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# The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture

John Shepherd

*This is the first of two articles*

## Introduction

This article was partly prompted by my witnessing a long embarrassed silence amongst a small group of 'evangelical' clergy after we had read together one of the Imprecatory Psalms at a prayer meeting. The silence reflected the current reluctance to accept such passages for use in either private or public worship. A brief study of the Church of England's *Alternative Service Book* shows that the vast majority of imprecations within the Psalms are placed in square brackets, and may therefore be omitted. Both Psalm 58 in its entirety and a significant proportion of 109 are also bracketed, which may cause them never to be said in the two year cycle. Holladay, in a chapter entitled 'Censored Texts', notes that in the Roman Catholic Liturgy of the Hours, in which the full Psalter is recited every four weeks, Psalms 58, 83 and 109 are omitted totally, together with verses from nineteen other Psalms.<sup>1</sup>

An 'imprecation' has been defined as 'an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God'.<sup>2</sup> These imprecations are found in many parts of Scripture,<sup>3</sup> but perhaps most strikingly in the Psalms, where they sit alongside much beautiful and uplifting poetry.<sup>4</sup> There are many Psalms which contain imprecations, and the ones that we shall regard as Imprecatory Psalms are those where the

1 See W L Holladay *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1993) pp 304-5.

2 J C Laney 'A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138:35-43 Jan-Mar 1981 p 35

3 Num 10:35; Judg 5:31; Jer 11:20; 18:21-3; Acts 13:10; Gal 1:8-9; Rev 6:10

4 C S Lewis comments on Psalm 143: '...after proceeding for eleven verses in a strain that brings tears to the eyes, adds in the twelfth, almost like an afterthought, "and of thy goodness slay mine enemies"' (*Reflections on the Psalms* [London: Collins 1958] p 24).

imprecations play a significant part in the Psalm.<sup>5</sup>

The Imprecatory Psalms are little studied, usually avoided, and are difficult to understand. W Kaiser Jr writes of them:

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.<sup>6</sup>

This is not an uncommon sentiment amongst writers concerning the Imprecatory Psalms. There is an undoubted embarrassment about them: they are often sidestepped, some are omitted from church lectionaries, and it is not always immediately clear how they fit into the Bible. It is for these reasons that this study was undertaken, for the Imprecatory Psalms are found recorded and preserved in the Scriptures, and so must be taken seriously. This article therefore seeks to demonstrate that the Imprecatory Psalms make an important contribution to the Canon of Scripture. They fit within the theology of the Psalter, are undergirded by the Old Testament, and are supported by the New Testament: so there need be no embarrassment over, or avoidance of, this part of Scripture.

This proposition will be defended by looking at the Imprecatory Psalms in a canonical context, beginning with some sharply focused and detailed work, before moving into a wider and more extensive but less detailed survey of the biblical material. This will involve an exegesis and study of Psalm 109, regarded by many as a particularly difficult case, identifying particular theological issues that arise. There will follow a briefer study of four other Imprecatory Psalms identifying issues that arise, and the article will end with some discussion as to how they fit into the theology of the Psalter. The second article broadens the perspective by looking at the place of these Psalms in the Old Testament, and what theological issues give them support. The study will be completed by widening out to the whole Canon of Scripture, and looking briefly at the use of the Imprecatory Psalms and other imprecations in the New Testament. A conclusion will

5 Psalms which include some imprecations: 5, 6, 7, 10, 17, 18, 26, 28, 31, 35, 40, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, 79, 83, 104, 109, 129, 137, 140, 141, 143, 149. This list is compiled with verse numbers by R Surburg 'Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms' *Springfielder* 39:88-102 Dec 1975 p 92. Also J C Laney identifies nine clear Imprecatory Psalms, as opposed to Psalms that may contain an imprecatory verse. The nine Psalms are 7, 35, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 139 ('A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138:35-43 Jan-Mar 1981 p 36). The Psalms which we shall be looking at more closely in this study are 109, 35, 58, 69 and 137.

6 W C Kaiser *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1983) p 293

draw together the points discussed, in order to show that the Imprecatory Psalms have a significant place in the Canon of Scripture.

## A Study of Psalm 109

In speaking about the Imprecatory Psalms C S Lewis describes Psalm 109 as ‘perhaps the worst’.<sup>7</sup> McCann refers to the Psalm as ‘the worst case scenario’,<sup>8</sup> and Bruggemann describes the central section as a ‘song of hate’, in which there is ‘free, unrestrained speech of rage seeking vengeance’.<sup>9</sup> Psalm 109 is seen by many as the climax of the Imprecatory Psalms, with the longest, most sustained series of imprecations recorded against the writer’s enemies. The writer desires judgment upon his enemy in terms of his life, his office, his possessions, his family and even his memory. The Psalmist is confident that God will carry this out and in doing so will bring him deliverance.

Due to its climactic nature, this Psalm of ‘individual lament’ is a good one to consider in some depth as a paradigm for all the Imprecatory Psalms. Clearly all are different, and others will be looked at briefly, but the main focus will be on ‘the worst case scenario’. A consideration of the background, authorship, structure and literary features of the Psalm will be followed by an exegesis of the text. A summary of the main theological issues arising from the Psalm will form the conclusion.

### Background/Setting

Psalm 109 has been given various headings in the many commentaries written, which include ‘Not-Guilty’<sup>10</sup>, ‘Against Cursing’<sup>11</sup>, ‘The Character-Assassin’<sup>12</sup> and ‘David’s Poem of Vengeance’<sup>13</sup>. These headings all suggest various background settings, but the first and the last perhaps crystallize the two predominant ideas of what is going on in this Psalm, and the setting in which it was formulated. The first title implies the idea of a religious courtroom scene in which the Psalmist finds himself. This view is held by Weiser, Dahood and Allen, while the last title implies a much more open ended, ambiguous setting in which the author calls for

7 *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Collins 1958) p 23

8 J Clinton McCann Jr *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms – The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1993) p 112

9 W Bruggemann *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1984) p 85

10 L C Allen *Psalms 101-150 Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books 1983) p 70

11 A Weiser *The Psalms* (London: SCM 1962) p 688

12 D Kidner *Psalms 73-150 Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (Leicester: IVP 1975) p 388

13 M J Ward ‘Psalm 109: David’s Poem of Vengeance’ *Andrews University Seminary Studies* Autumn 1980 vol XVIII no 2 p 163

judgment against his enemies, a view that is held by Kidner, Delitzsch and Ward.<sup>14</sup>

Weiser writes:

This Psalm is an individual lament, prayed by a man who, if we understand the Psalm aright, is accused of being guilty of the death of a poor man (v 16) presumably by means of magically effective curses (vv 17ff)... God himself must intervene and make his enemies realize that it was He, God Himself, who caused the sudden death of that poor man, and not dark, magic machinations which are laid to the charge of the worshipper.<sup>15</sup>

The scene is clearly one of a courtroom in which the writer is being charged with a capital crime. Dahood spells this out further: 'It is apparently while awaiting trial by a court filled with perjurers and presided over by a knavish judge that the Psalmist composed this charged lament.'<sup>16</sup> He identifies the individual who bears the brunt of the imprecations in verses 6-19 as a 'knavish judge' in a court full of enemies, making sense of the change in the Psalm from plural to singular and back to the plural which is noted by all commentators. Allen appeals to the presence of forensic vocabulary,<sup>17</sup> and argues that the direct prayer is evidence of the Psalmist claiming 'his innocence before priestly judges as representatives of Yahweh', citing Deuteronomy 17:8-13 as an example of such a religious court.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to this view Kidner writes of the Psalm: 'David is under an all-out attack on his character, which has already reduced him to a shadow (v 23). It is no longer a whispering campaign but brazen and open.'<sup>19</sup> There is no mention of a courtroom scene although he does acknowledge that there is clearly some legal language used in the Psalm, particularly with reference to verses 6-7 and perhaps verse 31, which speak of someone at the right hand of the man on trial, which was 'evidently the customary position in a court of law'.<sup>20</sup> Delitzsch also sees the setting in broader terms commenting:

14 The implications for choosing one against the other are not all that great, although the courtroom setting would clearly militate against Davidic authorship, and this setting is often combined with seeking to show that the main body of imprecations (vv 6-19) are a quotation from the enemies, rather than from the mouth of the Psalmist.

15 A Weiser *The Psalms* (London: SCM 1962) pp 690-1

16 M Dahood *Psalms III* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday 1970) p 99

17 Allen, most recently, has argued: 'The Psalmist evidently stands on trial at a religious court ... he testifies that the accusations laid against him are unwarranted and false. He appeals to the God who hitherto has given him cause for praise by coming to his aid' (*Psalms 101-150* Word Biblical Commentary [Waco: Word Books 1983] p 76).

18 Allen p 75

19 D Kidner *Psalms 73-150* Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Leicester: IVP 1975) p 388

20 Kidner p 390

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Psalm 109 is most closely related to Psalm 69. Anger concerning the ungodly who requite love with ingratitude, who persecute innocence and desire the curse instead of the blessing, has here reached its utmost bound. The imprecations are not, however, directed against a multitude as in Psalm 69, but their whole current is turned against one person. Is this Doeg the Edomite, or Cush the Benjamite? We do not know.<sup>21</sup>

Delitzsch makes the point that there is very little information in the Psalm which enables one to construct a setting, and although a courtroom image is undeniably conveyed in verses 6-7 of the poem, this is not enough to construct a complete background to the Psalm without a considerable amount of speculation. It seems more likely that it is simply a poetic image to make the point that the enemy is guilty. Those who argue for the courtroom setting, in their attempt at a detailed reconstruction, fail to agree in significant areas, such as whether verses 6-19 are the Psalmist's own words, or a quotation,<sup>22</sup> or whether the courtroom judge is a 'knave' or a 'representative of Yahweh'. It would seem, then, that rather than speculate as regards the setting, it would be safer to leave it more ambiguous, seeing it as a Psalm of imprecation against some enemies, with one in particular singled out. VanGemerén supports this view when he writes: 'In my opinion the expositor is at risk when he explains the text in the context of historical referentiality, liturgy, or cultic *Sitz im Leben*.'<sup>23</sup>

### Authorship

'A major problem pertaining to the study of individual Psalms relates to the possibility of identifying authors for the particular compositions.'<sup>24</sup>

21 Keil and Delitzsch *Commentaries on the Old Testament – Psalms Vol III* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1870) p 176

22 Weiser argues that it is a quotation, and Dahood replies: 'If his solution were correct, the burden of Jewish and Christian apologists, who must explain these horrendous imprecations within the framework of revelation, would be greatly lightened. Unfortunately, the burden remains' (M Dahood *Psalms III The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday 1970) p 102). It should be noted that this is quite a significant debate, with support for verses 6-19 being based on the main arguments of the change from the plural to singular, and the reference to the deceitful mouths and the lying tongues of the enemy in verses 2-3. However, we believe that the arguments in favour of that view cannot outweigh the fact that there is no formal introduction to the quotation, or any certain structural clues, together with the fact that it is fourteen verses long, which would make it a remarkably long quotation, and surely one that would warrant some sort of introduction by the author. It must be noted however, even if verses 6-19 were a quotation, verse 20 takes that whole preceding section and turns it back on the heads of the enemy, and so, although some of the apparent harshness may be removed from the mouth of the biblical writer, it is not removed from his mind. All that appears in verses 6-19, the writer wishes upon the enemy.

23 W A VanGemerén 'Psalms' *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* vol 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1991) p 14

24 P C Craigie *Psalms 1-50 Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books 1983) p 33

Psalm 109 is not an exception, although there are certain considerations that may lead one to argue for a particular author.

The clearest and most apparent aid in identification is the title or ascription at the head of the Psalm. Psalm 109 begins *lam<sup>e</sup>našēḥa l<sup>e</sup>dāwīd mizmôr* usually translated ‘to the chief musician, a Psalm of David’. It would appear from this rendering that David is the author of the Psalm. However, the matter is not so clear, as the Hebrew preposition *l<sup>e</sup>* can indicate a number of different meanings. It may well carry that of ‘by David’, in terms of authorship, but could also mean ‘for’ or ‘to David’ in the sense of being written for him or dedicated to him. It may also be used to convey being ‘about’ or ‘with reference to David’, or perhaps even ‘for the use of David’. Each of these would be legitimate renderings of the Hebrew preposition *l<sup>e</sup>*. Not only is the meaning of the preposition ambiguous, but its use in the Psalm titles is varied, usually with the name of an individual (eg 109:1), although sometimes referring to a group of people (eg 42:1), sometimes to a day, with the sense of ‘for use on...’ (eg 92:1), and at others carrying the sense of ‘belonging to...’ (eg 30:1). The ascription at the head of the Psalm, therefore, cannot conclusively decide the question of authorship. There is certainly a Davidic connection intended, but whether authorship is implied is not certain.

While the ascription *l<sup>e</sup>dāwīd* is not conclusive in proving his authorship, it is very likely that David is the author of at least some of the Psalms. He was known as ‘Israel’s singer of songs’,<sup>25</sup> he was responsible for appointing singers and musicians in Jerusalem, and his directions for worship were still being followed after the return from Exile.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, there are a number of poems recorded in the historical narratives, both of lament and thanksgiving, that are attributed to David.<sup>27</sup> It would be rather strange if there were no Psalms in Israel’s hymnbook written by ‘Israel’s singer of songs’, which would at least begin to suggest that we entertain the possibility that David is the author of Psalm 109.

Looking at the text itself and some of the language used, we may recognise a close affinity with Psalm 69, which is also attributed to David. Delitzsch notes some similarities with a later period of language, but he argues that these similarities are based on theme rather than time. Indeed he writes: ‘we feel on the other hand the absence of any certain echoes of older models.’<sup>28</sup> He also argues, in terms of content, and in the light of David’s consciousness of being the anointed one of Yahweh and his intense persecution at times, that

25 1 Sam 23:1 (NIV)

26 1 Chron 15:16-24; Neh 12:24

27 2 Sam 1:19-27; 2 Sam 22; 1 Chron 16:8-36

28 Keil and Delitzsch *Commentaries on the Old Testament – Psalms Vol III* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans 1870) p 176

‘the anathemas that are here poured forth more extensively than anywhere else speak in favour of David, or at least of his situation’.<sup>29</sup>

It is the inspired writers of the New Testament who are, perhaps, the main supporters for Davidic authorship of many of the Psalms. Jesus puts the words of Psalm 110 in the mouth of David as ‘speaking by the Spirit’, and Paul attributes Psalm 69 to David’s own speech. In Hebrews, God spoke the words of Psalm 95 through David, and according to the apostle Peter, in Psalm 109 and 69, ‘the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas’.<sup>30</sup> Clearly then the New Testament apostles considered David to be the author of a number of the Psalms, including Psalm 109.

While there is quite strong evidence to support Davidic authorship of Psalm 109, it cannot be proven beyond doubt, although for many the apostolic witness to his authorship is sufficient evidence. Whilst it may be countered that they too were dependent on the titles given, and were not necessarily implying David’s authorship in their use of his name, it does seem that the tradition points strongly to a close connection with David and probably his authorship. We shall therefore assume that David and not another anonymous author was the writer of this Psalm, although we shall not place too much weight on this assumption.

### Structure and Literary Features

Psalm 109 is structured quite simply, most commentators identifying four main sections (vv 1-5; 6-19; 20-25; 26-31), with Allen showing a pattern of corresponding strophes – ABA’B’ on stylistic, more than exegetical, grounds. He lists corresponding vocabulary and ideas, particularly linking A and A’.<sup>31</sup> Ward identifies a more simple ABA pattern (vv 1-5; 6-20; 21-31), with the Psalm breaking further into six stanzas, all of five verses each, except the last. There are other features which indicate structure, such as the commonly noted *inclusio* of verses 1b-2 and verse 30 identified by the use of *halēl* (praise) and *pī* (mouth). Dahood also identifies the use of *chiasmus* (vv 2-3, 14, 16), double duty modifiers (vv 14, 20) and careful syllable counting (vv 2-3, 19, 26b), noting that ‘the uniformly excellent poetic quality bespeaks unity of authorship and composition’.<sup>32</sup> Other features are also noticed. For instance, Ward claims that ‘Psalm 109 must stand high among the lyric Psalms for its literary features’.<sup>33</sup> He comments

29 Keil and Delitzsch *Commentaries on the Old Testament – Psalms Vol III* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1870) p 177

30 Matt 22:43; Rom 11:9; Heb 4:7; Acts 1:20

31 L C Allen *Psalms 101-150* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books 1983) p 76

32 M Dahood *Psalms III* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday 1970) p 99

33 M J Ward ‘Psalm 109: David’s Poem of Vengeance’ *Andrews University Seminary Studies* Autumn 1980 vol XVIII no 2 p 165

on the use of both synonymous and synthetic parallelism (eg vv 5, 9, 27, 31). There is a good use of figures of speech, for example the metaphor of clothing and the simile of water and oil interwoven in verses 18-19. It is hard to fail to notice the emotional element of the Psalm; indeed Ward writes that 'Psalm 109 is built around emotion'.<sup>34</sup> The despair of verses 1-5 is followed by the anger of verses 6-20, with despair returning, to be gradually changed to a mood of gratitude and praise (vv 21-31). A final feature noted is that of a balance between abstract and concrete terms, although with greater emphasis on the latter, especially in regard to the imprecations against the enemy. Ward suggests that: '[while] we in modern times are quite accustomed to feel enthusiasm for the abstract thing we call a "cause", with the ancient world it was necessary for the cause to be embodied in a concrete party.'<sup>35</sup> It would appear, therefore, that Psalm 109 is a carefully constructed composition, making use of many of the common features of Hebrew poetry. It is not simply the spontaneous, unthinking prayer of an angry man.

## Exegesis

### Verses 1-5

In these verses David 'confides to his God his lament and his integrity'.<sup>36</sup> He begins with an expression of his trust by describing him as 'God whom I praise' ('*lōhē ʿhīlāʿī*). He then goes on to describe his situation under the oppression of his enemies.

The complaint in verses 2-3 concerns their words – they are deceitful, false and hateful, and with them they 'wage war' against David and he feels 'surrounded' .

In verses 4-5 David protests his innocence and integrity, and he uses 'in return for' (*tahat*) three times to emphasise the contrast between his love and goodness towards his enemies and their opposition, evil and hatred towards him. These first verses then introduce the complaint and show that 'David is under an all-out attack on his character'.<sup>37</sup>

### Verses 6-20

These verses contain the series of imprecations against an enemy, with the first word, *hāp̄qēd* ('appoint'), being a hiphil imperative, setting the tone for the verses to follow. They are the Psalmist's call to God to punish his enemy, perhaps even demanding that this happen, and certainly express a

34 M J Ward 'Psalm 109: David's Poem of Vengeance' *Andrews University Seminary Studies* Autumn 1980 vol XVIII no 2 p 166

35 Ward p 167

36 A Weiser *The Psalms* (London: SCM 1962) p 690

37 D Kidner *Psalms 73-150* Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Leicester: IVP 1975) p 388

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desire that it should. The most immediately noticeable feature, as has already been noted, is the change from the plural to the singular. Several suggestions are made to account for this. It may be argued that this is a collective singular, although its sustained use over the fifteen verses seems to suggest that this is not so. Dahood, as above, argues that it refers to a knavish judge, but this seems to rely rather heavily on the detailed construction of the courtroom setting which has been said to be unwarranted on the limited evidence. Perhaps the simplest interpretation is that it is the ringleader of the enemies, the focus of David's opposition, clearly someone in a powerful position (v 8). It is against this man, then, that the imprecations are directed.

Verses 6-7 set up the image of a court, and the Psalmist demands that a wicked man be set over the defendant, his enemy, with Satan as his accuser at his right hand, so that he will be found guilty, and that his prayer will be ineffectual, that it will miss the mark (*h<sup>a</sup>tā 'ā*). Some argue that 'prayers' (*ṣ<sup>e</sup>pillātō*) may mean his plea in a court but it seems that this is rather speculative, and that 'the word everywhere else implies prayer to God'.<sup>38</sup>

In verse 8 David speaks of someone else taking his enemy's office or position of authority. *p<sup>e</sup>qudātō* could be rendered possessions, but, as they are the subject of verse 11, it is better to go with the LXX which translates it by ἐπισκοπή.

Verses 9-10 concentrate on his death and the resulting consequences for his family.

Verse 11 switches focus to the possessions of the enemy, with the Psalmist asking that all he has be seized and plundered by strangers.

In verse 12, David uses an important word, *hesed* ('covenant love'). He demands that no one extend this to his enemy or his children, looking ahead to verse 16 where it is clear that indeed his enemy has failed to extend it to the poor and needy, and, quite the contrary, has put them to death. It is important to notice that it is this *hesed* to which David will appeal in verses 21 and 26.

Verses 13-15 extend the imprecation to the memory of the enemy – that his name be wiped out and his remembrance be cut off from the earth.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note the use of 'the LORD' (*y<sup>e</sup>howā*), the divine, covenant

38 D Kidner *Psalms 73-150* Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Leicester: IVP 1975) p 390

39 This was, according to Allen, perhaps '...the ultimate of maledictions in a culture where its [the family name] being handed down through the generations was prized as a surrogate for personal survival (cf Gen 3:19, 20; Jer 11:19)' (*Psalms 101-150* Word Biblical Commentary [Waco: Word Books 1983] p 77).

name, in the midst of this imprecation. The target of the enemy is mentioned in verse 16 as the 'poor and needy' (*'iš 'ānî w<sup>e</sup>'ebyôn*), which the Psalmist himself identifies with in verses 22 and 31.

Verses 17-19 focus on the enemy's love of curses, and so the Psalmist desires that they work themselves out in the life of the enemy. There is some debate as to whether these verses are an imprecation or simply a prophetic statement of what will happen, but whichever is chosen does not make a major difference to understanding the text. The picture is clear, that the curses should become like a garment in which the enemy is wrapped, and like water and oil which get right inside him.<sup>40</sup>

Verse 20 is somewhat of a summary verse; hence some commentators include it in the preceding section (vv 6-19), and others see it as the beginning of a new section with the switch back to the plurality of enemies. Either way, it is an appeal to 'the LORD' (*y<sup>e</sup>howâ*) for all that has been said in the preceding verses to be carried out against the Psalmist's enemies, those who speak evil against his soul.

### Verses 21-31

The mood of the Psalm changes with an adversative as David prays for deliverance. The sense of weakness and despair remains until the final two verses in which confidence is expressed and a vow of praise is offered. David requests that God should act on his behalf, for the sake of his name, and that he should deliver him on the basis of the goodness of his faithful, covenant love (*hesed*).

Verses 22-5 reflect the state of mind of the Psalmist and what he has become as a result of the enemies' onslaught. He is poor and needy and his heart is breaking. He pictures his life as fading like a lengthening shadow and being shaken off like a tiny locust. His fasting and use of oil has led to great weakness, and he has become an object of reproach to them, at whom they shake their heads in ridicule and spite.

Verses 26-9 again return to the appeal for deliverance and help from 'the LORD my God' (*y<sup>e</sup>howâ 'elôhây*) on the basis of his covenant, faithful love. David's desire is that Yahweh should act and that the enemies should know that the judgment on them is carried out by the hand of God. In his confidence of God's vindication, David contrasts the enemies' cursing with God's blessing, the enemies' shame with his own rejoicing. As in verse 18, a clothing metaphor is again used to describe how the enemies of David will be dressed in their dishonour and shame, presumably for all to see.

40 Allen writes that this 'soaking is probably metaphorical for being completely under the curse's power' (*Psalms 101-150 Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco: Word Books 1983] p 74).

The Psalm closes with the vow of praise in verses 30-31. David promises that he will indeed praise Yahweh with his mouth, as opposed to the way the enemies have used their mouths (v 2), and he will do it publicly in the midst of the multitude; for it is God who will stand at the right hand of the needy, that is David, to save him from those who would condemn his life.

### Theological Issues

'This poem is aggressively Yahwistic' according to Bruggemann, who notes the repeated use of the divine name by David, together with other covenantal language clearly evident in the Psalm. He continues: 'The speaker addresses every element of the relationship that has been learned out of the tradition. Israel's entire understanding of God is mobilised.'<sup>41</sup> Whilst this may be an exaggeration, it is fair to say that the Psalmist is making a direct and forceful address to his God whom he regards as faithful, compassionate and powerful. The covenantal basis for the Psalm is supported by the use of 'covenant love' *hesed*, and particularly the writer's appeal to God's *hesed*. This underlying understanding of the covenant for the writer is clearly important. Bruggemann goes on to argue that only certain parts of the Psalm have this covenantal basis,<sup>42</sup> however on the basis of structure and language used, we would contend that there is an underlying unity and that throughout the Psalm<sup>43</sup> the writer is fully aware of the covenant and his faithful covenant God, with verse 26 as perhaps the clearest expression of this. This is the foundation for the whole Psalm, including those verses calling for judgment on the enemy.

A second important theme is the Psalmist's concern for God's praise and vindication. The Psalm opens with a recognition of the relationship between God and David. God is indeed *'lohê 'hilāṭî* ('God whom I praise'). This is the fundamental relationship, and the desire of the writer.

41 W Bruggemann *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1984) p 82

42 Bruggemann wishes to restrict this covenantal understanding purely to verse 1 and verses 20-26 and 30-31. Verses 2-19 and 27-9 he regards as belonging to another world arguing that this section '...is not a Yahwistic prayer or a covenantal speech. It is rather a raw undisciplined song of hate and wish for vengeance by someone who has suffered deep hurt and humiliation' (p 83).

43 Bruggemann's desire to split the poem up in such a radical way is to question the unity of the Psalm, or, for Bruggemann, perhaps the unity of the author, who can move so freely between faithful covenantal speech and free unrestrained speech of rage and anger. Whilst clearly the central section of the Psalm contains the imprecations, the use of the covenantal words continues, and the direct appeal to God in verse 6 provides the foundation for the rest of the imprecations in the following verses. Right at the heart of the imprecations in verses 14 and 15 lies an appeal to Yahweh, and in the summary in verse 20, David requests that Yahweh, his covenant God, should do all this. It seems also that God's covenant love (*hesed*) is compared with the enemy's distinct lack of it, in the central section, and one of the imprecations is indeed that no-one should extend this same *hesed* to him. To break up the Psalm, then, is to distort the underlying unity which exists.

He recognises that only God is able to save him, and therefore appeals to him. He wishes that the sin of the enemy should be before Yahweh, for it is against him ultimately that sin is committed. Verse 21 provides the clearest statement of the Psalmist's concern as he prays that all this should be done for the sake of God's name, and in verse 27 David emphasises that he wants people to know that it is God alone who has delivered him from his enemies and who has punished them. As Allen comments: 'He appeals to his divine judge to live up to the name he has for justice and protection of the oppressed. Yahweh's honour is at stake.'<sup>44</sup> The vow of praise in the final two verses confirms that this is the writer's great concern, to praise God loudly and publicly.

The concept of retribution and perceived justice are important to the Psalmist. This is evident in comparing the identified crimes of the enemy with the imprecations. In verse 12 the enemy deserves no 'covenant love' (*hesed*), because in verse 16 he has shown none. In verses 8-11 the enemy deserves to be impoverished, because he has mistreated those who are impoverished, 'the poor and the needy' (*'iš 'ānī w'ēbyōn*) (v 16). In verse 8, his days should be short, because he has hounded others to death (vv 16, 31). Perhaps most clearly in verses 17-19 and 28-9, the enemy deserves to be cursed and to suffer the consequences, because of his own love of curses. It seems that these imprecations are not merely the random wishes of the author, but relate to the crimes of the enemy.

David's identification of himself in this Psalm is of interest. His understanding of being a member of God's covenant people has already been noted. He also identifies himself as one who is upright, who has integrity. Twice he speaks of his love for the enemies, which they have repaid with evil: their hatred is without reason. It seems that he is concerned that the righteous be established – hence his desire to pray (v 4). The writer regards himself as 'poor and needy' (v 22), as the object of the enemy's persecution (v 16), but at whose right hand God will stand in his defence (v 31). Finally he identifies himself as a servant of God, who will rejoice when God's/his enemies are put to shame. He is identifying his cause with God's cause. He is Yahweh's servant, and hence accomplishing Yahweh's purposes. Thus when the enemies attack him they are attacking God, and when he is vindicated, especially when it is clearly God's action, God too is vindicated and will receive the glory.

The study of Psalm 109 shows clearly that this is much more than just a 'free, unrestrained speech of rage seeking vengeance'.<sup>45</sup> It is a well constructed prayer in which issues such as a concern for God's glory, the

44 L C Allen *Psalms 101-150* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books 1983) p 77

45 W Bruggemann *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1984) p 85

importance of retributive justice, the centrality of the covenant, and the vindication of the righteous are all interwoven. We may now therefore go on to look at some other Imprecatory Psalms to see whether similar issues arise, and, if so, to discuss their place in the theology of the Psalter.

## The Imprecatory Psalms and The Psalter

There is little room in the main body of the text for a study of Psalms 35, 58, 69 and 137, so we shall give only a summary sentence about each, before moving on to the more important subject of the theological issues that arise. Fuller exegetical notes can be found in the footnotes. Psalm 35 begins in darkness, but ends in hope and the exaltation of God, following imprecations against the enemy.<sup>46</sup> Psalm 58 is a prayer to God, who is the supreme Judge, to judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous.<sup>47</sup> Psalm

46 Psalm 35 is ascribed to David, and therefore his authorship is assumed (see discussion above). This Psalm is usually regarded as an individual lament, although Craigie describes it as 'A Royal Psalm for International Crisis', contending that it is the Psalm of a king who 'faces the threat of war from foreign enemies'. The form is not completely clear, but the structure is, with three sections, each ending with a note of hope (vv 10, 18, 27-8). Verses 1-3 are an appeal to God to fight on behalf of the Psalmist in rather warlike language. Verses 4-8 contain a description of the enemies and a number of imprecations. The enemy seeks the life of the Psalmist, plotting his ruin with no legitimate cause, and so the writer requests that the enemy should be put to shame, disgrace and dismay, and that he should encounter dark and slippery paths. He asks that the enemy should be ensnared in his own net and fall into his own pit that was meant for David himself. Verses 9-10 are a vow of praise with the Psalmist rejoicing because it is God who saves, who rescues the poor and needy. Verses 11-18 again reveal the wickedness of the enemies who 'repay evil for good' (v 12). The Psalmist has cared for them when they were in distress, but they gloat and mock when he is suffering. The section ends with the appeal 'how long?' and then a confident vow of praise. Verses 19-28 once more express the crimes of the enemy who commit them 'without reason' and 'without cause', before once again appealing to God for deliverance. The Psalmist considers himself righteous and wants to be vindicated. Again he calls for their judgment, before a final expression of confidence in God and his desire that God should be glorified (v 27).

47 Weiser entitles his section on Psalm 58 'Unjust Judges', and Kidner comments: 'With its passion for justice, the Psalter does not allow us to get used to the scandal of evil in high places' (p 207). Clearly the primary theme of this Psalm is that God, the ultimate Judge, will judge with justice the Psalmist's enemies, that is those who judge unjustly. The Psalm divides neatly into three sections, with verses 1-5 introducing the reader to the enemies of the Psalmist. They are corrupt rulers or powerful men (literally gods), speaking lies and acting with violence. The Psalmist compares them with the deadliness of a snake and makes the point that they will not stop from their wickedness, and are unmoved by anything. Verses 6-8 are the Psalmist's response to these unjust men. He desires that the weapons of their mouths, which have spoken lies, should be broken and torn out, and that they should vanish like water absorbed into the ground. He requests that their assaults should be stopped and that the enemies should become nothing. Verses 9-11 express the confident assertion that God will indeed act and 'the wicked will be swept away'. His desire is that the righteous will be vindicated and God be exalted when his justice is seen to be done. There is also a clear sense of satisfaction when the righteous are vindicated; this David expresses in the vivid language of verse 10. Weiser regards these words as 'the undisguised gloating and the cruel vindictiveness of an intolerant religious fanaticism'. I

69 is an important Psalm in the New Testament, and is a plea for God to rescue David from his enemies, by judging them, so that all will praise him.<sup>48</sup> Psalm 137 is a communal lament, remembering the horrors of the exile, and calling for retribution on those who caused it.<sup>49</sup> Each of these

shall return to this later, but at this stage say only that it would be much more in line with the rest of the Psalm to regard this as the statement of a man who longs to see the defeat of the wicked and the triumph of the righteous using non-literal, vivid imagery.

- 48 Psalm 69, an individual lament ascribed to David, is the most frequently quoted Psalm in the New Testament after Psalm 22. Kidner breaks the Psalm up into seven sections: 'The sea of troubles'(vv 1-5); 'The sting of insult'(vv 6-12); 'The cry' (vv 13-18); 'The cup' (vv 19-21); 'The curse' (vv 22-8); 'Praise from the heart' (29-33); 'Praise from the host' (vv 34-6) (pp 245ff). Whilst 'The curse' section is of primary interest, the surrounding verses are crucial for understanding the Psalm as a whole and seeing how these verses fit in. In verses 1-5 the Psalmist cries out to God to save him from great distress, which is emphasised using several common images. The enemies are identified as those who hate the Psalmist 'without reason' and seek to destroy him 'without cause'. The Psalmist recognises his own guilt, although this is in regard to God, not the enemies. Verses 5-12 emphasise the insults and mocking of the enemy, and the very close identifying of the Psalmist with God himself (vv 7, 9). Verses 19-21 express further the crime of the enemies in making the sufferings of the Psalmist worse still, when he needed sympathy and comfort. C H Spurgeon says of the enemies: 'They lay bare the wounds with their rough tongues. They lampoon the mourner, satirize his sorrows, and deride his woes' (*Treasury of David* p 183). The Psalmist then prays for God to redress the wrongs committed in verses 22-8. Each imprecation has more or less an equivalent crime attached to it. David wants the table which they have set before him with gall and vinegar (v 21) to become a snare to them. They have mocked him when he is wounded (v 26) and so he desires that they be wounded (v 23), and as they hated him and sought to remove him (v 4), so he desires God's wrath to be upon them and for them also to be removed (v 25). The enemies have falsely charged him with crimes (v 4) and so they ought also to be charged with 'crime upon crime', and finally as they had sought his life (v 4), their death should be the result (v 28), for a place in the Book of Life is a privilege of the righteous only. Verses 29-33, after a further lament and appeal to God, turn to his praise and exaltation, emphasising that it is the poor and needy whom God helps. Finally, verses 24-36, regarded by many as a later addition, move to a more general call to praise on the assurance that God will restore Judah.

- 49 Psalm 137, a communal lament, looks back to the miserable days of exile in Babylon which are clearly firm in the mind of the writer. Allen has entitled his comment on this Psalm 'Living with the Pain of the Past' (p 234) and Kidner writes: 'Every line of it is alive with pain, whose intensity grows with each strophe to the appalling climax' (p 459). The twelve lines in the Hebrew poem divide symmetrically into three sections of four lines each. Verses 1-3 speak of the sorrow of the captives in Babylon and the torment at the hands of their captors while in exile. The middle section, verses 4-6, show the total commitment of the writer and the singers to Jerusalem, God's holy city. This is their concern, for God and his glory. They are neither able to sing or play music in a foreign land, and unless they disown Yahweh and his city it will be impossible 'to play the puppet on a Babylonian stage'. The final section begins with an appeal to Yahweh, 'Remember!'(v 7). They want God to remember both the terrible crimes of the Edomites in wishing that Jerusalem be torn down, which was the same as wishing for God himself to be torn down, and also to remember Babylon, which actually carried this offence out. The cry is that a personified Babylon will be destroyed, and that there will be satisfaction when she receives her just repayment. The most difficult verse is the last, which 'comes to us white hot' (Kidner p 460). It seems again that the Psalmist desires for the enemy what Judah and the residents of Jerusalem in particular have experienced at the hands of the Babylonians in their conquest of the city. It was a violent and bloody assault in which

Psalms has, like Psalm 109, its unique features, but they also have some common underlying theological themes.

### **Theological Issues**

In this section we shall draw out some general principles concerning this group of Psalms before going on to look at their place in the Psalter. We would suggest that there are a number of broad and important principles in the Imprecatory Psalms which are crucial for a correct understanding of them, and their place in the Psalter, as opposed to dismissing them as poems written by 'ferocious, self-pitying, barbaric men'.<sup>50</sup>

The first principle is that of an overarching and supreme concern for God's glory and vindication in the situations in which the Psalmist finds himself. Psalm 35 ends each of its three sections with a vow of praise, as it is God who is to be exalted. The Psalmist's whole being will praise God, he will praise him among the crowds and his desire is that all those who see God delivering him will say 'Yahweh be exalted.'(35:10, 18, 27). This is equally true in Psalm 58 in which the climactic verse looks forward to men recognising that 'there is a God who judges the earth' (58:11). The desire for God's vindication and glory is also strong in Psalm 69, particularly in the final seven verses. Here the Psalmist both makes his own personal vow of praise, and calls the whole of creation to praise God. Finally in Psalm 137, although this is less explicit, the close association of the holy city with Yahweh makes clear that the primary concern of the singers of this Psalm is God himself in that they consider Jerusalem to be their highest joy.

This has already been noted as a feature of Psalm 109, with attention drawn to verses 21 and 27, in which David is supremely concerned for Yahweh's honour, and anxious that people recognise it is God who has vindicated him. The Psalmist's primary desire is not the destruction of his enemies, but the glory of God. It is important that the imprecations are seen in that context if we are to understand them correctly.

A second recurring theme in all these Psalms is that of retributive justice. This has already been brought out in the brief exegesis of the Psalms, which express a clear desire to see justice done, and in which the imprecations largely reflect the crimes of the enemy. Psalm 35 appeals to Yahweh to match his judgment with their violent intent, and desires what they have planned for him to be turned back on them (vv 7-8). The crime of the enemies' speech in Psalm 58 is mirrored by judgment against their

many women and children would have been destroyed, and the Psalmist describes how satisfying and how right it will be to see this wickedness repaid.

50 C S Lewis *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Collins 1958) p 26

mouths, and the *inclusio* of verses 1 and 11 makes clear that the Psalmist is ultimately concerned with just judgments. The imprecations of Psalm 69 clearly reflect the accusations against the enemy (see above), and, as was mentioned (note 49) concerning Psalm 137, the ruthlessness and bloody assault of the Babylonians are the background to the imprecation. It is repayment which the Psalmist is desiring (v 8).

This theme is also evident in Psalm 109. The imprecations are connected directly with the offence of the enemy. Certainly the Psalmist sometimes uses vivid imagery, but when the imprecations are looked at carefully they are not simply wild, uncontrolled expressions of anger, but rather of a desire for justice and retribution.<sup>51</sup>

A further important idea is that of the Psalmist's own sense of righteousness and integrity, and his innocence in relation to the enemies that are oppressing him. In Psalm 35 he claims that his enemies repay evil for good, and in verse 19 there is a clear statement that their attacks are 'without reason', thus claiming the innocence of the writer. In verse 24 vindication is explicitly sought on the basis of God's righteousness, which could be requested only in the light of his own righteousness. Psalm 58 conveys the same sense of David's own righteousness, although he does not claim it explicitly there. However he speaks of the joy of the righteous when they are avenged, presumably including himself among that group. The sense of righteousness in these Psalms is very helpfully expanded in Psalm 69, where it is made clear that the Psalmist does not regard himself as fully righteous in the sight of God. In this Psalm it is explicit, and elsewhere it is assumed, that before God the Psalmist is a sinner, but in relation to his enemies he is righteous. So even here, before he admits his guilt before God (v 5), he complains of the enemies who hate without reason and without cause (v 4). As a communal lament, Psalm 137 is rather less applicable, although even there verses 4-6 reflect the exiles' righteousness before their captors, and their commitment to God in feeling unable to sing the songs of Yahweh in a foreign land.

This sense of David's righteousness and integrity is apparent in Psalm 109. Verses 4-5 express his goodness and friendship towards his enemies, contrasted with their evil and hatred towards him. The point in these Psalms is not that the writer is self-righteous and considers himself perfect,<sup>52</sup> but that in relation to the enemy he has done nothing wrong and

51 Although these Psalms are certainly expressed in anger and pain at times, Weiser is wrong to describe them as 'the undisguised gloating and the cruel vindictiveness of an intolerant religious fanaticism' (*The Psalms* [London: SCM 1962] p 432).

52 J Wenham argues that they are not self-righteous, but 'the Psalmists have honestly tried to do the right thing towards their enemies' (*The Enigma of Evil* [Leicester: IVP 1994] p 174).

yet is constantly attacked.

A final, but important, recurring theme in these Psalms is the writer's constant appeal to Yahweh, who is his covenant God. He recognises that only God can save him and so he prays. Psalm 35 begins with an appeal to Yahweh to contend with David's enemies, and the same desire is expressed towards the end, before the vow of praise (v 23). Psalm 58 makes clear that it is God alone who judges the earth (v 11) and it is to him that the writer appeals (v 6). Psalm 69 begins with a personal appeal for God to save David and ends with the recognition that it is God who will save Zion (vv 35-6). Psalm 137 is perhaps the most difficult of the Psalms to understand in this context, in the light of the statement regarding human participation in the judgment against the Babylonians; yet even here Yahweh is appealed to in verse 7, and there is no direct call for the exiles to take action. Moreover, the emphasis on the holy city is important in understanding the underlying faith in a covenant Yahweh.

This covenantal basis of Psalm 109 is very clear, as is David's appeal to God to accomplish the judgments for which he calls. This is a very important point, not simply demonstrating the faith of the Psalmist in God's power to save, but showing his desire to put his troubles and, more particularly, the fate of his enemies in the hands of God. David himself is not planning revenge; that is why he prays to God. The imprecations, in this sense, are an expression of trust in Yahweh, handing over all responsibility for judgment and retribution to him, the faithful covenant God.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Imprecatory Psalms and the Psalter**

We have shown that there are a number of important themes that are essential for understanding the Imprecatory Psalms correctly. These are a supreme concern for God's glory, a desire for retributive justice, a sense of righteousness and the need for vindication, together with an underlying awareness of the covenant relationship and dependence upon Yahweh. It must now be asked whether these particular themes are found in the rest of the Psalter, particularly with regard to those other Psalms that refer to enemies; in this way we may ascertain whether the Imprecatory Psalms are consonant with the rest of the Psalter, or whether they diverge theologically.

'At the core of the theology of the Psalter is the conviction that the

53 Some 30 years ago J A Motyer made this point when he wrote in the *Church of England Newspaper*: 'We will search these Psalms in vain for any indication that the writers answered back to their adversaries, or that they either tried or even wished to pay them back for their hostility. They flew to God in prayer. While they are expressed with vigour, yet when viewed for what they really are – prayers – they are primarily expressions not of revenge but of trust.'

gravitational centre of life (of right human understanding, trust, hope, service, morality, adoration), and also of history and of the whole creation (heaven and earth), is God (Yahweh).<sup>54</sup> Yahweh is at the centre of the Psalter's theology and, as we have seen, he remains at the centre of the Imprecatory Psalms, and even within the imprecations themselves Yahweh is appealed to (109:14). The Psalter is a book of prayer and praise, and it is the praise of Yahweh which dominates most people's understanding of the collection.<sup>55</sup> Ringgren, in a chapter entitled 'Theocentric Religion' writes:

The main concern in the Psalms is not the welfare of the Psalmist, but the glory of God. God deals with man, and man calls for God's attention, but the ultimate purpose in both cases is the advancement of God's glory.<sup>56</sup>

The point is that throughout the Psalms God is to be glorified, and there is no contradiction to this in either Psalm 109 or the other Imprecatory Psalms.

Guthrie writes: 'The Psalmists are motivated by zeal for the Holy One of Israel who must exercise retribution in the present moral order in the world.'<sup>57</sup> This concept of God's justice and the existence of a moral order is a significant idea throughout the Psalter. God 'loves righteousness and hates wickedness' (45:7), indeed 'Yahweh is known by his justice' (9:16), and 'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of *his* throne' (89:14). Due to this understanding of a just God, there is a great confidence throughout the Psalter that justice will be done.<sup>58</sup> The desire is not always expressed as in the Imprecatory Psalms, but the very simple fact that the wicked will be destroyed is confidently acknowledged. The Psalmist writes: 'Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side' (97:3). It is important to understand at this point that the Psalmists thought primarily in terms of this world, and therefore their desire was that justice should be seen to be done in the here and now. If the moral order were to be upheld, God needed to act in the present age. Anderson comments: 'The Old Testament Psalms wrestle with the problems of human existence within the context of this life – the three score years and ten of Psalm 90:10. Lacking the eschatological horizon of the New Testament, they

54 *NIV Study Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1987) p 767

55 In actual fact there is a higher proportion of Psalms of lament than any other, but perhaps this dominant feeling of praise arises because most of the Psalms end on a note of praise, and the whole collection ends with a series of Psalms praising Yahweh.

56 H Ringgren *The Faith of the Psalmists* (London: SCM 1963) p 27

57 D Guthrie 'Psalms' *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* vol 3 J D Douglas ed (Leicester: IVP 1980) p 1297

58 G S Gunn comments: 'In a world so planned and governed by God, there is constantly at work a process of retribution. Evil returns upon itself, not by accident but by God's decree (Ps 37:13-15; 120:3-4)' (*God in the Psalms* [Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press 1956] p 88).

concentrate on the problems of life now with a fierce and passionate intensity.’<sup>59</sup> A God of justice who will judge the wicked in this life is an important strand of the theology of the Psalter, and it comes through unmistakably in the Imprecatory Psalms which we have considered.

The division between the righteous and the wicked is a clearly held concept throughout the Psalter, as is the vindication of the righteous. This is the reverse side of the last point made – the centrality of retributive justice in the Psalms. The very first Psalm makes the distinction: ‘For Yahweh watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish’(1:6). In the Psalms ‘the righteous’ refers not simply to those who are morally upright, although Psalm 1 certainly describes the righteous man in such terms and as one who loves God’s law, but the word is also used as a technical term for God’s people (cf 32:11; 33:1; 37). At times these words are used interchangeably, as it is considered that God’s people will be morally upright and obedient to the law, in contrast to the Gentiles outside the covenant. Throughout the Psalter the righteous are considered favoured by God and are vindicated in relation to the wicked. Psalm 5:12 expresses this confident assumption of favour: ‘For surely, O Yahweh, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favour as with a shield’ (cf 14:5; 37:39; 140:13; 146:8).<sup>60</sup> As we have seen, the sense of righteousness in the Psalmist is not a self-righteousness. There are many places where the Psalmist acknowledges his sin before God, perhaps most strikingly in Psalm 51, and, as has been noted, in Psalm 69, where David also expresses his integrity as regards the enemy. The righteous are, in a sense, a category of those who are on God’s side, rather than those who are spotless. The idea runs through the Psalter contrasting the righteous with the wicked, and saying that God should and indeed will vindicate them.<sup>61</sup>

The covenantal basis for all the Psalms, and the writer’s dependence upon his faithful covenant God, is a further major strand of thought in the Psalter as a whole. Indeed, Dillard and Longman write that the ‘covenant is a concept that ties together many strands of the theology of the Psalms’.<sup>62</sup> The pervasiveness of the covenant theme is certainly recognised by those

59 B W Anderson *Out of the Depths – The Psalms Speak For Us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1970) pp 65-6. It must be noted, however, that there was certainly a notion of the afterlife. On the death of his son David boldly says ‘I will go to be with him’(2 Sam 12:15-25), and there is a concept of ‘Sheol’, although this is not very developed. Indeed H H Rowley writes: ‘There is no uniform or sure faith in an afterlife that is meaningful, but there are these reachings out after such a faith’ (*The Faith of Israel* [London: SCM 1956] p 175).

60 Psalm 75:10 expresses the vindication of the righteous that is assumed: ‘I will cut off the horns of all the wicked, but the horns of the righteous shall be lifted up.’

61 See H Ringgren for a fuller discussion of the righteous and the wicked (*The Faith of the Psalmists* [London: SCM 1963] pp 37ff).

62 R Dillard and Tremper Longman III *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollos 1995) p 228

scholars who regard the *Sitz im Leben* for all the Psalms as some kind of Covenant Festival. Whilst we would not want to embrace this idea fully for lack of evidence,<sup>63</sup> the very fact that the theory has been suggested indicates the strength of the underlying covenantal ideas in the Psalter. The constant use of the Divine Name in the Psalms, together with the appeal to and exaltation of Yahweh's faithful covenant love *hesed*, are both indicators of the Psalmist's awareness of the covenant relationship. Further, the common identification of the Psalmist with God is undergirded by the covenant relationship. As we have already seen in the study of Psalm 109, the Psalmist regards himself as God's servant, identifying his cause with God's cause. This is even more explicit in Psalm 69:9 where David cries 'the insults of those who insult you fall on me'. This strong identification between the Psalmist and Yahweh has its basis in the Covenant, although with the Psalms of David in particular there is a special relationship within that Covenant – that of kingship. The King of Israel is God's appointed servant to rule his people, and therefore the identification of David with God is clear. Laney comments: 'As the representative of God to the people, an attack on the King – the theocratic official – differed in no way from an attack on Yahweh!'<sup>64</sup> This is an important point for our understanding of the Imprecatory Psalms, for they are not simply personal feelings of vindictiveness and desire for revenge, but rather the recognition that not only 'the righteous' are under attack, but God himself, and therefore a punishment is desired that fits such a heinous crime. Thus the response is not to take action, but to call out to a faithful covenant God, so that the righteous may be vindicated and, more importantly still, that Yahweh may be glorified.

## Conclusion

We have shown that the theology of Psalm 109, and more broadly that of the Imprecatory Psalms, in no way contradicts that of the Psalter as a whole, but in fact fits very well. There are certain unique features found in the Imprecatory Psalms, notably those of the tone and particular language employed, but theologically we would contend that there are no major differences and their place in the Psalter is secure.

Dillard and Longman write:

While it is correct to say that the Psalter's theology is not systematic, we must be quick, on the other side, to affirm that it is extensive – so

63 Even Arthur Weiser, one of the chief proponents of this theory, admits: 'No proper ritual of the Covenant Festival of Yahweh has been handed down to us from Old Testament times' (*The Psalms* [London: SCM 1962] p 35).

64 J C Laney 'A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138:35-43 Jan-Mar 1981 p 43

## The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture

extensive, in fact, that the Psalter is a 'microcosm' of the teaching of the whole Old Testament. In the well known words of Martin Luther, the book of Psalms is 'a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament'.<sup>65</sup>

If this is correct, and our contention that the Imprecatory Psalms have a valid place in the Psalter is also correct, then they must also have their rightful place in the Old Testament as a whole and indeed in the whole Canon of Scripture. It is to this wider perspective we shall turn in a further article.

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65 R Dillard and Tremper Longman III *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollos 1995) p 227