

“Destroy, O Lord”: Imprecation In The Psalms

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Text: Psa. 55:9


Introduction:


- I. The following is an excerpt from an August 2007 L. A. Times article.
 - A. “Until last week, ‘imprecatory prayer’ was not in many people’s vocabularies. But then the Rev. Wiley S. Drake, pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park, urged his supporters to use Psalm 109 to focus prayers directed at the ‘enemies of God’ – including the leaders of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Drake was urging the use of imprecatory prayer – prayers for another’s misfortune or for vengeance against God’s enemies. Now such prayer is the talk of blogs and letters to the editor.” (Kang, B-2)
- II. The article goes on to point out how scandalized everyone from Moslem imams to Buddhist monks were by such harsh language. Many Christians feel the same. Just what is the role of these Psalms?


Body:


How Extensive Is This Phenomenon In The Psalms?


 Classifications vary:


 Shane Scott says that the general consensus is that Psalms 55, 59, 69, 79, 109 and 137 are imprecatory Psalms. (Scott, p. 209)


 I do not doubt Brother Scott, but I had trouble finding a consensus, as the following will demonstrate.


 C. Hassell Bullock classifies Psalms 35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109 and 137 as imprecatory. (p. 228)


 J. Carl Laney would classify Psalms 7, 35, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137 and 139 as imprecatory. (p. 138)


 Alex Luc classifies Psalms 35, 58, 69, 83, 109, and 137 as imprecatory, but he notes that imprecations occur much more frequently in the Psalter than this list would indicate. He lists 28 Psalms that contain imprecations! (p. 396)


 In summary:


 If we take only those Psalms that are common to all these sources we are left with three: 69, 109 and 137.

 If we take all of the Psalms listed we have eleven Psalms: 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137 and 139.

 I believe imprecation plays a significant role in the theme of all of the eleven Psalms mentioned above.

 Some Psalms that might be questionably classified as imprecatory are 5, 12, 40, 54 and 143.

 However, the phenomenon of imprecation is much broader than this:

 As we will see the phenomenon of imprecation is not limited to the Psalms.

 It is not even limited to the Old Testament.

Some Inadequate Solutions To The Imprecatory Psalms:

☞ Views that do not take inspiration seriously:

☞ Some have argued that the Old Testament represents a lower morality than the New Testament. The problems with this should be obvious.

☞ So much of what these critics say is higher and nobler in the New Testament has its roots in the Old Testament.

☞ "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him." (Exodus 23:4-5)

☞ "You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.'" (Leviticus 19:17-18)

☞ The other side of this is that the New Testament contains the very things that these critics find objectionable in the Old. (e.g. Acts 13:10-11; Galatians 1:8-9; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 2 Timothy 4:14)

☞ C. S. Lewis represents the view that the imprecations in the Psalms simply represent the personal animosities of the Psalmists.

☞ Lewis tells us plainly that we must not, "...yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious."

☞ Although this view finds acceptance with a number of brethren it is fraught with problems.

☞ If you affirm that the curses are only inspired records of the way the Psalmist felt and not necessarily a representation of the way God expected or wanted him to feel, you call into question every emotion expressed in the Psalms. Which emotive statements do you allow and which do you disallow? This seems to me a slippery slope to stand on.

☞ It will not be long before such a position will result in the wholesale rejection of the Psalms and perhaps a great deal more than that.

☞ Imprecatory statements are not limited to the Psalms.

☞ Moses prayer in Numbers 10:35-36 contains an imprecation against the enemies of Israel.

☞ The song of Deborah contains similar material. (Judges 5:31)

☞ Jeremiah utters a number of curses against his enemies. (Jeremiah 11:20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:19-23)

☞ Such statements are not limited to the Old Testament. (Galatians 1:8-9; 2 Timothy 4:14; Revelation 6:9-10)

☞ The imprecatory Psalms are used in the New Testament.

☞ Not only are the Psalms quoted, but also the imprecations themselves.

☞ The imprecations are quoted in a number of places.

☞ Psalm 69:9 in John 2:17

Ω☉ Psalm 69:25; 109:8 in Acts 1:20

ℳ☉ Psalm 69:22-23 in Romans 11:9-10

⚡☉ Bratcher believes that Paul used the language of Psalm 79:6 or Jeremiah 10:25 in 2 Thessalonians 1:8. (Bratcher, p. 59) The sentiment is certainly the same.

▣☉ There are other quotations from the imprecatory Psalms. These are cited because the imprecations themselves are quoted.

▣☉ Clearly the Apostles took these statements to be authoritative.

☞☞ Views that take inspiration seriously but still fall short:

☞☞ Some have suggested that the imprecations are prophetic. That is these are statements of what God will do to His enemies. While this would solve a lot of problems it is simply not the case

☞☞ “Do not let them say in their heart, ‘Aha, our desire!’ Do not let them say, ‘We have swallowed him up!’ Let those be ashamed and humiliated altogether who rejoice at my distress; Let those be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves over me.” (Psalms 35:25-26)

Ω☞ “May their table before them become a snare; And when they are in peace, may it become a trap. May their eyes grow dim so that they cannot see, And make their loins shake continually. Pour out Your indignation on them, And may Your burning anger overtake them.” (Psalms 69:22-24)

ℳ☞ This is prayer not prophecy.

☞☞ Robert L. Thomas has argued that the imprecation in Revelation 6:9-11 is valid because they saw things from a divine perspective. He cites John J. Owens in support of His position,

☞☞ “There must have been such enlightened and enlarged views of God’s justice... that the psalmist, wrought up to the highest sympathy with this fundamental attribute of Jehovah, anticipated the doom of the ungodly, and devoted them at once to destruction.... God through him, could doom, in direct terms, the guilty, or he could inspire him to pray for speedy judgments to fall upon them.” (p. 131)

Ω☞ Both Thomas and Owens believe that imprecations can only be uttered by those who have been informed by God that their foes are irredeemable.

ℳ☞ The obvious problem with this position is that the Psalms were meant to be used by people who weren’t inspired.

☞☉ No matter whose classification you use, most of the imprecatory Psalms are Davidic. (Psalms: 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 109 and 139)

▣☉ Are we to understand that these Psalms only applied to the specific people David mentioned and had no meaning for successive generations of God’s people?

▣☉ This position takes inspiration seriously, but it does not take the Psalms seriously.

☞☞ There are other positions not dealt with here. Undoubtedly, there are many more that this student is not even aware of. However these are some of the more common positions.

☞☞☞☞ **What We Must Understand About These Statements...**

☞☞ The Psalmists are **not planning these actions**; they are **calling on God to carry them out**. (Deuteronomy 32:35-36)

☞☞ Furthermore, they are calling on God to do what He said He would do.

☞☞ “And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3)

☞☞ The imprecations appeal to the covenant faithfulness of God.

☞☞ The punishments called for are in harmony with the *lex talionis* [law of the tooth] (Leviticus 24:19-20)

☞☞ This is a cry for justice.

☞☞ The suffering of the Psalmist is an injustice and the Psalmist is calling for a just judgment. (cf. Psalm 59:4)

☞☞ These imprecations are **concerned with God’s glory being vindicated**. (Psalm 28:4-5; 64:5; 69:6)

☞☞ Like Phinehas the Psalmist is jealous for God.

☞☞ (This seems to me to be a mindset that is almost completely absent in Christians. In fact our Christianity may be more “sub-Christian” than David’s Judaism!)

☞☞ The early Christians called on God to **take notice of their enemies**. (Acts 4:24-30)

☞☞ In the case of the martyred saints in Revelation the language is quite strong. (Revelation 6:9-11)

☞☞ Paul frequently calls down curses on people for various reasons. (Acts 13:10-11; Galatians 1:8-9; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 2 Timothy 4:14)

☞☞ We may argue that the language is less vivid, however, the appeal to God’s justice is still there.

☞☞ J. A. Motyer makes the following observation in the context of his discussion of Psalm 109:

☞☞ “When any measure of hostility disturbs our comfortable lives we rouse ourselves to say ‘Lord, help me to love my enemies as Jesus taught, and, please, will you deal with them for me.’ The psalmist was more realistic: how will God ‘deal with them’ except in ways which he has revealed in his word? False accusers must receive what they purposed to achieve (Dt. 19:16-19, *cf.* 2 with 6); those who disobey have no tenure on earth (Dt. 4:1, *cf.* 8); sinners bring disaster on their descendants (Ex. 34:7, *cf.* 9-12). If we retreat into unreality with a general petition where the psalmist ventured to express scriptural realism, we should at least be aware of what we are doing.” (*ad loc.*)

☞☞ God will in fact deal with His enemies and we had better understand what that means.

☞☞ A careful reading of Romans 12:17-13:10 will demonstrate that God’s just punishment of the wicked frees the Christian to love his enemy.

☞☞ I don’t have to worry about justice or vengeance if God is taking care of it.

☞☞ I can love my enemy and know in the end that justice will be done.

☞☞☞ **Lessons Learned: There Is Nothing More Practical Than Judgment.**

☞☞ The imprecatory Psalmists **believed in judgment**.

- ☞ In the midst of David's plea for the judgment of His enemies, he says:
 - ☞ “O God, it is You who knows my folly, And my wrongs are not hidden from You. May those who wait for You not be ashamed through me, O Lord GOD of hosts; May those who seek You not be dishonored through me, O God of Israel.” (Psalm 69:5-6)
 - ☞ While the accusations of David's enemies are false, he is also aware of his own sin.
 - ☞ He prays that he will not bring reproach on the Name of God.
 - ☞ Asaph makes a similar plea: “Do not remember the iniquities of our forefathers against us; Let Your compassion come quickly to meet us, For we are brought very low.” (Psalm 79:8)
 - ☞ Furthermore, David does not asked to be saved because he deserves it. He asks to be saved because of who God is.
 - ☞ “Answer me, O LORD, for Your lovingkindness is good; According to the greatness of Your compassion, turn to me, And do not hide Your face from Your servant, For I am in distress; answer me quickly.” (Psalm 69:16-17)
 - ☞ David makes appeals to:
 - ☞ God's compassion.
 - ☞ David's trouble.
 - ☞ The Psalmists never argue that God owes them salvation!
 - ☞ Judgment ought to frighten us and humble us.
- ☞ The imprecatory Psalmists **hate sin**. There are two themes that we need to see in these Psalms.
 - ☞ There is a strain of **righteous indignation**.
 - ☞ “In return for my love they act as my accusers; But I am in prayer. Thus they have repaid me evil for good And hatred for my love.” (Psalm 109:4-5)
 - ☞ Curses are called down, “Because he did not remember to show lovingkindness, But persecuted the afflicted and needy man, And the despondent in heart, to put them to death. (Psalm 109:16)
 - ☞ There is an overwhelming **concern for the “name of God.”**
 - ☞ “Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; And deliver us and forgive our sins for Your name's sake. Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Let there be known among the nations in our sight.” (Psalm 79:9-10)
 - ☞ “But You, O GOD, the Lord, deal kindly with me for Your name's sake; Because Your lovingkindness is good, deliver me.” (Psalm 109:21)
 - ☞ We need more of both! (Ezekiel 9:4; Revelation 6:9-11)
- ☞ The imprecatory Psalmists **live in hope**.
 - ☞ They believe that God will hear them:
 - ☞ “Give ear to my prayer, O God; And do not hide Yourself from my supplication. Give heed to me and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and am surely distracted.” (Psalm 55:1-2)

🕒 “Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur, And He will hear my voice. (Psalm 55:17)

📖 They believe that God will deliver them:

🕒 “And my soul shall rejoice in the LORD; It shall exult in His salvation. All my bones will say, ‘LORD, who is like You, Who delivers the afflicted from him who is too strong for him, And the afflicted and the needy from him who robs him?’” (Psalm 35:9-10)

🕒 This statement follows the imprecatory portion of Psalm 35.

📖 This same hope exists in the New Testament. (Philippians 1:27-28)

✚ David As A Modern Model:

🕒 David did not **take his own revenge**:

📖 Twice he refused to kill Saul. (1 Samuel 24:1-12; 26:5-20)

📖 David refused to take vengeance on Absalom. (2 Samuel 18:5)

📖 David refused to take vengeance on Shimei. (2 Samuel 19:18-23)

📖 The one time David was tempted to seek revenge he thanked the woman who stopped him. (1 Samuel 25:32-35)

🕒 David **did good** to his enemies. Some of the evidence for this is found in the imprecatory Psalms themselves!

📖 “They repay me evil for good, To the bereavement of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting, And my prayer kept returning to my bosom. I went about as though it were my friend or brother; I bowed down mourning, as one who sorrows for a mother.” (Psalms 35:12-14)

📖 David mourned for Saul (2 Samuel 1:19-27)

🕒 When David perceived his enemies to be implacable foes of God and God’s people, he **called down judgment** on them.

🕒 We see the same thing in the New Testament:

📖 As we noted earlier Paul called down judgment on the enemies of Christ.

🕒 “But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, ‘You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.’ And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand.” (Acts 13:9-11)

🕒 “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha.” (1 Corinthians 16:22)

🕒 “Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.” (2 Timothy 4:14)

📖 Paul comforted Christians with the knowledge that their enemies would be judged.

🕒 “Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the

gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents--which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God.” (Philippians 1:27-28)

☞ “For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed--for our testimony to you was believed.” (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10)

☞ We need to follow the same pattern.

☞ We need to love our enemies.

☞ We need to do good to our enemies.

☞ However it is appropriate when we are faced with implacable enemies of all that is right and true to call on God Almighty to “take note of their threats.” (cf. Acts 4:29)

Conclusion:

- I. It seems to me that many who claim to follow Jesus today need a greater sense of the justice of God and greater hatred for sin.
- II. I suspect that many who dismiss the imprecatory Psalms as sub-Christian would readily accept Zimri and Cozbi and reject Phinehas.
- III. God had a different judgment on the matter.
 - A. “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy.” (Numbers 25:11)
- IV. David was also jealous for God and that jealousy is manifested in righteous indignation.

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Works Cited:

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