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Should Cursing Continue? Imprecatory Psalms in Biblical Theology

I. Introduction

Cursing was prevalent in ancient Israel and those who issued such curses strongly believed in their effectiveness. This understanding is not a relic from a bygone era but continues today in many societies in Africa. Still, while many Africans continue to pronounce curses or imprecations, the advent of Christianity has caused many to question this idea. The idea of cursing someone, despite the abundance of curses in the OT, seems quite foreign to the Christian ethic. Today, African Christians in both academia and in the church in general continue to struggle over this issue. In 1998, when several Kenyans were killed in the American Embassy bombing, thoughts drifted towards imprecations. A few years later, in March 2001, arsonists killed over 60 children at Kyanguli Secondary School just outside of Machakos town resulting in the “biggest case of mass murder ever brought against Kenyans.”¹ While the bombing caused more international grief, both of these events devastated the nation of Kenya and certainly caused many good Christians to revert to imprecatory thoughts, if not words and deeds.²

While African Christians readily admit their imprecatory thoughts, Christians in the West dismiss the potency of curses, regarding them as nothing more than fantasy. One may tend to expect that when tragedy and the obvious existence of biblical curses combine, even western Christians would pronounce curses on their enemies. Strangely, this seldom seems to be the case. I remember vividly where I was on September 11 when the second World Trade Center tower crumbled. I was gathered with at least a hundred other men and women in corporate prayer. We

¹ Bob Odalo, “Two Pupils Face 67 Murder Counts,” *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 7 April 2001, 1.

² In a survey done by Dr. C. O. Ogunkunle of University of Ilorin, it is noted that out of 494 Evangelical participants in Nigeria, 355 responded that they do indeed think of imprecations when they are oppressed, cheated, maltreated, etc. That is 71.9% of the people answered that they sometimes or always think of imprecations when oppressed. C. O. Ogunkunle, “Imprecations as a Weapon of the Oppressed: A Comparative Study of Selected Individuals in Israel and Churches in Nigeria” (Unpublished Paper, University of Ilorin), 12.

prayed for the survivors that were trapped under tons of rubble. We prayed for the families of those lost in the tragedy. We prayed for the government officials who were responsible for repairing so much lost real estate. We prayed for the church community who was needed now more than ever to mend people's lives and preach an undiluted gospel. We prayed intensely. We prayed with passion. When we finished praying, I realized what we had not done. We had prayed *for* people, but we never prayed *against* anyone. Never did we openly express our desire that the people in charge of this atrocity pay for their deeds. Never since these tragedies have taken place have I heard anyone repeat this prayer to God:

“Appoint a wicked man over him; And let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him come forth guilty; And let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; Let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, And his wife a widow. Let his children wander about and beg; And let them seek *sustenance* far from their ruined homes. Let the creditor seize all that he has; And let strangers plunder the product of his labor. Let there be none to extend lovingkindness to him, Nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children. Let his posterity be cut off; In a following generation let their name be blotted out (Ps 109:6-13 NASB).

Most Christians in the west apparently do not even consider cursing when acted against, while many Africans have thoughts of cursing even when not personally affected by the atrocity.³ But truthfully, we are not all that different. Both have ill feelings towards the oppressors and both desire justice to be done. We are also similar in that most Christians, from both Africa and the west, refuse to pray or sing the cursing passages of the Bible. We have all but done away with the imprecatory psalms.⁴ A New Testament Christian simply would not use the Bible to pronounce a curse, regardless of who speaks or acts against him. The task before us is not simple. Our intention here is to consider the ethical inclusion of curses in the current dispensation. The tensions between one Testament and the other and even within each

³ Ogunkunle in another survey suggests that even when bad things are happening to others and not to themselves, 69.9% continued to think of imprecations. Ogunkunle, 13.

⁴ There are certainly distinctions between types of curses and this will be explained briefly below.

Testament are so great that to reach a definite conclusion might be the work of arrogance.

Despite the difficulties, it is nevertheless important to wrestle with the issue of the Psalms and especially the imprecatory psalms and their placement in Biblical Theology. With this understanding firmly in mind, I intend to put forward an apologetic for the relevancy of present day biblical cursing by showing their appropriateness in the redemptive historical plan of God.

II. The Psalms And Biblical Theology

A. Problem

The definition of Biblical theology can be very difficult to pin down. Open any biblical theology book and you will find differing ideas as to what it entails. Perhaps von Rad is most popular for interpreting Biblical Theology as *Heilsgeschichte*. His idea is to see the Bible through the lens of salvation history. Today, most biblical theologians would agree that Biblical Theology seeks to deal with the entire canon as a redemptive and historical story. Unfortunately, there are difficulties with this system (like any system), and one of these difficulties directly impacts this discussion. If it is true that Biblical Theology deals with the entire canon, then each book about biblical theology should include chapters at least skimming each book of the Bible. This is not the case, however. In fact, most Biblical Theologies ignore the poetic genre altogether and if they do not, the time spent on it is insignificant in comparison to the prose histories. This means that Psalms, Proverbs, and many other entire books are not mentioned a single time in the Theology. This makes sense since Biblical Theology traces the redemptive historical plan of God throughout the ages. Psalms are not understood to “give a history of God’s people or God’s ways with them, nor is it the inculcation of positive doctrines or duties,

nor the formal prophetic announcements of coming events.”⁵ Roland Murphy observes concerning OT theology:

“The usual approach in Old Testament theology is by way of the biblical record of God’s revelation to the people by prophets and deeds—the rigid axis of history—which leaves little room for wisdom literature.”⁶

While Murphy is speaking specifically of wisdom literature, the same could easily be said for the Psalter; “little room is left for the Psalms in OT Theology.” James Barr insists, quite adamantly, that much of the OT does not see revelation as through history. He says that von Rad’s *Heilsgeschichte* is not the only thing of value in Biblical Theology and cites as examples wisdom material, psalms, and even Israel’s understanding of creation.⁷ This problem regarding the definition of Biblical theology remains a very important one for all biblical theologians.

B. Psalms as Revelation of the Old Testament God

Biblical Theology is about the revelation of God in history. It is true that the psalms are not historical in the sense that they are not stories or narratives. However, psalms do fit into history and they do reveal God as a redemptive deity in history. In fact, von Rad, in his *Old Testament Theology*, included the Psalter as “Israel’s answer to the saving acts of God.”⁸

Regarding this, he says:

This answer of Israel’s, which we gather for the most part from the Psalter, is theologically a subject in itself. It shows us how these acts affected Israel and how Israel on her side accepted and understood this existence in immediacy with Yahweh and in proximity to him, that is, the steps which, in this proximity to Jahweh, she took to justify or to be ashamed of herself in her own eyes and before Jahweh. . . . In the courses of her converse with Jahweh Israel did make further striking statements about herself over and above those general concepts of man which theologically do not amount to much. The

⁵ Raymond F. Surburg, “The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms,” *The Springfielder* 39 (December 1975): 88.

⁶ Roland Murphy, *Tree of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 112.

⁷ J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London, 1966), 72. For a very helpful and readable look at Barr’s response to von Rad see D. G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies* (Naperville, Alec R. Allenson, Inc. 1974).

⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 356.

way in which she saw herself before God, and pictured herself before him, is worth the highest attention theologically.⁹

This placement of Psalms is far from universally agreed upon.¹⁰ C. Barth, for one, is very hesitant to treat Psalms as Israel's response.¹¹ Although some believe that von Rad was unsatisfied with his own view later in life,¹² I believe he continued to understand Psalms in basically the same way. He continues to place Psalms as an important part of God's action even in his later work, *Wisdom in Israel*. Although specifically referring to Wisdom, von Rad in clarifying his view on poetry in history says, "The wisdom practiced in Israel was a response made by a Yahwism confronted with specific experiences of the world."¹³ Roland Murphy agrees when he comments, "God was as much at work here [in the little areas of life] as in the heady experiences of Israel's history and liturgical worship."¹⁴ Von Rad and Murphy were placing the book of Psalms and the books of Wisdom as equal to history in that God works experientially in both of them.

Despite the difficulty of the psalms and wisdom literature, I believe that Biblical Theology can still umbrella this poetic genre. My own way of dealing with this is to clarify the definition of Biblical Theology. Biblical Theology is not just the actions of God in history; rather, it includes the reactions as well. It is not just God's actions, but it is also the acts of the people in history, which are both based on his acts and are the cause of his acts. Therefore, a better definition of Biblical Theology might be the action of (history), and the reaction to (response) God's revelation. Psalms help make history a dialogue and not a one sided show.

⁹ Ibid., 355-356.

¹⁰ It might be good to remember that von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* in its whole was a very debated work.

¹¹ C. Barth, "Grundprobleme einer Theologie des Alten Testaments," *EvTh* 23 (1963): 368f. cited in D. G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies* (Naperville, Alec R. Allenson, Inc. 1974), 41.

¹² Murphy, *The Tree Of Life*, 112.

¹³ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), 307.

¹⁴ Murphy, *The Tree Of Life*, 124.

Even more specifically, we see in the psalms the feelings behind the actions of man. H. Wheeler Robinson says about the psalms,

They can be described in general as responses of varying kinds to the revelation of divine grace along the lines of Nature, Man and History and in the temple ritual as ordained of God. The Hebrew name of the book *tehillim*, i.e. ‘praises’, may not comprehend all of them, but it does fitly suggest the praise of God as a response to the manifestation of His grace.¹⁵

We have seen that there is a problem in Biblical Theology, but that this problem is not without resolution. However, this solution needs some specification, especially in regards to the imprecatory psalms. Even if we grant the psalms entrance into Biblical Theology, it is very difficult to commend them all as intimately connected to the revelation of God. We will first present the ethical difficulties of these psalms and conclude with the reason for their acceptable placement in Biblical Theology.

III. Definitions

Psalms have been divided into a host of different categories including, but not limited to, royal psalms, thanksgiving psalms, enthronement psalms, wisdom psalms, and lament psalms. It is this last category that holds the most relevance for our topic. Sheila Carney helps to explain the lament psalm in a popular article:

The lament form was used by the Israelites in the times of personal and national distress. Its purpose was not only to complain to God, to make him aware of the problem at hand, but also to express trust in his intervention and praise for his constant care.¹⁶

Psalms of lament can be further subdivided and contain a small group of psalms we refer to as “imprecatory psalms.” Carl Laney defines an “imprecation” as an invocation of judgment,

¹⁵ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 262.

¹⁶ Sheila Carney, “God Damn God: A Reflection on Expressing Anger in Prayer,” *Biblical and Theological Bulletin* 13 (1983): 116.

calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God.¹⁷ As many as 33 psalms can be labeled as imprecatory, but not one of these is completely devoted to curses. Out of these 33 psalms, 18 are generally agreed to be imprecatory psalms. Even this may be difficult to concede, considering that out of the 368 verses in these psalms, only 65 can be called imprecations or curses. Furthermore, even referring to these few as "curses" may be inadequate. Anderson and Ringgren both agree that curses in the ancient Near East were believed to go instantly and automatically against the recipient and not to "go through" God.¹⁸ Africans also often seem to prefer a direct connection between the words spoken and the effect.¹⁹ While this may be true of some African belief and some ANE beliefs, I cannot bring myself to agree with this automatic retribution theory in the Hebrew culture; rather, I maintain that the retribution of the Bible is intrinsic retribution.²⁰ The Israelites believed that God's intervention was necessary. Therefore, instead of cultic curses, the Hebrew Bible records Yahwistic prayers.²¹ We will return to these issues in the final section of the paper, but for now it should be understood that the Hebrews believed that God brought rewards and punishments on people because of their deeds

¹⁷ J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms, *BS* 138 (Jan 1981): 40.

¹⁸ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 65. Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 31.

¹⁹ John Mbiti says, "There is mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one, in terms of age, social status or office position. The words of parents, for example, carry 'power' when spoken to children: they 'cause' good fortune, curse, success, peace sorrows of blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis. The words of the medicine man work through the medicine he gives and it is this, perhaps more than the actual herb, which is thought to cause the cure or prevent misfortunes. Therefore formal 'curses' and 'blessings' are extremely potent; and people may travel long distances to receive formal blessings, and all are extra careful to avoid formal curses." It appears that God is not necessarily involved. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 197. Of course, many Africans also attribute the potency of curses to spirits or living dead.

²⁰ For a beginning to this argument of automatic retribution read Klaus Koch's classic thesis "Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?" in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Edited by James Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 57-87. Intrinsic retribution is God, the righteous judge, punishing or rewarding people based on their actions. It is not simply automatic consequences based on actions. Yahweh himself actively bestows what comes to pass as the result of human action. Just as in other ancient Near Eastern texts, the gods are concerned with keeping a cosmic order that they themselves have usually initiated. Although many texts can be interpreted to intimately link the results with the action, it would be better understood as Yahweh himself making this close connection. He is the one who rewards and the one who punishes human action. See Jace R. Broadhurst, "Material Intrinsic Retribution in Proverbs," Unpublished, 2002.

²¹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 202-203.

and that their prayers were considered a part of that process. Despite the non precision and possible connotations involved in the terms “imprecation” and “imprecatory psalm,” I believe these terms are adequate and useful and a change in terminology would just add confusion to the issue. For this reason, I will continue to conform to this established terminology.

IV. Ethical Difficulties

It should be readily admitted that imprecatory psalms are difficult. They do not make most people feel good about their Bible. Both lay and scholarly Christians have trouble explaining these sections, in spite of their usual willingness to adhere to the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture. Christians simply do not like curses. Even in African tradition, curses are generally understood to be relegated primarily, if not exclusively, to familial situations. Curses are seldom placed on those outside of the family²² and to do so would certainly require the formality of a witch-doctor/medicine-man. While curses from father to son are still considered potent, Christians have largely rejected the idea of praying to God in order to get their curses enacted. This is simply a different kind of curse and one that has been dismissed or never even considered by Christians. C. S. Lewis actually went so far as to claim that the OT is not in its entirety the Word of God.²³ The Church of England’s *Alternative Service Book* shows that the vast majority of imprecations within the Psalms is placed in square brackets and may, therefore, be omitted.²⁴ It would be possible, therefore, to cycle through the entire Psalter and never pray these psalms. “The Catholic Church, both in the missal and in the Liturgy of the

²² On this subject see Richard Gehman, “Ancestor Relations Among three African Societies in the Biblical Perspective” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1985), 82.

²³ Surberg, 90.

²⁴ John Shepherd, “The Place of Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture,” *Churchmen* 111, no 1 (1997): 27.

Hours, has removed the psalms and sections of psalms that call for vengeance and retribution.”²⁵

Walter Kaiser speaks the heart of many Christians when he says,

Perhaps there is no other part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible objection to the belief that the Psalms are the productions of inspired men than the spirit of revenge which they sometimes seem to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness which the writer seems to manifest.²⁶

There is no doubt that imprecatory psalms stretch our general thoughts about ethics and living a Christ-centered life. It is not the case, however, that there are no suggested answers. In fact, there are a host of proposed answers intended to minimize or even eliminate this dilemma. Anyone who is serious about the inspiration of the canon must at some time deal with the apparent problem of these cursing songs. Many theologians have attempted answers and this section is a summary of the most popular solutions. There is tremendous overlap among each solution, but I have tried to draw out the distinctions of each. We will now look at five basic suggestions for dealing with our apparent ethical difficulty.

A. David is Not the Author

The first solution is to take the psalms out of the mouth of David. This idea takes two different turns. First, scholars desire to show that the Psalms are not Davidic at all. They suggest that if David is not the author, then these may not be inspired and therefore, can be ignored.²⁷ The ascription at the head of some of the psalms reads *l'm David*, which is most commonly translated “a Psalm of David,” signifying that David was the author. We must remember, however, that this is not necessarily the case. *l'm David* can just as easily be translated as “for David” or “to David” in the sense of being written to him or being dedicated to him.

²⁵ Otto Knoch, “Altbundlicher Psalter. Wie kann, darf und soll ein Christ ihn beten?” *Erneuerung in Kirche und Gesellschaft* 4 (1989): 45-47; quoted in Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 16.

²⁶ Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 293.

²⁷ This end result is similar to Lewis’ as mentioned above.

There are also other ideas this preposition could be signifying and, therefore, not proof of David's authorship. Admitting this, it must be said that most scholars hold to at least the Davidic authorship of some of the psalms. He was known as the singer of songs,²⁸ and several psalms were attributed to him in the historical narratives.²⁹ Probably the best evidence is found in the NT. Both Paul and Peter attribute Psalms to David and more specifically the imprecatory Psalm 69.³⁰ Having said this, there is still not certain evidence that the Psalms are written by David, since the NT authors may have been relying on the same ascriptions that we modern readers do. They may not have been attributing the Psalms to David, but more generally referring to the editor or representative for the Psalms. This does, of course, beg the question of why he was known as the representative for the Psalms, but at least it does not guarantee his authorship. Even without this guarantee, it is generally assumed that David is the author of many of the psalms and this proposal in no way harmonizes these texts for us. Furthermore, the problem is not as much with David as it is with the inspirer of these words—the Holy Spirit. This entire argument betrays a lack of understanding of the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture. For evangelicals who hold to the inspiration of the entire Word, this does not seem to be a worthwhile solution.

A second path that some scholars propose in regard to these words not being David's is to suggest that David is simply recording the words of his enemies against him.³¹ In order to make this suggestion work, some manipulation of the text is necessary. For instance, in Psalm 109 it is suggested that the word *lemor* (saying) is missing from the text at the end of verse 5. If we were to emend the text in this way, it would read:

²⁸ See 1 Sam 23:1.

²⁹ See Neh 12:24 and 1 Chr 15:16-24.

³⁰ See Rom 11:9-10.

³¹ J. W. Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8 (1897): 491-492. Beardslee is simply suggesting this and will go on to reject this theory.

And they have rewarded me evil for good,
 And hatred for my love, 'saying'
 Set thou a wicked man over him;
 And let an adversary stand at his right hand. (ASV)

If this were the case then this solution would work beautifully. However, even if this were true, it would only work in a handful of the psalms and it would still leave many imprecations unaccounted for. The only way to handle each of the psalms would be to make considerable additions and subtractions from the texts that we have. This does not seem to be an appropriate solution unless there were much more evidence to build the case.

B. Inferior Dispensation

The second major solution advanced by Christian theologians has to do with the progress of revelation. It is argued that David, living in a different dispensation, was not expected to understand the idea of loving his enemy. It is further argued that there is a direct contradiction between the OT and the NT upon this subject. Robert Dabney has this to say concerning those who argue for this solution; "They thereupon imagine a discrepancy, if not a contradiction, between them, and adopt the mischievous conclusion that the two Testaments contain different codes of Christian ethics."³² Dr. Alexander Maclaren wrote, "it is far better to recognize the discordance between the temper of the psalmist and that enjoined by Christ, than to cover it over."³³ This recognition of the tension is important and something that most people would agree with. He continues, however, concerning the inferiority of David's time:

Our Lord has signalized the difference between his teaching and that addressed to "them of old time" and we are but following His guidance when we recognize that the psalmist's mood is distinctly inferior to that which has now become the law for devout menThe form of these maledictions belongs to a lower stage of revelation, the substance of them considered as a passionate desire for the destruction of evil, burning

³² Robert L. Dabney, "The Christian's Duty Towards His Enemies," *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. 1 (London: Banner of Truth, 1967), 706.

³⁰ Alexander Maclaren, *The Psalms*, Vol. 3 (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1901), 174.

zeal for the triumph of the truth, which is God's cause and unquenchable faith that he is just, is a part of Christian perfection.³⁴

Although it is true that David lived at a different time and may not have understood as much as the NT believer about love for an enemy, it is not fair to say that he did not at all understand this idea. Recall his dealings with Saul on several occasions as well as his understanding of the law. Exodus 23:4-5 says:

If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. 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. (NIV)

Even other wisdom literature speaks of giving bread to a hungry enemy and giving water to an enemy that is thirsty (Pro. 25:21). The OT dispensation is not inferior to the New, at least not in a negative sense. It is not that it is defective or in error, while the NT, divergently, is pure truth. Gleason Archer says that progressive revelation is "not to be thought of as a progress from error to truth, but rather as a progress from the partial and obscure to the complete and clear."³⁵ Robert Dabney agrees that there is a difference in the degrees of fullness, but says there can be no contrariety.³⁶

C. Prophetic, Not Desires of the Psalmist

A third possible solution is that these psalms are more predictive in nature than an actual wish of the psalmist. Calvin, Augustine and Spurgeon all held to this opinion to some regard.³⁷ In fact, for some psalms, this solution may be considered feasible. Barnes writes:

"Several of the passages of this kind which may properly be applied to the Messiah, are undoubtedly of this nature, and those passages are to be interpreted, when the laws of language will admit of such an interpretation as expressive of what sinners deserve, and of what will come, and not as indicating any desire on the part of the author that it should

³⁴ Ibid., 175.

³⁵ Gleason Archer, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1963), 437.

³⁶ Robert L. Dabney, "The Christian's Duty Towards His Enemies," 707.

³⁷ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1950 reprint),

be so.”³⁸

While this solution is possible for some Psalms, there are many others where the Hebrew grammar would not allow for this understanding.³⁹ As an example, consider Psalm 69:24-25 (Heb 25-26):

Pour out thy indignation upon them,
and let thy burning anger overtake them.

May their camp be a desolation,
let no one dwell in their tents. (RSV)

^m,[.z: ~h,yle[]-
%p'v.
`~gEyFiy: ^P.a;
!Arx]w:
hM'v;n> ~t'r'yji-
yhiT.
`bveyO yhiy>-la;
~h,yleh\ a'B.

These two sentences begin with an imperative verb (%pv) and are followed by three imperfect verbs (gFn, hyh, and hyh again). This syntactical relationship (imperative-imperfect) usually results in the imperfects being translated as jussives. A jussive is generally translated as a want or desire. Therefore, the imprecation in these verses is not simply a statement of fact; rather, it is a wish or desire of the Psalmist. This makes this particular solution improbable.

D. Enemies are Spiritual

A fourth possibility is that the enemies the Psalmist is cursing are spiritual enemies; and therefore, there is no possibility of sin against a brother. The law is not to be applied towards demons. Mowinckel is a popular proponent of this. He suggests that the imprecations are curses uttered under the power of God against the powers of darkness in order to overthrow the armies of evil who are torturing the Psalmist.⁴⁰ Laney argues against Mowinckel saying that to do this lends to a subjective hermeneutic, allowing the reader to simply take his pick of the text as a

³⁸ Ibid.; quoted in Surburg, 94.

³⁹ Surberg, 94.

⁴⁰ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas; New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:44-52.

literal statement or a spiritual one. He asks “How is one to determine when to make the transition from a literal to a spiritual interpretation of a particular passage?”⁴¹ Laney’s argument is far from fair. It is true that there are many times when literal interpretations are not suited for proper understanding, and there is no reason to ignore this possibility here. At the same time, just because it is a possible hermeneutical move, does not mean that it is the best move in all the imprecatory psalms. For example in Psalm 109, the enemy’s families are mentioned. It is possible that this is metaphorical, but considering the great number of physical enemies that David had, it seems more probable that the curses are aimed at actual individuals or groups. This leaves the difficulty of at least some of the imprecatory psalms still to be resolved.

E. Psalmist’s own Sentiments

A fifth solution and by far the most popular, is that these curses are simply David’s sentiments—the anger and hurt of a human author—and not those of the Holy Spirit. Laney shows that in Psalm 137, the imprecation involves the third person in such a way as to show that the speaker is expressing his own feeling as a man.⁴² The psalms are legitimized by saying that, although they cannot be emulated, they are still valid in that at least they are honest. This may be a common African understanding as prayers in general are to be honest reflections of one’s feelings. Laurenti Magesa, a well-known African Theologian says:

“Prayer is the time to express oneself in an uninhibited way; it is the time to let go of one’s whole being, to be more forthright and honest than usual. . . . Not to express oneself completely in prayer is dangerous, moreover, because it implies a further breach of trust between the visible and the invisible worlds.”⁴³

⁴¹ J. Carl Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” *BS* 138 (Jan 1981): 40.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 178.

C. S. Lewis would not be a proponent of this view. He says the imprecations are poems written by ‘ferocious, self-pitying, barbaric men.’⁴⁴ These were the enraged cries of a man in a dangerous position calling out to God, but were not good in any way. J. H. Webster, in similar fashion to Lewis, says, “Were these Imprecatory Psalms the language of more personal animosity to his foes, they would mark David as one of the most savage, profane and cruel among men.”⁴⁵ The Psalmist, being seen as such, goes against the idea given to us from Scripture of David as a man after God’s own heart. This argument may be a good counter to the solution proposed, but I wonder if it is even true. Personal animosity, even to the point of cursing people, does not necessarily make one savage, profane, or cruel. We will come back to this thought in the final section.

The second argument against the “Psalmist’s own Sentiments” view is that to see David as yelling out to God to destroy someone may be understandable if it is done in the heat of the moment, but one dare not forget that these psalms were carefully written or refined in times that were much less stressed. Furthermore, these psalms were sung or prayed in later times as the church’s hymnbook. Tremper Longman has this to say:

The Psalms, though they may have been written with a specific historical event in mind, have left that event unnamed in the body of the poem so the psalm could be reused and reapplied to similar, though not identical, later events. One person’s enemy is not another person’s but the psalm can serve both.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections of the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bliss, 1958), 26.

⁴⁵ J. H. Webster, “The Imprecatory Psalms,” *The Psalms in Worship* (ed. John McNaugher; Pittsburgh, PA: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1907), 300.

⁴⁶ Tremper Longman, III, “Lament,” in *Cracking Old Testament Codes* (ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr.; Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 202.

Furthermore, if these psalms are only the desire of David and not of the Holy Spirit, then they may not be the authoritative word of God and this implies a suspiciously low view of Scriptural inspiration.⁴⁷

An offshoot of this view is that David was not a proponent of his own words; he was simply writing what would be the common sentiment of the people. Barnes says that there is nothing in the Psalms that requires the reader to assume that the author of the psalm would approve of such barbaric treatment. The writer was giving an accurate account of feelings that existed at that time; he does not subscribe to such cruelty.⁴⁸ This still does not account for the inspiration problem, but even more simply, it is not persuasive to change such a plain reading of the text to a more difficult one. Anyone reading the Psalms would have to admit that it appears that David or the Psalmist is passionately desirous that such “cruel” behavior will be enacted against his enemies.

These five basic arguments designed to solve the difficulty brought about by the imprecatory psalms have certainly not yielded fully convincing solutions. Each argument has been countered by another argument that would at least cause the contemplative reader to rethink the proposal. At the same time, while not one of these proposals is the final solution, each of them can be regarded as helpful and, in certain of the psalms, can indeed be seen as possible solutions. The final section will seek to harmonize Biblical Theology and the imprecatory psalms and therefore solve the ethical dilemma as well.

⁴⁷ I recognize that all of Scripture does not of necessity include God’s true statements. Sometimes people in Scripture or Satan himself may speak against God or utter false statements. For this reason, I do not mean to imply that these can in no way be just David’s words, but only that that is a possible implication. The argument here would rest on the idea that the Holy Spirit guided the congregation to continue singing these psalms long past the time of their authorship.

⁴⁸ Mentioned without citation in Albertus Pieters, *The Psalms in Human Experience* (New York: The Half Moon Press, 1942), 97.

V. Biblical Theology And The Imprecatory Psalms

We have already seen that Psalms should be included in Biblical Theology because in their reply to God, they condition further acts of God. They are not stories, but they do convey history; that is they are communication between the people and their God. The people of God replied most often by way of thanksgiving and praise. But these hymns of the people also included vindication themes and curses. How are these curses to be seen as a revelation of God in salvation history? To many Christians, as we have already seen, texts which seek to reveal a loving God cannot include in them songs desiring war and violence.

A. The Word of God in Human Words

It is necessary first to remember that the Bible is not revelation in the sense of an immediate, verbal communication from God but is “the word of God in human words.”⁴⁹ This doctrine, known as organic inspiration, may shed some light on the problem. With this in mind, and before moving into the meat of this section, let us look at three assumptions that evangelicals generally hold.

1. Progressive Revelation. Evolutionary revelation cannot be accepted. The OT is not an imperfect stage of revelation that has been superceded (in a negative way) by the NT. Progressive revelation is not a move from error to truth but from incomplete truth to more complete truth.⁵⁰
2. Writer / Document / Audience. Interpreters must try to discover what the texts intended to say to the readers and hearers at the time. The texts are not universally true and timeless; rather, they fit very specifically into a social, religious and historical context.

⁴⁹ This comes from the new document from the Papal Biblical Commission (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

⁵⁰ We do not consider those in the OT to have been in error in their worship of God, despite the fact that the whole truth had not yet been revealed. They were working with the knowledge they had. The book of Hebrews does refer to the OT being superceded, but in fulfillment terms not cancellation ones.

They will naturally emphasize different truths depending on the time and place that they are read and written.

3. Canon. Individual texts do not exist in a vacuum and cannot be absolutized. They exist in canon and therefore must be heard canonically. They are always communicating with other texts of similar themes. The Bible is not a collection of revelations and eternal truths descended from heaven. Only the Bible as a whole is revelation from God.⁵¹

These three truths will help us as we strive to find the right place for these Psalms.

B. Tensions within the Testaments

Organic inspiration is the first step towards clarity, but an important second step is recognizing the tension that exists not only in the ancient world but in ours as well. The church today lives in a different world—one after the cross. How is the church to understand Israel as hating their enemy, when Jesus says to love enemies? This tension is not foreign to the OT either. We have already rejected the view that the OT time is an inferior dispensation and have mentioned verses that show the Old Testament's view of loving enemies. In addition to these, consider Job's statement:

"Have I rejoiced at the extinction of my enemy, Or exulted when evil befell him?
"No, I have not allowed my mouth to sin By asking for his life in a curse (Job 31:29-30 NASB).

Even David may have had in mind God's words, "To me belongs vengeance and recompense," as a rule for him when he found himself an enemy of Saul.⁵²

The NT is not only in tension with certain OT texts but with other NT texts as well. Jesus does declare that we are to love our enemies, but at the same time he curses many cities for their lack of repentance (Matt 11:20-24) as well as announcing a long diatribe against hypocrites and

⁵¹ These three points are very dependent on chapter three of Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 63-86.

⁵² See Dt 32:35 and 1 Sam 24.

other enemies of the truth (Matt 23). Not only Jesus, but also most of the authors of the NT call curses on people. Paul denounces a chief priest and asks God to smite him (Acts 23:3); he also prays for retribution against Alexander the coppersmith (2 Tim 4:14). Peter denounces Simon Magus saying “May your money perish with you” (Acts 8:20 NIV). These “discrepancies” within the Testaments make it impossible to put the OT against the New in any discussion concerning imprecations. With these first two steps in mind, it is now necessary to look at the covenant of God in the OT and its continuance into the New.

C. The Covenant

Possible solutions to the problem may be more easily ascertained with a proper view of covenant. It is this relationship that makes the imprecatory psalms not only bearable, but also necessary and even pleasurable.⁵³ H. Ridderbos and P. Craigie say that “there is more to the harsh language of the psalmists than at first appears on the surface; the background is to be found in the context of covenant or treaty.”⁵⁴ The relationship between God and his people began at a specific point in history with a covenant. By the time of the Mosaic covenant, there was a relatively full revelation of God as not only a loving and faithful God but also as an angry, jealous, and cursing God.⁵⁵ In this Mosaic covenant, which is intimately connected to the Abrahamic covenant, Yahweh promised to bless his people as they obeyed him and to curse

⁵³ Pleasurable may be too emotional a word, but considering the direction that covenant allows us to go, I feel that this may be a worthwhile choice if we end up agreeing with anything proposed in this section.

⁵⁴ N. H. Ridderbos and P. C. Craigie, “Psalms,” *ISBE* rev. ed. 3:1037.

⁵⁵ I hold this to be obvious from the curses promised upon Israel if they were disobedient. However, not all agree. A popular youth magazine in Kenya insists that people invoking deity in their curses cannot be expecting God the creator to bring ill on someone. “Scripture tells us that all good things come from God. He therefore cannot be the deity referred to in the definition of curses. Our God consigns people to life, not destruction.” See Atieno Okudo, “Curses,” *Step Africa* vol. 1 no. 10, (1994): 6. Laurenti Magesa confirms this more academically, “The relationship between God and creation—specifically, humanity is one of solicitude on the part of God. To associate God with anything that is not good, pure, just and honorable is ridiculous.” Magesa, 46. I think most Christian scholars would agree, however, that God does indeed curse.

those who rejected his covenant. This retributive understanding of the covenant was pervasive in Israelite society and retribution in general was a part of many other cultures as well.

Since the Psalms are generally attributed to David, let us look at this man as an example of a covenant relationship. David was a righteous man and was chosen specifically by God to be his representative on earth. With the promise of this plan and the later working out of this plan, David was still forced to spend many years in hiding while his enemies prospered and spent much time trying to kill him. This went against everything he understood about the character of God. The agreement was that if David obeyed God, then he would be blessed, specifically with a sure house, but in general as well.⁵⁶ David was living righteously, and it appeared that God was not keeping his end of the bargain. These imprecations involved the longing of a man for righteous vindication. David fully expected that God would crush his enemies because they threatened the covenant ideal. This belief is called retribution and there was no diffidence in believing this. Von Rad says:

Israel saw this idea [retribution] of the indissoluble connexion [*sic.*] between it and outcome as confirmed in daily experience. It was anything but a theological theory—it only became so in the later reflexions [*sic.*] of the Wisdom literature; rather it was substantiated by countless observations in daily life.⁵⁷

In OT times, there was an underdeveloped understanding of final vindication. It was not understood as something that happened after death. God could not allow the righteous to suffer or the wicked to prosper here on earth. They simply must be blessed or punished in the present time. Delitzsch says concerning this:

“Theodicy, or the vindication of God’s ways, does not yet rise from the indication of the retribution in the present time which the ungodly do not escape to a future solution of all the contradiction of this present world...”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ The sure house is the Davidic Covenant, but it is intimately connected to the earlier covenants and general blessing had been promised to the righteous under the Mosaic covenant.

⁵⁷ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 386.

Man fully expected God's promises to materialize on earth and would not have considered retribution as eschatological.

David believed God would vindicate him, but even more than his own vindication, David's plea for the cursing of his enemies centered rightly on the vindication of God's righteousness. God in his righteousness has set up a specific order in the world that must be followed. When people purposefully go against this order, they deserve to be punished, so that God's reputation will not be impugned. Psalm 58:6 says:

Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth: (ASV)

But the imprecation is followed with the purpose clause:

So that men shall say, Verily there is a reward for the righteous,
Verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth. (ASV)

Psalm 59:13 says:

Consume them in wrath, consume them till they are no more,
that men may know that God rules over Jacob to the ends of the earth. (NASB)

As a representative of the monarchy, David saw his own enemies as enemies of God. They were not simply guilty of treason to Israel but also of blasphemy of God. The curses uttered against these men were done with a zeal for God and his kingdom. These were bold utterances of a man who was as disgusted at sin as God was. These enemies were embodiments of sin. Psalm 5 shows David's desire that the enemies of God be dealt with:

For thou art not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not sojourn with thee.
The boastful may not stand before thy eyes; thou hatest all evildoers.
Thou destroyest those who speak lies; the LORD abhors bloodthirsty and deceitful men.
.....
For there is no truth in their mouth; their heart is destruction, their throat is an open
sepulchre, they flatter with their tongue.
Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of their

⁵⁸ Quoted from Chalmers Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms," *PTR 1* (1903), 545. No citation is given.

many transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against thee (Psalm 5:3-10 NRSV).

The reason for the curse is the sin of his enemies. Even David, who was the king and therefore, a warrior, recognized that he was, in a very real sense, the sword of God. He called on God to curse his enemies and to make the order right. Erich Zenger comments concerning this:

These psalms are realized theodicy: They affirm God by surrendering the last word *to God*. They give *to God* not only their lament about their desperate situation, but also the right to judge the originators of that situation. They leave *everything* in God's hands, even feelings of hatred and aggression.⁵⁹

While I agree with most of this statement, the last line seems to go against the entire concept of the Psalm. He does not leave *everything* in God's hands. His hatred of his enemies continues. He must hate what his king hates. But the action is left to God. David curses and in so doing is asking God to continue to keep His promises.

These promises were important to the entire nation of Israel, not only to the monarch. Every person in the community was part of the covenant and every person expected God to keep his promises. A good example of a community understanding of what these promises meant can be found in the premonarchical story of Achan. The people of Israel cannot defeat their enemies, and it comes to Joshua's attention that the reason is an enemy within the camp. Achan is discovered to have taken spoils from a past war and hid them under his tent. When he and his whole family are brought out before the people, we find that even Achan understands the importance of the promises of God. Joshua confronts him and asks him to give glory and praise to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Achan then does this, confessing his sin. The fact that Achan is then stoned by the people convinces the reader that the agreement between God and the people is even more important than human life. The judgment on one family was for the betterment of the community. This is true whether judgment is against enemies outside the community or insiders

⁵⁹ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 79.

among the community. These historical examples show the importance of an historical covenant—promises made between God and man. Every member of the community would desire and expect God to uphold his covenant promises and would ask God to judge their enemies based on this expectation—an expectation spelled out in the law itself.

There is most likely a historical background behind each of the psalms, but at the same time, they are the hymns of Israel. When Israel sang many of these songs, the psalms did not always remind them of a historical event; rather, the songs ambiguously kept them involved in the text itself and its new application to the singers. The psalm is designed for application purposes and although it may have a historical foundation, it is purposely kept ambiguous concerning details so that it may fit into the reader's situation. The enemies may have originated as historical adversaries but have become godless types and models of evil. "The enemies thus become representatives of all the power of chaos threatening the order which the Creator continues to uphold."⁶⁰ This implies, I believe, that the original historical event that prompted the psalm was not relevant to the singers; rather their own history with God and his response to their song is what kept these songs important. For this reason the new singers continued to claim the covenant blessings for themselves and expect the covenant cursings for their enemies.

Finally, a connection to the first section of the paper is needed. It was proposed there that the Psalms were a response to God, but it was left undetermined as to how imprecations can be a response. This has been alluded to in this section already, but it needs to be stated explicitly. The imprecations are a response to a covenantal God. God said he would curse those who cursed Abraham's children; that is his statement. The people sing with the desire of vindication in the hearts of the singers—a desire for God's justice to prevail; that is their response to his statement.

⁶⁰ Anderson, 63.

In this, they respond in agreement to the Suzerain (God) involved in the treaty. M. G. Kline says:

The Psalter's function in covenantal confession suggests that it may be regarded as an extension of the vassal's ratifications response, which is found in certain biblical as well as extra-biblical covenants as part of the treaty text.⁶¹

The imprecations are covenantal confessions and serve as the vassal's ratification response. In this way they fit into a Biblical Theology. Kline also says:

The imprecations in the Psalms confront us unexpectedly with a pattern of conduct which conforms to the ethics of the consummation. Since it is intruded by inspiration, it constitutes a divine abrogation, within a limited sphere, of the ethical requirements normally in force during the course of common grace. What is required is that we cease stumbling over this as though it were a problem and recognize it as a feature of the divine administration of the Covenant of Redemption in the Old Testament, a feature that displays the sovereign authority of the covenant God.⁶²

Allan Harman helps explain Kline when he says, "the imprecations in the Psalter, given under divine inspiration, are calls for consummation judgment to be intruded into the present time frame."⁶³ Kline is correct in this, although he may be inferring that this idea applies to the OT use of the imprecations alone. However, the consummation is still not complete. With this in mind, we turn to whether there is a continuance of these psalms.

D. Psalms as Revelation of the New Testament God (Thy Kingdom Come)

God's response to the Psalms still continues, and the church's response to his response continues as well. The key to the church's understanding is remembering that we are still part of the same covenant that existed in the OT—a progressively revealed one, but with the same underlying agreement. Although inaugurated in Christ, the consummation of the kingdom is "not yet." I think that most would agree that when the kingdom comes in its fullness

⁶¹ M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 63. A king who conquers another king and forces him to pay tribute and allegiance is known as the Suzerain. The conquered king, although still a king, is the vassal of the Suzerain; and therefore, under his authority.

⁶² Kline, 162.

⁶³ Allan M. Harman, "Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations," *RTV* 45 (1995): 72.

(consummation) there will be no need for the people of God to ask for retribution; the Day of the Lord entails judgment and it will have arrived. But what should the saints do in the meantime?

The martyred saints continue to cry before God's throne, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev 6:10 NASB) Do we not ask for the same thing? Many churches announce implicit curses on the enemies of God every Sunday in the unison statement of the Lord's Prayer. In quoting the words of Christ, "Thy kingdom come," we are asking for the consummation of an era. This consummation brings about the destruction of our enemies and God's enemies. This petition involves the complete overthrow of Satan's kingdom and all his followers. There is really no difference in praying this than there is in praying an imprecatory psalm and so I suggest we should continue singing these psalms with all the fervor of the martyred saints.

We must sing these imprecatory psalms, but we must always keep in mind the inherent danger. An enemy is not one with whom we cannot get along, and they may not be as blatant as Goliath was for David. However, in continuing to pray "Thy kingdom come," we recognize that the enemies have not been totally defeated and therefore it is appropriate, even necessary to continue our plea for the vindication of God's righteousness. "The church that does not learn to hate—in a covenantal way—what its King hates is on the wrong path."⁶⁴ We are required to hate our enemies and to love our enemies. We are required to hate the "representatives of all the power of chaos" but to act in fashion that brings about the removal of enmity, which in some cases might be the reconciliation between the enemy and their Creator. For this reason, we continue to pray the psalms, but we do it reservedly. Only Christ can pronounce these psalms in

⁶⁴ Cornelius Vanderwaal, *Search the Scriptures 4 Job-Song of Songs* (Ontario: le at Paideia Press, 1979), 53.

an absolute sense since he knows who the enemies ultimately are and knows of their “imminent” destruction. For us, this tension must remain as long as the kingdom is in a continuation phase.

VI. Conclusion

We have seen that, although many scholars do not accept the poetic genre as fitting readily into their view of Biblical Theology, it should not be avoided. Biblical theology is the revelation of God in history. This includes the action of God, the response of the people, and the reaction of God to the people’s response. H. Wheeler Robinson says, “It was said at the outset that the Psalms though strictly a response to revelation, have become for us a part of it.”⁶⁵ We now must see the Psalms as a part of revelation. We have seen the alleged difficulty with these imprecations and shown that the usual task of harmonization falls short of comfortable. We have further shown that harmonization is not necessarily the goal and while comfort is nice, it should not be the goal either. A blatant tension existed in ancient times and still exists today and this tension should not be harmonized but accepted. While there is much room for further dialogue on this uncomfortable subject (and I truly hope there is some), it has been shown that by properly understanding the covenant, we must conclude that the singing of imprecations should continue in a desire for the vindication of God’s name.

⁶⁵ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 265.

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Jace R. Broadhurst is currently Professor of Old Testament at Scott Theological College. He holds a B.A. from University of Maryland in Political Science and an M.Div from Reformed Theological Seminary. He is also a Ph.D. candidate at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA.