

Is it Right to Pray the Imprecatory Psalms?

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Introduction

The usefulness of Imprecatory Psalms as Christian Scripture poses one of the greater hermeneutical challenges to confessing evangelical scholarship. While the Psalter has been a source of blessing for faithful Christians over the millennia in times of thanksgiving, lament, praise, and complaint, this same book contains imprecations that boldly ask for horrific violence to be done to the psalmists' enemies.¹ While evangelical scholars cherish 2 Timothy 3:16–17, a number hold the view that these imprecations should not be appropriated for church use or for believers under the new covenant. Anderson, for instance, calls the imprecations “pre-Christian”², while Craigie views the words of imprecation not as oracles of God but as “Israel’s response to God’s revelation emerging from the painful realities of life” that are “in themselves evil”.³ In contrast, Estes reminds the reader of the Psalter that the psalmists who are crying out for vindication are not “abject pagans”⁴ but rather they are the covenant people of God pouring out their painful experiences before their covenant God.

The apparent division of scholarly opinion prompts the question of how we are to both faithfully and helpfully use the psalms that contain these imprecations within Christian worship both individually and corporately. The task of this paper is to first examine whether the psalmist’s view of justice within the psalms expressing imprecations is aligned to the view of God’s justice that encompasses the whole Psalter. If it is indeed evident that both views of justice are aligned, then the imprecations cannot be seen to be inherently evil. The second task is to suggest a framework to understand the imprecatory psalms theologically. The goal is to

¹ Examples of Psalms that contains imprecations are Psalms 5, 10, 28, 31, 35, 40, 58, 69, 109, 139, and 140.

² A. A. Anderson, *Psalms 1–72* (2 vols; NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972, Vol. 1), 434.

³ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 41.

⁴ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 172.

propose a way forward to resolve the issue at the crux of this hermeneutical challenge, “Is it right to pray the imprecatory psalms?”

Understanding Justice in the Imprecatory Psalms

From the beginning to the end of the Psalter, the psalmists testify to the two-sided justice of Yahweh where God acts salvifically on behalf of those whose allegiance is to his kingship, while he acts mercilessly against those who oppose him. Psalm 1, the hermeneutical gateway into the Psalter, teaches how the one who delights in Yahweh’s instruction will be known in the way of the righteous, while the one who walks, stands, and sits in the path of the wicked will perish. Alternatively, Psalm 2, which is considered the first psalm of Book I of the Psalter, suggests the kings of nations who do not submit to God’s anointed king will perish in the way, while those who serve Yahweh with reverential fear and who take refuge in him are blessed. Similarly, Psalm 145 before the extended doxology of Psalms 146–150 also declares the same view of God’s justice in v. 20, which is that Yahweh acts to preserve the life of those who love him, while he will destroy the wicked. It is after this concluding note that the psalmist then calls all flesh to bless the holy name of Yahweh forever (v. 21). Thus, examining Psalms 69, 109, and 137 as exemplars of imprecatory psalms, we will ask whether the view of God’s justice in these psalms is aligned to the view of God’s two-sided justice that encompasses the whole Psalter.

Understanding the Imprecations of Psalm 69 in Context

The imprecations of Psalm 69 are isolated to one section in vv. 23–28 [vv. 24–29]⁵, which structurally is significant. Before the imprecations, David cries out his utter dependence upon his covenant God as he waits in desperate agony for Yahweh to ransom him from relentless opposition (vv. 1–20). David’s initial appeal for God to save him in v. 1 sets the tone for the first half of the psalm (vv. 1–18). The metaphorical language of the waters sweeping up as far as David’s life Heb. *נֶפֶשׁ* (*nepes̄*) in v. 1 [2] conveys that the situation is threatening his very being, which is then accentuated in v. 2 [3] with the imagery of falling into muddy depths with no firm ground. Later in v. 14 [15], David repeats

⁵ There is a discrepancy in the versification of Psalm 69 between the Hebrew text and English translations. Therefore, for the sake of readership, Hebrew versification is acknowledged in the brackets when it is necessary, otherwise this section will follow English versification.

similar sentiments asking God to rescue him from the mud and not to let him fall. This phrase in v. 14 [15] rendered ‘Rescue me from the mud and let me not fall’ then has a parallel phrase that repeats the same verb נָצַל (*nāṣal*) in the cohortative (‘let me be rescued’) with the indirect objects being the threatening waters and those who hate the psalmist. The use of parallelism in this instance indicates that the situation from which the psalmist is seeking deliverance is from those who hate him. The vivid imagery of the threatening waters suggests that those who oppose him could certainly cause his death.

The use of parallelism in v. 4 [5] to describe the psalmist’s adversaries accentuates that those wishing to destroy him (v. 4c) are attacking David with lies (v. 4d) and are doing so without cause (v. 4b). His opponents are described as great (v. 4a) and powerful in their number (v. 4c). The psalmist’s perception is that he is being unjustly accused, recognising that God knows his folly and guilt (v. 5). David is implying that his guilt is not the reason why he is bearing reproach. Verse 5 [6] declares that God knows Heb. יָדָע (*yāda*) his folly, while v. 19 affirms that God knows Heb. יָדָע (*yāda*) David’s reproach, his shame, his dishonour, and his enemies. What is clear is that the psalmist is not near to death because of his own guilt, but rather due to the shame and dishonour caused by those who oppose him unjustly. Moreover, the psalmist’s concern in his shame is for those who seek Yahweh and he asks that they not be put to shame because of him (v. 6). Verses 7–8 provide the reasons for this concern, which is firstly because the psalmist’s shame is for the sake of Yahweh (v. 7) and secondly, due to his zeal for Yahweh’s temple. In fact, David almost perceives himself enduring shame on behalf of God, since the reproach was first aimed at God but has now fallen to him to bear (v. 9 [10]). As Wenham highlights, “it is not merely his own discomfort that drives the psalmist’s prayer, but the honour of God’s name and the perseverance of those who trust in him.”⁶

David’s understanding of why he is bearing shame unjustly motivates his plea in vv. 13–18 [14–19] for God to answer him. In v. 13, David affirms his trusting confidence that God will intervene in a favourable time. This confidence is in the character of God

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (STI; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 172.

whose abundance of *hesed*⁷ Heb. **חסד** will answer the psalmist by means of the faithfulness of his salvation. Similarly v. 16 [17] asks for an answer based in the belief that God's *hesed* is good. The psalmist envisions that this answer, founded in God's *hesed*, will be manifest in two ways. The first is the psalmist's hope that God will no longer hide his face from him (v. 17). The psalmist knows that if God's face is hidden so is his favour, and thus asking God to reveal his face is akin to asking God to show favour to him. The form of this favour in v. 14 and v. 18 is deliverance and ransom from those who hate him. Thus, in the first half of the psalm, leading to the imprecations, the psalmist views himself as one who faithfully honours God and has been dishonoured because of his faithfulness. This shame however is caused by those who hate the psalmist and who seek to destroy him. Therefore, as one who honours God, the psalmist is seeking favour and salvation from God, established in *hesed*, as an answer to his plight.

In contrast to David's expectation that God will redeem him (vv. 1–19), vv. 22–28 give voice to the second way David desires God's intervention, which is for God to remove his favour from those who have caused his plight. This desire for the removal of favour expressed through the imprecations involves making his enemies blind (v. 23a) and for their camp to be desolate so that no one dwells in their tents (v. 25). Then, even more terrifying, is the psalmist's request in v. 27 to give his persecutors guilt upon guilt so that they do not approach in God's righteousness.⁸ This then leads to the psalmist asking in v. 28 that they be wiped out from the book

⁷ The translational meaning and value of **חסד** (*hesed*) is widely debated. Glueck, Snaith, and Sakenfeld argue that when *hesed* is active in relationship between Yahweh and his people then the term is inherently covenantal and so should be translated 'covenantal faithfulness' or 'covenantal love' (Norman Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, London: Epworth, 1947, 98–99; Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1967, 71, 102; Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, HSM 17, Missoula: Scholars, 1978, 147). In contrast, Andersen states that *hesed* is not constrained to a covenantal relationship and has strong connections to the meaning of grace, mercy, and compassion (Francis Andersen, "Yahweh, the Kind and Sensitive God," in *God Who is Rich in Mercy*, Eds. Peter O'Brien and David Peterson, Sydney: Lancer, 1986, 41–51). There is no sufficient English word that conveys the semantic value of *hesed*. Moreover, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the debate concerning the hermeneutics of imprecations in the Psalter rather than the meaning and translational value of *hesed*. Therefore, this paper will use the transliteration only rather than providing an English equivalent.

⁸ Verse 28b in the Hebrew versification can be rendered 'and let them not approach in your righteousness', rather than the rendering of many modern English translations, 'may they have no acquittal from you' (ESV). The second person pronominal suffix modifying **צדקה** (*ṣḏdāqāh*) refers to God's righteousness.

of the living and not be recorded with the righteous. Thus, the nature of the imprecations is such that David is asking not only for physical blessing and favour to be taken away from those who hate him, but that any opportunity for the persecutors to be in right relationship with God and thus be counted on the path of the righteous be removed. Essentially, after asking God not to be hidden from him and to act in salvation, the psalmist is now requesting that those who caused his shame be the ones from whom God turns away his favour.

Is the psalmist asking for more than the principle of *lex talionis*?⁹ When we understand the imprecations in context, the answer must surely be ‘no’. As harsh and vindictive as the imprecations sound, what David is asking for is nothing more or less than what those who are persecuting are desiring for him. Verse 26 provides the reason for the imprecations. It seems that his persecutors are actively hunting those who have already suffered under God’s justice. David prays that the recipients of the withdrawal of God’s favour are the pursuers of those whom God has already struck down and slain. Thus, just as the psalmist’s persecutors are violently adding to God’s justice, so the psalmist asks for guilt to be added to them.

Understanding the imprecations within their literary context reminds us that the psalmist is not calling for God’s justice to come upon his enemies in cold blood. Rather, he views himself as one of the righteous and therefore is seeking God’s justice against those who cause God’s people shame. Thus, the psalmist’s imprecations are aligned to Psalm 1:6, which states the theological principle of Yahweh knowing the path of the righteous, while the path of the wicked will perish.¹⁰ David’s prayer in Psalm 69, including the imprecations, is that this theological truth will be realised in his situation where the righteous are suffering unjustly at the hand of those who are counted among the wicked.

Understanding the Imprecations of Psalm 109 in Context

Part of our westernised reaction to the imprecations is the assumption that words asking for God to destroy the psalmists’

⁹ The *lex talionis* refers to the ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’ principle.

¹⁰ While Yahweh knows the righteous, he is absent in the path of the wicked, where those who are present perish. Yahweh is active in the path of the righteous but absent in the life of those who oppose his rule. Thus, Broyles rightly asserts “the implication of v6b is that without divine intervention life will degenerate into death; it is only with divine aid that it is possible to sustain life” (Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 43).

opponents are motivated by hatred. Yet the motivations giving voice to the imprecations are quite contrary to our assumptions. David begins Psalm 109 with a plea for God not to be silent because he is surrounded by language of hate and opposition, both without cause (vv. 2–3). Verses 4–5 then express David’s attitude of love and good towards those who attack him. When his accuser appoints evil against him, his response is to devote himself in prayer (v. 5). Thus, the attitude of the psalmist praying the imprecations is that of dependence upon his God to act in a context where the good he is demonstrating to others is rewarded with evil.

David’s recollection of how words are spoken against him unjustly causes him to pray the imprecations in vv. 6–19 and he does so using the language of a legal courtroom setting. For instance, in v. 4 David asks for an evil man to be appointed as a prosecutor against his opposer and for the outcome of the trial to be a guilty verdict (v. 7). This request then leads to the series of imprecations asking for his accuser to be deprived of blessing and favour. This encompasses asking that the days of the psalmist’s accuser will be few so that another can take his place (v. 8), for his sons to be orphans and his wife a widow, and that even his family be reduced to poverty (vv. 10–11). In the reversal of circumstances, the psalmist asks that no one will extend *hesed* and favour (Heb. חֲנּוּן) to his accuser or to his orphaned sons. Rather, the psalmist asks in v. 13 and v. 15 that future generations will be cut off so that his name will no longer be in existence. David makes a deliberate contrast in vv. 14–15, using a play on the Hebrew זָכַר (*zākar*). He asks in v. 14 that the iniquity and sin of the father and mother be remembered (*zākar*), while the remembrance (*zākar*) of their name be cut off from the land. The reason given is that his accuser did not remember (*zākar*) to demonstrate *hesed*. Instead of showing *hesed*, the accuser pursued the humble and broken-hearted to death. David’s opponent does not delight in giving favour or blessing, but rather delights in curse. Thus, the psalmist’s logic is that if his accuser did not delight in showing to others favour and blessing, then he should not be a recipient of such *hesed*. In v. 20, David pleads that this be the recompense, that is, the just reward, of his accusers who speak against his own life. Thus, the psalmist’s prayer is aligned to the *lex talionis*.¹¹ Just as his accuser seeks to end David’s life and by

¹¹ David Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaints* (PBM; Bletchley: Paternoster, 2005), 41. See also, John N. Day, “The Imprecatory

implication his future generations, so too he asks God to put an end to his accuser's life. The difference between David's accuser and David himself is that David has displayed *hesed* to his accuser and has surrendered his desire for justice to God, while his accuser pursues David personally in violence without cause. While VanGemerén is right to highlight that we need to understand the psalmist's imprecations in the context of his time¹², it is of even greater importance to understand v. 20 as handing over retribution to Yahweh, whose promise is to curse those who curse his people in Genesis 12:3.¹³

Verse 31 is indeed the “matter of the psalm in a nutshell.”¹⁴ The reason for the psalmist's vow of praise is his confidence that God is at the right hand of the one in need in order to deliver him from those who would judge his life. Again, courtroom language is used. In v. 6, the psalmist asks that an accuser be appointed at the right hand of his opponent, while in v. 31 the psalmist affirms that God, who can deliver his life, is at his right hand. God's justice is such that salvation for his people means justice against those who oppose them.¹⁵

Understanding the Imprecations of Psalm 137 in Context

The violence of the imprecations in Psalm 137 is unpalatable to the point that Zenger calls it “the ‘psalm of violence’ *par excellence*.”¹⁶ It is critical however that we do not divorce the psalm from its exilic context where the exiles themselves have experienced horrific violence at the hand of the Babylonians, suffering torment and oppression in a foreign land. The psalmist is aware of the widening chasm between the promise of the songs of Zion and the reality of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. For instance, the song of Zion in Psalm 46 celebrates Zion's inviolability because God is in the midst of her (vv. 5, 7, 11). Psalm 46:2–3 declares that even

Psalms and Christian Ethics,” *BSac* 159 (2002), 179: “David asked the divine Judge to extend to his enemy the demands of the *lex talionis*.”

¹² Willem A. VanGemerén, “Psalms”, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols; Eds. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008, Vol. 5), 810.

¹³ Firth, *Surrendering*, 42, observes “as an expression of covenant faithfulness, that desire for vengeance is handed over to Yahweh since the right of vengeance is exclusively his.” Furthermore, Day, “Imprecatory Psalms,” 179, perceives echoes of Genesis 12:3 in Psalm 109.

¹⁴ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150* (TOTC; Leicester: IVP, 1973), 391.

¹⁵ Day, “Imprecatory Psalms,” 178.

¹⁶ Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: WJK, 1996), 47.

though the mountains of the earth may shake and fall, the city of Zion will not because God is present with her. The song of Zion ends with a universal call to peace (vv. 9–10) because Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, is present with his people in his chosen city, Zion (v. 11). In contrast, Psalm 137 laments how they cannot sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land (vv. 1–3) and recalls how the Edomites encouraged the Babylonians to tear down the city of Jerusalem to its foundation (v. 7). Underlying the psalm is the uncertainty that if foreign and impure nations have torn down the city, then God must have either abandoned Zion or he is defeated.

Psalm 137 has a simple structure focused on זכר (*zākar* ‘to remember’) and its antithesis שכח (*šākah* ‘to forget’). The first use of זכר (*zākar*) is at the beginning of the first stanza in v. 1, recalling how the exiles sat by a river in Babylon and remembered Zion. This act of remembrance then leads the psalmist to recollect in vv. 2–3 how they endured the mocking of their oppressors asking them to sing the songs of Zion. The rhetorical question in v. 4 leads to the psalmist uttering imprecations against his own person. The first imprecation in v. 5 is conditional upon the psalmist forgetting Heb. שכח (*šākah*) Jerusalem. In this instance, the psalmist asks that his right hand would forget how to play his instrument. If he forgets Jerusalem, which means that he has forgotten the songs of Zion, then in his view he does not deserve to be able to play. The second imprecation is conditional upon the psalmist not remembering (*zākar*) the city (v. 6). His highest joy would be reflected in his singing. If he no longer remembers, then this would no longer be the case and again, in his view, God should take away the capacity for the psalmist to sing and even to speak.

After the psalmist speaks imprecations against himself in the second stanza, the third stanza (vv. 7–9) is a command for Yahweh to remember (*zākar*) how Edom and Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. In v. 7, although Edom was not involved in the actual destruction of Jerusalem, Edom is portrayed as an accomplice in its encouragement of the Babylonians to wreak destruction in Jerusalem. Then vv. 8–9 focuses upon Babylon and pronounces a two-fold blessing on the one who brings retribution to daughter Babylon. We must note that Yahweh is not explicitly addressed within vv. 8–9, but the call for Yahweh to remember in v. 7 implies he will act upon that which he remembers. It is reasonable to suggest that the psalmist is envisaging Yahweh as the one who is

blessed as he acts in vengeance against Babylon by crushing the nation in devastating defeat.¹⁷ Verse 9 is the most problematic, with the psalmist wishing that the retribution would be for the Babylonian children's heads to be smashed against rocks. Yet v. 9 is a "naked appeal for retribution"¹⁸ as the psalmist asks for Yahweh to repay Babylon for the destruction of Jerusalem kind for kind. The focus is upon the merciless justice of Yahweh upon those who destroyed the children of God's people and his city.¹⁹ There is no call for salvation on behalf of the exiles, rather the focus is on surrendering retribution for the evil perpetrated against Jerusalem to God, the one to whom justice ultimately belongs.

Are the Imprecations Inherently Evil?

Although the imprecations may offend our westernised sensibilities, contrary to Craigie this paper cannot affirm that the imprecations are "evil"²⁰. To affirm this notion, we would in effect be declaring that God's justice is not inherently good. The Psalter relentlessly portrays God's justice as two sided. Exploring the nature of justice in the imprecatory psalms, it has been observed that the psalmists' imprecations are aligned to this two-sided understanding of justice where each imprecatory psalm asks Yahweh to act in salvation on behalf of those who seek him (69:14, 17, 33–34, 109:22; see also 35:26, 58:11–12)²¹ and to act in vengeance against their adversaries (69:25–29, 109:20; see also 35:2–6, 26, 58:9–10, 83:15–18). It is

¹⁷ See Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, 461: "although this is an outburst, not a direct plea to the Judge, and reveals only obliquely what Babylon has done, the words are by implication spoken in the Lord's hearing, continuing from verse 7."

¹⁸ James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: WJK, 1994), 423. See also Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 309; A. A. Anderson, *Psalms 73–150* (2 vols; NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972, Vol. 2), 900; Kidner, *Psalms*, 461; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150* (Trans. Hilton C. Oswald. Continental; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 504; Mays, *Psalms*, 423; J. Clinton McCann Jr, "Psalms", *NIB* (Vol. IV, Nashville: Abingdon), 1228; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 952. *Contra* James Limburg, *Psalms* (Westminster. Louisville: WJK, 2000), 467, who explains the violence of the imprecations of v. 9 as a "violent wish, inexcusable but not atypical for a violent time."

¹⁹ *Contra* Heim who argues that a responsible reading of Psalm 137 understands daughter Babylon as a symbol for the brutal army and the infants being representative of the cruel soldiers who oppressed Jerusalem. There is nowhere in the text that suggests such a degree of symbolic meaning. However, Heim is correct in his observation that the nature of the imprecations is "about expressing the agony and resentment of an exiled and humiliated community about their abusive oppressors." Knut Heim, "How and Why We Should Read the Poetry of the Old Testament for Public Life Today", *Cardus*, <http://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/2981/how-and-why-we-should-read-the-poetry-of-the-old-testament-for-public-life-today/> (November 11th 2011).

²⁰ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 41.

²¹ Psalm 137 is the exception, since the psalmist does not ask for God's justice in salvation.

critical to note both aspects of God's justice are present and both are beyond dispute. The imprecations by nature are the psalmists crying out for the kind of justice that is witnessed to from the beginning (Pss. 1–2) to the goal of the Psalter (Pss. 145–150). Firth states in relation to Psalm 64, “there is no need to seek retribution because the world view of the psalm again assumes that Yahweh acts on behalf of the righteous against the wicked.”²² In surrendering the desire for justice to God, the psalmists are imploring God for his favour to be manifest in the life of those who seek him, while asking that those who are complicit in evil be cut off from God's favour. The imprecatory psalms are not just applied theodicy,²³ but they are applied *lex talionis* that moves from the academic to the personal, grounded in the extreme suffering of the psalmists, and caused by the malicious intent of others. Indeed, the imprecations are voiced because of the conviction that “justice must be done – at least, it must be done by a God who has created the world...”²⁴ Thus, the imprecations are not concerned with bloodthirsty revenge but are motivated by the conviction of God's two-sided justice and ask that the principle of God's justice be applied in their situation.

Understanding the Imprecations of the Psalms Theologically

Before we move towards suggesting ways in which new covenant believers can appropriate the imprecations of the Psalter, it is worth discussing three theological points emerging from the above discussion to form a framework for understanding the imprecations theologically.

1. The Imprecations are an Expression of Faithfulness Within the Covenant Relationship

A dimension of the Abrahamic covenant that is often glossed over is Yahweh's commitment to bless those who bless his people and curse those who curse his people (Gen. 12:1–3). This expression of Yahweh's two-sided justice of blessing and curse is engrained in the covenant relationship between God and Abram from the beginning and is then extended to Israel.²⁵ In the Mosaic covenant, an

²² Firth, *Surrendering*, 141.

²³ Estes, *Handbook*, 174.

²⁴ Zenger, *God of Vengeance*, 67.

²⁵ Carl J. Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” *BSac* 138 (1981), 42: “On the basis of the unconditional Abrahamic covenant, David had a perfect right, as the representative of the nation, to pray that God would effect what He had promised. . . The cries for judgment in the imprecatory psalms are appeals for Yahweh to carry out His judgment

expression of the two-sided justice of God inherent within the covenant relationship is the blessings and curses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. The covenant blessings and curses affirm to the nation of Israel how Yahweh will protect and act in justice on behalf of his people when they are in right relationship (Lev 26:1–13; Deut 28:1–14), but in the context of their rebellion, God also affirms that he will cut them off from the land (Lev 26:14–45; Deut 28:15–68). To emphasise this two-sidedness to Yahweh’s justice in Deuteronomy in particular, Moses’ song in chapter 32 narrates Israel’s continuous cycle of faithlessness as they spurn Yahweh’s grace in salvation (vv. 5–18). Their faithlessness in turn kindled Yahweh’s anger and made themselves the objects of God’s wrath to the point that Yahweh desired to destroy them and enact the covenant curses against his own people (vv. 19–27). In this context, Yahweh affirms that he is a God of vengeance, with the implication that he will bring justice against his people but also justice on their behalf (vv. 35–36). The kind of justice that God will enact on his people’s behalf is a “vindicating grace,”²⁶ as Yahweh will contend on behalf of his people. Yahweh’s reassurance of vengeance on behalf of his people in a context of faithfulness is a promise of justice that is gracious and merciful, while merciless towards their enemies.

While Moses’ song offers the basis for God’s people to be confident in Yahweh to act on behalf of his people as the one to whom vengeance belongs, there is a profound consequence for covenantal obedience. Verse 35 is a concluding summary of God’s actions in vv. 19–35, where he has threatened to punish his people for their hardheartedness and their refusal to acknowledge his salvific work. Yahweh’s work in wiping out his people in vv. 26–27 is his prerogative because Yahweh is their creator. For nations to conspire to blot out God’s people is to usurp the rule of God. Furthermore, vengeance is not only Yahweh’s prerogative against his people, but against all nations. In v. 36, God promises vindication and compassion for his servants when they are powerless or in bondage. Then v. 43 proclaims how Yahweh will avenge the blood of his children, take vengeance on those who oppose his people, and repay those who hate him. It is Yahweh alone who has the sovereignty to kill and to give life (v. 39).

against those who would curse the nation – judgment in accordance with the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant.”

²⁶ Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 303.

So when David and the other psalmists pray for Yahweh to vindicate them against those who threaten their lives by violent words and actions, they are praying that Yahweh would make good on his promise to act in retribution and vengeance. Their prayers are grounded in the covenant theology of Moses' song and are indeed aligned to Yahweh's sovereign and just rule. Again, the reason why the psalmists' imprecations seem unsavoury and sinful is because, in the rawness of grief and pain, the psalmists boldly ask Yahweh to act in vengeance on their behalf and on behalf of God's people. The psalmists' boldness should not be rejected as 'sinful' but rather is an applied expression of the covenant relationship. The psalmist desires to take refuge in the God who promises vengeance against those who oppose his people and his rule. It is the right response to God's commitment to bless those who bless his people and curse those who curse his people because the imprecations surrender retribution to the only one who has the right to vengeance – Yahweh.²⁷ In fact, taking vengeance into one's own hands against those causing violence unjustly would be an act of covenant unfaithfulness, since the right response, in accordance with Genesis 12:3 and Deuteronomy 32, is to trust in Yahweh, their covenant God, to act in justice on behalf of his people.²⁸ The psalmist does not personally act in vengeance, but calls his covenant God to contend for his people.²⁹ Thus given the nature of the imprecations as an expression of dependence upon the covenant God of Israel, it is reasonable to argue that the imprecations are an outworking of Torah-piety. The psalmists are applying in their contexts what they know to be true of their covenant God, which is first that vengeance belongs to Yahweh and second, that the right response then is to surrender and trust in Yahweh's justice to vindicate those who take refuge in him as their covenant God of *hesed*. The imprecations are appealing to Yahweh to make manifest his justice against those who oppose his people and, as such, is a plea with Yahweh to make evident his saving and vindicating grace, which is based in covenant theology, in the life of his people.

²⁷ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 1–72* (BST; Leicester: IVP, 2001), 122.

²⁸ See also Firth, *Surrendering*, 42; Laney, "Fresh Look," 42.

²⁹ McCann, *Psalms*, 909.

2. God's People Can Confidently Entrust Justice and Pain into the Gracious Hands of God

The motif of Yahweh's two-sided justice in covenant theology gives permission for the psalmist to cry out for justice from the dark context of agony and suffering as a consequence of much violence, physical and verbal. His hope is grounded in Yahweh's gracious promise to act as the God of vengeance on behalf of his people against those who curse them. The psalmists are recipients of curses spoken by their enemies, expressing a desire to see the lives of God's people destroyed. Thus, the psalmists can confidently entrust retribution into the gracious hands of God because they know vengeance belongs only to him and he alone is mighty to save.

Furthermore, the cries of the psalmists for Yahweh to contend on their behalf, to vindicate and save, are cries for Yahweh to manifest his covenant faithfulness based on his *hesed* in the life of God's people. In contexts of life or death, the psalmist is utterly dependent upon Yahweh's faithfulness in saving and vindicating his life. As Firth observes, "they seek to model a response to violence which is an adoption of a position of powerlessness, a posture of total trust in God... what matters, though, is the inculcation of an attitude of dependence on God."³⁰ Throughout the complaints of the psalmists, they plead for Yahweh to listen, to contend, to save, and to vindicate, for without Yahweh's intervention, the psalmist would not survive. The surrendering of retribution is "entrusting pain into the gracious hands of God"³¹ because the psalmist knows confidently that Yahweh acts as the God of his *hesed* in his favour towards those who seek him. The imprecations are an expression of trust.³²

3. Imprecations Ask Yahweh to Sever the Wicked from the Path of the Righteous

"What more terrifying prayer could there be than to ask for Yahweh not to show grace?"³³ This is Goldingay's question to the 'chilling' plea of the psalmist in 59:6 where he calls upon Yahweh not to show his favour to iniquitous nations. This is true also of Psalm 69:27–28, where the psalmist asks God to add guilt upon guilt to his

³⁰ Firth, *Surrendering*, 139.

³¹ Estes, *Handbook*, 175.

³² John Shepherd, "The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture," *Churchman* 111/2 (1997), 43.

³³ John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89* (3 vols; BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007, Vol. 2), 216.

oppressor and not to give him righteousness. In essence, David is asking that God does not justify his persecutor so that he cannot stand among the righteous. This raises the question (see below) as to whether it is ethical for a Christian justified by the righteousness of Jesus Christ to pray that those who wish to end the Christian's life not be counted among those justified by Jesus. While some might object to this leap from the Psalms to the New Testament, it must be noted that even though the Israelite worldview represents a more 'realised kingdom' perspective and we live with the tension of the 'already and the not yet', whether we ask for God to give to our oppressors his righteousness in the immediate or for an eschatological future, makes no difference to the outcome. Those whom God does not justify in the 'already', that is between Jesus' ascension and his return, will not be justified in the 'not yet', that is, after Jesus' return.

Is It Right to Pray the Imprecations of the Psalter?

The above discussion gives us a theological framework to understand the imprecations of the Psalms as an expression of covenant faithfulness in relationship to a sovereign God to whom vengeance belongs. The question remaining is how we can appropriate the imprecations of the Psalter as Christian Scripture and at the crux of the issue is whether it is ethical to pray the imprecations of the psalms. It is worth noting first that the first two theological points in the framework are unchanging from the Old Testament to the New.

First, as believers of the new covenant, the God whom we trust is still a God of two-sided justice who will bless those who bless his own or avenge those who curse his own. The first example is Matthew 25:31–46 where the separation of the sheep from the goats reflects the two-sidedness of God's justice. Those on his right are declared blessed by the king and thus receive the blessing of his kingdom. The reason they receive blessing and are counted as righteous is that they blessed those who believe in Jesus (v. 40). Blessing one who bears the name of Jesus is blessing Jesus himself. In contrast, the king condemns those on his left to eternal destruction because they did not bless him who was in need. The objection of those cursed in v. 44 and Jesus' response in v. 45 again reflect that how a person relates to one of Jesus' disciples is relating to Jesus himself. Thus, the people on the left are those who have cursed others who belong to Jesus, and thus this is an application of the principle in Genesis 12:3. With this in mind, it would be right

for a disciple of Jesus to pray in a context where blessing offered to another is returned with curse asking God for his justice aligned to Matthew 25:31–46 to be realised. This is exactly what the imprecations are in the Psalter. It is asking God’s two-sided justice to be realised in the context of the psalmist. However, it would be wrong with Matthew 25:31–46 in mind for the Christian to enact vengeance instead of surrendering justice to the king to whom justice belongs.

A second example is Mark 9:41–48 where the outworking of God’s two-sided justice is different to the above example. In the context of the disciples telling Jesus proudly that they stopped someone performing miracles in his name, Jesus uses the opportunity to teach them the principle of Genesis 12:3. In v. 41, Jesus uses the illustration of someone giving one of his disciples a cup of water as a blessing offered to one of his people and Jesus affirms that in turn the one who blesses will be blessed. Jesus says, ‘by no means will he lose his reward’. Then in v. 42, Jesus applies the *lex talionis* directly. The one who causes a believer in Jesus to sin will receive the same in kind. The consequences are so severe that it would be better that the offender be drowned than receive the justice he or she deserves. Then vv. 43–45 applies the same principle to the disciples themselves, which is similar to the self-imprecation of Psalm 137:4–5. In saying that it would be better to cut off the hand that causes you to sin than suffer the just consequence of the sin, Jesus says that it is better to suffer now a lesser punishment than the severity of the consequence in the future. Thus, it is evident from Mark 9:41–48 that Jesus still reflects the two-sided nature of justice that characterised God’s justice in the Old Testament. This justice is both for those who cause others to sin and for believers who cause themselves to sin.

These two examples demonstrate that Jesus’ justice as taught in the Gospels reflects the two-sided justice evident in the covenant theology of the Old Testament, in which the view of justice in the Psalter is embedded. As argued above, the imprecations are a faithful response within covenant relationship to a sovereign God to whom vengeance belongs. The imprecations are a surrendering of retribution to God. Thus, with the knowledge of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels, it would be permissible for a believer in Jesus to ask that Jesus’ justice be done in his or her context that is aligned to his teaching and to the theological framework of the Psalter.

Having established that it would be permissible for a believer in Jesus to ask that God's justice be realised in his or her context, knowing that this justice is not necessarily immediate but when Jesus returns, this gives the believer confidence to entrust justice to the kingly rule of Jesus. This is what we do when we pray in the Lord's Prayer 'Your kingdom come' (Luke 11:2). Moreover, this is exactly the point of the parable of the widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18:1–8. Jesus tells the point of the parable up front in v. 1, which is that his disciples will continue to pray, that is be dependent upon God, and not lose heart. The widow in the parable relentlessly asks the judge for justice in her situation, and the judge only gives the widow justice so that she will not cause him shame by her continuous requests. In v. 7, Jesus highlights that God will give justice to those whom he has chosen and he will not delay. The challenge in v. 8 is whether Jesus will find this kind of faith on earth when he returns. This parable gives new covenant believers permission to ask for God's justice in their situation with boldness and with perseverance, with the full assurance that God will bring about justice. Thus, just as the psalmists surrendered the desire for justice to their covenant God in the Psalter, so too believers in Jesus are to actively ask for God's justice to be manifest on their behalf.

However, with the development of biblical theology from the Old to the New, the third proposition in the above framework concerning the psalmists asking God to cut off those who do evil from the path of the righteous, or from his grace, must be re-assessed. Is it ethical for the believer saved by grace to ask that others (no matter their guilt) be cut off from that same grace? The answer must be both 'yes' and 'no'. Knowing that Jesus' rule reflects that two-sidedness that encompasses the whole Psalter, it is right for the believer who is being persecuted to the point of death to ask for God's justice to be realised in their situation even if the vindication is at the return of Christ. The imprecations of the Psalter along with Luke 18:1–6 give permission for the persecuted to cry out in dependence upon God for justice and for vindication. This however must never be motivated by hatred, but rather concern (as with the psalmists) for the honour of God's name and for his people. This is affirmed by Paul who, when writing his letter to the Romans, instructs believers not to seek retribution themselves and repay evil for evil (12:17–19), but to submit that vengeance to God's anger. In making this point, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32:35, affirming that vengeance belongs to God who will repay (Rom 12:19).

However, we must also acknowledge a development with the gospel of Jesus Christ being revealed, which is that we are to love our enemies (Matt 5:43; Luke 6:27, 35). Jesus' example as he endured persecution to the point of death on the cross demonstrates compassion towards those who put him to death (Luke 23:34). As his disciples, Christians are to follow his example. Similarly Paul in Romans 12:20–21 commands believers to bless their enemies by supplying for their needs and says 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' One of the greatest expressions of that love is to pray that God would indeed change the heart of those who do violence against God's people and bring those who persecute to repentance as he did in the example of the apostle Paul.

Thus, we must hold in tension both dimensions. We have permission to echo the sentiments of the imprecations in crying out to God in contexts of great suffering and shame under persecution because we bear the name of Christ. We can surrender our desire for vindication to Jesus, knowing that he will bring justice to those who oppose his people. However, in asking for God's justice to be done, we are to pray as an expression of sacrificial love that God in his freedom be gracious to the undeserving; that he would change the hearts of those who persecute to be in the path of the righteous. Both dimensions must be held in tension since both reflect the two-sided nature of God's justice in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

There is an earthiness to God's justice that those of us who do not live under intense persecution to the point of death find hard to comprehend. We have softened the justice of God to love and graciousness rather than seeing the devouring fire of the glory of God who is jealous for his name and for those who bear his name. The imprecations are raw cries for justice in the context of intense persecution. These cries for justice are aligned to the view of justice that encompasses the whole Psalter and are based in covenant theology reflected in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. In surrendering retribution to God, the psalmists acknowledge that both salvation and vengeance belong to the sovereign rule of God and ask that what they know to be true of God's two-sided justice be manifest in their context. However, we must be clear that what is not sanctioned is taking retribution into one's own hands. Moreover, the imprecations are not uttered in a context where the psalmists are suffering because of their own folly and sinfulness. It is when they are suffering without cause. So is it right for Christians to

pray the imprecations of the Psalter? In contexts where believers are suffering unjustly because they bear the name of Jesus (and not because of their own folly), it is permissible to use the words of the psalmists to cry out to God for justice to be done. This is an expression of dependence upon our God, whom we believe brings justice to those who seek him. This justice however may not be immediate but may be realised at the return of Jesus. Thus, while striving to respond to evil with good, we have permission in these circumstances to ask for God's justice to be manifest, surrendering our desire for vindication to his vengeance, but at the same time, participating in the greatest act of love, which is to pray that God in his freedom might change the hearts of those who oppose the gospel to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ.