

1 Timothy 1:19-20

[you should hold on] to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. {20} Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

2 Timothy 4:14

Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done.

Revelation 6:9-10

When [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. {10} They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

*The following are Jesus' cursings:*⁴

Matthew 10:14

[Speaking to disciples]:

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.

Matthew 11:21-24

"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. {22} But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. {23} And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. {24} But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

⁴ Bush lists more NT references on p. 6, n. 6.

Mark 3:5

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

Matthew 12:34

You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

Matthew 23:13-39

{13} "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ...

{15} "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ...

{16} "Woe to you, blind guides! ...

{17} You blind fools! ...

{19} You blind men! ...

{23} "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ...

{24} You blind guides! ...

{25} "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ...

{26} Blind Pharisee! ...

{27} "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ...

{29} "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ...

{33} "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? {34} Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. {35} And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. {36} I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. {37} "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. {38}

Look , your house is left to you desolate. {39} For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' "

We should also note that the NT speaks of hell far more than the OT does. Thus, the problem of cursings in the Bible ranges far beyond the OT itself; it involves a problem with the entire Bible.

7. MODERN-DAY USE OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Can we use the imprecatory psalms today as our prayers? Laney says "no," because we are from a different dispensation than the Old Testament believers; his main concern is to justify *them*. McKenzie says "no," although for a very different reason: they are too lofty in expression. That is, they are expressions of people who were much more in tune with God that we will likely ever be; their motives were pure, while ours may be suspect.

My own inclinations are in sympathy with McKenzie's.⁵ I would rather Christians err in the direction of not using them, since they are so easy to misuse or abuse. Usually, the imprecations are uttered by favored Old Testament individuals, who represent God's people in some way. Most of us here today do not represent God in the same way that David or Jeremiah did.

However, I would say that we cannot condemn the Biblical writers for these imprecations. They are rooted in a scrupulous sense of justice, and of wanting God to take his vengeance. *We should note well that never do the psalmists declare their desire or intent to take their own vengeance: it is always God that they ask to intervene.*

Thus, we must conclude that there is a place for righteous anger. Otherwise, there is no basis for condemning anything. We must be able to condemn evil, even when it is directed at us.

So, can we use the imprecations? Perhaps, but only with great care. The following are guidelines for careful use of imprecations:

1. Believers should never speak of personal, private vengeance. Rather, they should rely on God's vengeance.

⁵ Although, to be fair, McKenzie changed his views fairly radically over the years. In 1986, he stated that "I treat the imprecations of the Psalms as something which can have no place in a genuinely Christian life or a genuinely Christian prayer. If they can find a place, then I completely misunderstand either the text of the Psalms or the text of the Gospels." [Personal communication, March 18, 1986.]

2. This desire for God's taking vengeance should not be a vindictive desire, either. It must be rooted in a holy desire to see God's justice prevail.
3. The imprecations must not be seen as absolute. That is, the purpose of Old Testament judgments, ultimately, is to bring people to repentance, not to punish for the sake of punishment. The words of Psalm 83:16 [MT 17] are appropriate here:

Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name, O LORD.

Note also Jonah's words: "Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed." There was grace even for Nineveh.

PSALM 137

In conclusion, what can we say about Psalm 137:8-9?⁶

 Psalms 137:8-9

 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us-- {9} he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

Several things should be noted. First, the word "happy" (*'ashre*) refers in the Psalms (26x) only to individuals who trust God.

Second, the expression "dashing ... against the rocks" is used by Jesus himself, in Luke 19:44, speaking about another city, Jerusalem:

They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Indeed, the Greek form used in Luke is found again *only* in the LXX translation of Psalm 137:9. This undoubtedly indicates an intentional echo of the psalm.

Third, the translation of *`ôläl* as "infant" is a bit misleading. Its important feature is not age -- it can refer to infants or grown children -- but rather relationship; its salient feature is the fact that of *offspring*, whatever their ages.

Fourth, the psalmist must be speaking metaphorically here, since there are not cliffs or rocks anywhere near Babylon. Along the Euphrates, the terrain was flat and muddy.

⁶ See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, pp. 173-75 here.

The psalm, then, certainly expresses a great outrage at what Babylon (and Edom) has done to God's people, and it does express a desire on the part of those who trust in God that justice be done to Babylon. However, it certainly does not express a sadistic delight in the smashing of innocent babies.

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