

# 'Father, Forgive Them'? Or, 'Let Your Burning Anger Overtake Them'? Psalm 69:22-28 on the Lips of Jesus

Matthew W. Mason

## Abstract

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This article investigates the fulfilment of the imprecations in Psalm 69:22-28 in the ministry and prayers of Jesus. The psalm is one of the most used in the NT, yet the imprecatory section presents a difficulty for biblical theology, particularly as it relates to Jesus' prayer from the cross, 'Father forgive them' (Lk. 23:34). Examining the NT's use of this psalm, I argue that Jesus did indeed pray the imprecations and his Father answered; yet, building on Klaas Schilder's discussion of Luke 23:34, I argue that this is readily harmonisable with his first word from the cross.

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*In the Psalms of David the Promised Christ himself speaks (Hebrews 2:12; 10:5)... These same words which David spoke, therefore, the future Messiah spoke through him. The prayers David prayed were prayed also by Christ. Or better, Christ himself prayed them through his forerunner.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1970), 19.

Psalm 69 is, after Psalms 22 and 110, the most quoted or alluded to psalm in the NT.<sup>2</sup> James Adams notes the following cross-references:<sup>3</sup>

69:4 <sup>4</sup>	John 14:25
69:8	John 7:5
69:9	John 2:17; Romans 15:3
69:13	2 Corinthians 6:2
69:14-16	Hebrews 5:7
69:15	Acts 2:24
69:21	Matthew 27:34, 48; Mark 15:23, 36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29
69:22	1 Thessalonians 5:3
69:22-23	Romans 11:9-10
69:23	2 Corinthians 3:14
69:24	Revelation 16:1
69:25	Matthew 23:38; Luke 13:35; Acts 1:20
69:28	Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27

Along with Jonah 2, it provides the OT background for Jesus' description of his death as a baptism (vv. 1-3; Mk. 10:38-39; Lk. 12:50). Allusions to it are found in all four passion narratives as Jesus is given sour wine to drink, with John stating that Jesus said 'I thirst' in order to fulfil the psalm (v. 21; cf. Matt. 27:34, 48; Mk. 15:36; Lk. 23:36; Jn. 19:28-29). Therefore, it was evidently a strong part of Jesus' self-consciousness, and a significant contributor to his understanding of his vocation.

Nevertheless, this very fact creates an apparent problem, for although the psalm is undoubtedly a prophecy of the crucifixion, it also contains a lengthy imprecation, where David<sup>5</sup> calls on God to turn his enemies' table into a snare, to darken their eyes, to pour out

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 1-72* (Leicester, IVP, 2001), 239.

<sup>3</sup> James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1991), 119.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article, verse references follow the numbering of the English translations.

<sup>5</sup> Here is not the place to enter into discussion of the authorship of the psalms. I assume with Paul that the psalm was composed by David (Rom. 11:9-10).

his wrath upon them, to add punishment upon punishment, and to blot them out of the book of the living (vv. 22-28). Although it is neither the fiercest, nor the longest, nor the most shocking imprecation, Psalm 69:22-28 is, at first glance, perhaps the hardest to reconcile with the gospel. Alexander McClaren, the nineteenth century Scottish Baptist minister said of these verses,

It is impossible to bring such utterances into harmony with the teachings of Jesus, and the attempt to vindicate them ignores plain facts and does violence to plain words. Better far to let them stand as a monument of the earlier stage of God's progressive revelation, and discern clearly the advance which Christian ethics has made on them.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Derek Kidner noting the way in which the psalm 'so evidently' foreshadows Christ and his passion, contrasts these verses with Jesus' prayer from the cross, 'Father, forgive them' (Lk. 23:34), arguing that this serves as a 'powerful reminder of the new thing which our Lord did at Calvary ... Christ came to crown justice with atonement. Zeal for this, now it is accomplished, will stir us differently: cooling anger instead of kindling it; fostering rather than stifling compassion.'<sup>7</sup> However, as John Goldingay notes, in contrast to Midrash Tehillim which says little about this psalm, the NT values it highly, 'especially the prayers for punishment.'<sup>8</sup>

In this article I shall argue that the Lord Jesus Christ himself prayed the curses in Psalm 69. In so doing, I shall not downplay the remarkable compassion and mercy of our Lord's first word from the cross, nor the 'new thing' he accomplished in his death, but will nevertheless seek to show how his prayer for divine forgiveness can be harmonised with this psalm's prayer for divine vengeance. I shall

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42-106* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 579-80. Boice goes beyond McClaren in saying that if we misuse the blessings of God we can expect him to harden our hearts and to curse us, but he stops short of allowing that it is permissible to pray these words, or of hinting that Jesus may have done so (580-82).

<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72, TOTC* (Leicester, IVP: 1973), 248.

<sup>8</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42-89* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 355. Later he comments, 'There is some irony in the fact that the point where the NT concentrates most of its use of the psalm is where commentators see it as unworthy of the NT. Apparently it was fine for the suppliant to pray the prayers in vv. 22-29.' (356)

first briefly consider the structure and meaning of Psalm 69, focussing in particular on verses 22-28, before turning to consider the relationship of Jesus to verses 22-28, looking at the place of imprecations in the NT, the place of verses 22-28 in the NT, and finally their relationship to Jesus' prayer in Luke 23:34.

### Psalm 69

The shape and content of Psalm 69 closely resembles that of Psalm 22.<sup>9</sup> Goldingay outlines it as follows:<sup>10</sup>

Plea (v. 1a)	Protest (vv. 1b-5)
Plea (v. 6)	Protest (vv. 7-12)
Plea (vv. 13-18)	Protest (vv. 19-21)
Plea (vv. 22-29)	Confession of trust (vv. 30-36)

Dividing the units slightly differently, we can also observe the following structure:

- A Prayer for deliverance from enemies; imagery of water and drowning (vv. 1-5)
  - B Prayer that those who hope in God be not shamed by the reproach and dishonour David bears (vv. 6-12)
- A' Prayer for deliverance from enemies; imagery of water and drowning (vv. 13-17)
  - B' Prayer that David would be delivered from reproach, shame, and dishonour (vv. 18-21)
- C Prayer for David's persecutors to be destroyed (vv. 22-28)
  - D Confidence that David will be vindicated and the world will praise God (vv. 29-36)

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms: Volume 3*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 45.

<sup>10</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 338.

The A and B sections thus show us David's plight and his cries to God for deliverance. The C and D sections speak of the consequences of God's intervention: David's persecutors will be judged, and he will be vindicated. The root issue in the psalm is that of true and false worship. David is consumed with zeal for God's house (v. 9), and the reproach he bears comes from those who reproach God. Here is a true worshipper despised by those who despise the God he worships; therefore others who seek God are in danger also of being put to shame and dishonoured through David's reproach (v. 6). In contrast, after God has intervened to set David on high (v. 29), the outcome will be true worship: David will praise God with a song, those who seek God will be glad, heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them, will join in praising YHWH (v. 34), and future generations of his servants will find security in Zion (v. 36)

It can be seen that although the imagery and details are somewhat different, the psalm follows the same basic structure as Psalm 22, with its move from cries for deliverance in the face of death at the hands of hostile enemies, to confidence in a deliverance that will result in David singing God's praises with the nations and future generations of believers (cf. Ps 22:22-29).

The most significant difference between the psalms is found in 69:22-28, the imprecation David prays against those who hate him. These verses start with pleas for retribution according to the *lex talionis*, for the way they have caused David to suffer:

'They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink' (v. 21)	'Let their own table become a snare' (v. 22)
'My eyes grow dim' (v. 3)	'Let their eyes be darkened' (v. 23)
'I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons' (v. 8); 'I looked for comforters but I found none' (v. 20)	'May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents' (v. 25)

Mitchell Dahood also notes that the imagery of verse 24 is water

imagery, matching the language of drowning at the start of the psalm:

‘Pour out<sup>11</sup> your indignation upon them;  
and let your burning anger overtake<sup>12</sup> them.’

As the psalm progresses, the imprecations get progressively fiercer until the last, ‘the most dreadful of the whole’,<sup>13</sup> ‘Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous’ (v. 28).

The language used in these verses is striking in two ways, particularly when considering how this Psalm is used in the NT. First, it is language that is used to speak of God punishing Israel.<sup>14</sup> So, according to Goldingay,

Pour out wrath [v. 24] is a theme that occurs only twice in the Psalms (cf. 79:6; also Jeremiah’s prayer in Jer. 10:25). It is more commonly a description of something God threatens to do to Israel (e.g., Jer. 6:11; Hos. 5:10), sometimes holds back from doing (Ezek. 20:8, 13, 21), but in due course actually does (Lam. 2:4, 4:11; Ezek. 22:31). God also threatens to pour out wrath on Israel’s enemies (e.g., Ezek. 21:31, 36; 30:15; Zeph. 3:8) but is never said to do so.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, in verse 25, ‘the prayer uses language that in the Psalms appears otherwise only in Ps. 79:7 but corresponds to Yhwh’s threats with regard to Israel (e.g., Lev. 26:22; Ezek. 33:28) and its attackers (e.g., Isa. 42:15; Ezek. 30:7) and God’s actions toward Israel (e.g., Jer. 33:10; Lam. 1:4).’<sup>16</sup>

Second, the vocabulary used also matches closely with Isaiah 53. In Psalm 69, David identifies himself as YHWH’S servant (v. 17). The words of verse 26<sup>17</sup> — struck (נִכָּהַר), pain/suffering (מִכְּאֹב), and wounded (לְחַלְלֵי) — also appear in Isaiah 53:3-5. Although David’s

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<sup>11</sup> ‘The metaphor being that of torrential rain’ (Mitchell Dahood, *II: 51-100*, The Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968], 162).

<sup>12</sup> Suggesting ‘a flood or a flash flood’ (Dahood, *Psalms*, 162).

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Mt. 23:38; Rom. 11:9-10 and my comments below.

<sup>15</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 350. That he is never explicitly said to do so does not, of course, mean that he never does.

<sup>16</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 350.

<sup>17</sup> Heb. v. 27.

human enemies are the persecutors, they are persecuting the one that YHWH has struck (v. 26; cf. Isa. 53:4, 6, 10). There is, however, one significant difference. In Isaiah 53, the servant bears the guilt and punishment (עֲוֹן) of the people (v. 6);<sup>18</sup> in the Psalm, David calls on God to multiply punishment (עֲוֹן) to those who persecute him (v. 27).<sup>19</sup> Not only will they bear עֲוֹן for what they have done, but David calls upon God not just to leave them in their עֲוֹן, but to keep adding to it. Putting these two factors together, in the light of Jesus' fulfilment of both passages in his sufferings and death, we can see that either those responsible for his death will turn to him that he might bear their punishment for them, or they will despise God's servant, and so bear their punishment themselves.

With these details in mind, we may now turn to consider the use of Psalm 69 in the New Testament, and particularly how it sounds on the lips of Jesus.

## Jesus and Psalm 69:22-28

### *Imprecations in the NT*

The imprecatory psalms are first and foremost appeals for God to act on the basis of his covenant promises spoken to Abraham: 'him who dishonours you, I will curse' (Gen 12:3), and through Moses: 'I will take vengeance on my adversaries and will repay those who hate me' (Dt. 32:41; cf. vv. 39-43).<sup>20</sup> It must be noted that it is God who is to act in vengeance, not believers. Nevertheless, since God has given these promises it is appropriate that in the psalms David repeatedly calls on him to keep them. As the Son of David, the Seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), and the One in whom all God's promises find their 'Yes' (2 Cor.

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<sup>18</sup> On עֲוֹן נִשָּׂא in Isa. 53 meaning to bear punishment see Garry Williams, 'The Cross and the Punishment of Sin', in David Peterson, ed., *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 70-75; on עֲוֹן meaning punishment in Ps. 69:27 see Goldingay, *Psalms*, 351.

<sup>19</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 350.

<sup>20</sup> John N. Day, 'The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics', *Bib Sac* 159 (2002): 166-86, at 168-69.

1:20), we would expect Christ to call on his Father to keep his promises to curse his enemies. Similarly, as heirs of the Abrahamic promises and the seed of Abraham in Christ, we would expect the Church to pray these prayers, for to be an heir of Abraham is to inherit both the promise of blessing and of cursing.<sup>21</sup> This is precisely what we see.<sup>22</sup> According to John Wenham, the imprecatory psalms are quoted at twice the frequency of the rest of the psalter, and also alluded to with greater frequency.<sup>23</sup> We see Jesus pronouncing woes against unrepentant cities in which his mighty works were done (Mt. 11:20-24), and against the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 23). In Mark 11:12-14, 20-21, he utters an imprecation against a fig tree; however, as the context makes clear, the fig tree symbolises Israel, and so Jesus' imprecation is directed against them (11:15-19).<sup>24</sup> Paul desired the eternal destruction of the false teachers who were preaching another gospel to the Galatians (Gal. 1:8-9). In Revelation, the saints under the altar cry, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' (6:10), which, as Day notes, looks back to God's promise to avenge the blood of his servants (Dt. 32:43).<sup>25</sup>

It is therefore entirely unsurprising to discover that the NT makes use of the imprecatory verses in Psalm 69.

### *Psalm 69:22-28 in the NT*

We noted above Goldingay's observation of the high value that the NT places on Psalm 69, 'especially the prayers for punishment.' Thus we find allusions, for example, to verse 22, where those who are at peace are destroyed (cf. 1 Thess. 5:3), and to verse 24, with its imagery of God's wrath being poured out on his enemies (cf. Rev. 16:1). There

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<sup>21</sup> Day, 'Imprecatory Psalms', *Bib Sac*, 178, n. 34.

<sup>22</sup> For fuller descriptions of imprecations in the NT, see Adams, *War Psalms*; John N. Day, 'The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics' (Ph.D. Dissertation: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000), 143-75; Day, 'Imprecatory Psalms', 182-85; John Frame, 'More on Imprecations' (1993), <[http://www.framepoythress.org/frame\\_articles/1993More.htm](http://www.framepoythress.org/frame_articles/1993More.htm)> [last accessed 1 March 2010].

<sup>23</sup> John Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 172-73.

<sup>24</sup> Day, 'Imprecatory Psalms', *Bib Sac*, 183-84.

<sup>25</sup> Day, 'Imprecatory Psalms', *Bib Sac*, 185.



is a possible allusion to verse 23, with its prayer for the enemies' eyes being darkened in 2 Corinthians 3:14-15, where unbelieving Jews are described as having hardened minds, and a veil over their faces when Moses is read. In Revelation, when the request that the enemies be blotted out of the book of life is picked up (v. 28; cf. Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27), the significance is reversed, the promise of 3:5 for example being that those who overcome will not be blotted out of the book of life; nevertheless, the implication is that those who do not overcome will not be found in the book. Of particular significance are two allusions to the request that the enemies' camp be left desolate (v. 25). In Matthew 23:38 and Luke 13:35 Jesus takes up this verse in the form of an imprecation on Israel. In Matthew 23:38, immediately following the woes to the scribes and Pharisees and introducing his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Mt. 24), Jesus laments over Jerusalem, in an allusion to this verse, that its house (i.e., the temple) is left desolate. Jesus has already promised the destruction of that house because it has become a den of robbers (cf. Mt. 21:12-13). Strikingly, as he again prophesies its destruction, which will be accomplished by his death (Mt. 27: 51) and effected by the Roman armies forty years later, he alludes to the psalm that speaks of zeal for God's house consuming him. Thus, these verses provide evidence that Jesus evoked at least part of the imprecation of Psalm 69 as he warned of the judgment coming on Israel.

In addition to these allusions, part of the imprecatory section of this psalm is directly quoted in the NT on two occasions. In the first, Peter quotes the words of verse 25 concerning Judas after he betrayed Jesus, bought a field with the money, and fell, bursting open in the field. Thus, the field became known as the Field of Blood, in order that the prayer might be fulfilled that his camp become desolate and there be no one to dwell in it (Acts 1:16-20, quoting Ps. 69:25 at v. 20). Thus, as Judas died, God answered the imprecatory prayer of the psalm. In the second, Paul quotes verses 22-23 (Rom. 11:9-10). Here, the words are applied to the non-elect in Israel who failed to obtain the righteousness of God, but instead were hardened. Their disobedient unbelief (10:14-21) finds its cause in God's words through Isaiah (Isa. 29:10; quoted in v. 8) and in his answering the prayer of Psalm 69:22-23. Paul returns to Psalm 69 in Romans 15:3, where, to provide a motivation for the strong to bear with the weak, he quotes

Psalm 69:9 and applies it to Christ: 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me [Christ]'. Thus, it appears that the underlying narrative that Paul is using here follows the shape of the psalm closely as it finds its fulfilment in Christ. Just as David bore reproach for God's sake, so too Christ; just as David therefore prayed for vindication and the destruction of his enemies, so too Christ; therefore, those in Israel who continued to reproach him in unbelief became the objects of the imprecations in the psalm, and were hardened by God and prevented from obtaining the saving righteousness of God.

Therefore, the evidence of the NT indicates that not only would Jesus have prayed Psalm 69 *in toto* in the congregation of Israel, so too he took its words on his lips, including its imprecations, in reference to Israel, especially its leaders, and Judas, as they conspired against him to crucify him. However, perhaps the most obvious objection to the thought that Jesus could have prayed this imprecation in conjunction with his sufferings and death is the first of his seven 'words' from the cross. According to Luke's account, on the cross, Jesus fulfilled Psalm 69:21 by receiving sour wine to drink (Lk. 23:36). However, far from then praying an imprecation on those responsible for his death, he had previously prayed: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Lk. 23:34). How are we to harmonise this with what we have just seen of the use of Psalm 69:22-28 in the rest of the NT?

### ***Psalm 69:22-28 and Luke 23:34***

There is some doubt over whether Luke 23:34a is original. However, I shall follow those recent scholars who, on the basis of internal evidence, argue for its inclusion in the original text of Luke.<sup>26</sup> Equally

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<sup>26</sup> The manuscript evidence is divided, but points against inclusion. NA<sup>27</sup>-UBS<sup>4</sup> places the text in double brackets, indicating that in the opinion of the editors it is known not to be part of the original text. Metzger regards the saying as bearing 'self-evident tokens of its dominical origin', but probably not as being part of the Third Gospel (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. [Stuttgart, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994], 154). However, a significant number of modern commentators regard the internal evidence for inclusion as sufficiently weighty to override the manuscript evidence. See e.g.,

significant is the question for whom Jesus is praying in these words. There are a number of options.

(i) *Jesus is praying only for the Roman soldiers who have just crucified him.* The strongest argument in favour of this reading is that Jesus' plea for forgiveness is based on the ignorance of those crucifying him, whereas those in Israel who rejected him had the Scriptures and had heard his teaching and seen his mighty works that fulfilled those Scriptures, and so in that sense knew perfectly well what they were doing.<sup>27</sup>

(ii) *Jesus is praying only for the Jews.* Fitzmyer argues that the verses can '[s]carcely' apply to the Roman soldiers: first, they have not yet been mentioned in the the narrative, and so it would be unnatural to view them as an antecedent for αὐτοῖς ('them'); second, in Luke's sequel volume, the Jews are described as having killed Christ from ignorance (Acts 3:17; 13:27; cf. 17:3 where Paul needs to reason from the Scriptures to explain to the Jews that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer).<sup>28</sup>

(iii) *Jesus is praying for both Jews and Romans.*<sup>29</sup> Given the ignorance motif in Acts, the way that throughout the passion narrative Luke has

Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51-24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1867-68; Raymond Brown, *Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave, A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, 2 vols (London; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:975-81; E. Earle Ellis, *Gospel of Luke*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., NCB (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 267; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 817; I. Howard Marshall *Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 867-68 (tentatively). Joseph M. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1502-1503 is uncertain. A good summary of the case for inclusion can be found in Bock, *Luke*, 1868.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., Wilcock (*Psalms*, 243) argues that the prayer is for the soldiers, and so is then able without contradiction to acknowledge that Christ prayed the imprecations against those in Israel who were hardened (on the evidence of Acts 1:20; Rom. 11:9-10).

<sup>28</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1503-1504. Bock agrees that Jesus' prayer primarily refers to the Jews, but adds that 'Luke's readers might apply it to all who had a role in killing Jesus' (*Luke*, 1849-1850).

<sup>29</sup> So Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2:972-73; R. Alan Culpepper, 'The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections', *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995): 1-490, at 455; Green, *Luke*, 819-20.

highlighted the role of the Jewish leaders in the crucifixion (22:1-6, 52, 66; 23:4, 10, 13), and the involvement of the crowds in calling for his death,<sup>30</sup> the Jews must be included in Jesus' prayer. However, although they have not yet been mentioned, in the immediate context it is the soldiers who are crucifying Jesus, and even though they have not yet been mentioned, all of Luke's early hearers would have witnessed crucifixions, and so would have know who was doing the crucifying. Moreover, as Green notes, Luke emphasises that the Jews and Romans 'found concord in their opposition to Jesus' (Lk. 23:26),<sup>31</sup> so it is most likely that Jesus is here praying for both.

What, then, is the significance of this prayer, and how can it be reconciled with the other prayers for God's judgment, which echo Psalm 69?

In his exposition of the first of the words from the cross, Klaas Schilder has argued that the answer is to be found in the meaning of the word ἀφίημι ('forgive'), which 'consists solely of a temporary suspension of the charge or of the sentence.'<sup>32</sup> It 'is not a plea for the justification of the sinner, nor a plea against the justification; it simply desires that God will temporarily withhold the terrible judgment, the catastrophic annihilation which must necessarily follow the condemnation and cursing of the Prince of Peace by this generation of vipers.'<sup>33</sup> Thus,

...it would be a vain task if anyone should attempt to 'play off' this prayer of Christ with the imprecatory psalms of the Old Testament.... For these psalms were given us by the Logos. They can be explained only by the Logos which has been made flesh. No, but on the contrary, Christ is uniting himself with these psalms of Israel. Christ's soul is becoming one with them. At the same time, however, his soul is very eager to have the wrath consumed by love.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Culpepper, 'Luke', 455.

<sup>31</sup> Green, *Luke*, 820.

<sup>32</sup>Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1940), 134. I am grateful to John Barach for drawing Schilder's discussion of this verse to my attention.

<sup>33</sup> Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 135.

<sup>34</sup>Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 137. There is much more to Schilder's reflections on this verse than we can explore here; he links Jesus' words with the creation and fall and God's patience throughout history, with the Day of the Lord, with our

Thus, in his love for those who are crucifying him, Jesus asks that the judgment for which he prays will not fall immediately, that rather his Father will grant them a temporary reprieve in order that they might repent and find mercy.

Schilder is not alone in this interpretation; Jerome interprets Jesus' words similarly:

We even see that the Savior loved this city so much that the misfortunes which threatened it elicited tears from His eyes; when He was crucified, He said to His Father, 'Forgive them, Father, because they do not know what they do.' His prayer was answered, for shortly after His death the Jews believed in Him by thousands, and God gave to this unfortunate city forty-two years to do penance. But finally its citizens, having failed to benefit, and still persisting in their wickedness – Vespasian and Titus together formed an anti-type of what is mentioned in our Scriptures, when they came out of the woods and killed and mauled these 'children,' because of their blasphemous insults to the real Elisha when ascending to the house of God (for that is what 'Bethel' means in Hebrew).<sup>35</sup>

In his commentary on Luke, Norval Geldenhuys offers the same interpretation, and adds to it the observation that this fits well with the parable of the fruitless fig tree in Luke 13:6-9.<sup>36</sup> In the parable, a man plants a fig tree in his vineyard; for three years, he seeks fruit on the tree, but finds none, so he instructs the vine dresser to cut it down. The vine dresser appeals for clemency for one more year in the hope that by putting on manure it might produce fruit. Geldenhuys does not note this, but there is a strong verbal connection between the parable and Jesus' prayer from the cross. In both cases, the plea for clemency uses the verb ἀφίημι. As Jesus prays, 'Father forgive [ἄφεσις] them' (23:34), so the vinedresser says, 'Sir, let it alone [ἄφεσις] until I dig round it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; *but if not, you can cut it down.*' (13:8-9). Thus, within the parable, ἀφίημι is a plea for patience, for a temporary reprieve to give opportunity for the tree to bear fruit, suggesting that this interpretation of Jesus' prayer from the cross is at least plausible.

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own lives as the knowledge of the Gospel spreads, ignorance recedes and God shows mercy to us, and with the final judgment. The entire discussion is worth careful attention (*Christ Crucified*, 128-44).

<sup>35</sup> Jerome, Letter 120.8.2

<sup>36</sup> Geldenhuys, *Luke*, 608-609.

The interpretation is further strengthened by noting the context of Jesus' prayer for forgiveness. Luke's account of the crucifixion forms a chiasm:<sup>37</sup>

- A** Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross (23:26)  
**B** Women follow Jesus, mourning, 'breasts' (23:27-31)  
**C** Criminals crucified with Jesus (23:32-33)  
**D** Jesus prays, 'Father forgive' despite mockery and abuse (23:34-48)  
**C'** One criminal mocks Jesus; the other believes (23:29-43)  
**B'** Jesus death leads crowd to mourn, beating breasts, women stand at a distance (23:44-49)  
**A'** Joseph of Arimethea puts Jesus in his own tomb (23:50-56)

Jesus' prayer therefore forms part of the centre of the chiasm; it is the hinge on which Luke's account of the crucifixion turns. Nevertheless, it comes in the context of, among other things, Jesus' warning of the destruction of the Temple and the outpouring of God's wrath on Jerusalem in A.D. 70. As he walks to his crucifixion, Jesus warns the 'daughters of Jerusalem' who are mourning over him to mourn rather for themselves and for their children (v. 28). This exchange contains allusions back to two earlier warnings of judgment on Jerusalem. First, in verse 29, Jesus warns that 'Days are coming' (ἔρχονται ἡμέραι) when those without children will be called blessed. This alludes back to 19:41-44, where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem because 'the days will come' (ἥξουσιν ἡμέραι) when enemies will besiege and tear down the city and its children. Second, the depiction of the blessedness of childlessness and implicit grief of those with children also alludes back to 21:20-24, where in Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse Jesus pronounces a woe on women who would be pregnant or nursing infants in the days Jerusalem was surrounded by Roman armies and desolated. Those days he describes as 'days of vengeance', that is to say, days when God's wrath is poured out on the city. Thus, in this light, Jesus warning to the daughters of

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<sup>37</sup> Lightly adapted from Peter Leithart, 'Chiasm of Luke's Crucifixion Account' (2004) <[http://www.leithart.com/2004/04/03\\_chiasm-of-lukes-crucifixion-account](http://www.leithart.com/2004/04/03_chiasm-of-lukes-crucifixion-account)> (last accessed 10 February 2010).

Jerusalem in chapter 23 is a warning of the events of A.D. 70. The parallel section in the chiasm (vv. 44-49) includes the account of the temple curtain being torn in two, which suggests that at least part of the significance of this event is that it foreshadows the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

Therefore, Jesus' prayer for forgiveness comes in the immediate context of warnings that God's wrath will fall on Jerusalem because of their rejection of him. As zeal for God's house consumes Jesus (Ps. 69:9a; cf. Jn. 2:17), and he is surrounded by those who hate him without cause and becomes a byword to them, bearing their reproaches (Ps. 69:4, 9b-12), so he prays for God to stay his hand and to grant time for those who have crucified him to repent. It is a remarkable prayer, full of the mercy and compassion of the Saviour. And the narrative of Acts, not least the Day of Pentecost, demonstrates the way in which Jesus' heavenly Father answered his prayer. Nevertheless, Jesus' words to the women who followed him, and the effect of his death on the Temple, particularly when considered in the light of his recent words about Jerusalem, also demonstrate that the time of forgiveness is only a temporary reprieve. Eventually, the manager would return to the fig tree and cut it down; the burning anger of God would sweep through the city and temple like a flood and would overtake them (Ps. 69:24) in the form of the Roman armies of Titus and Vespasian; beyond that wrath will be poured out on the Last Day. In the words of Schilder,

Christ would have time enough for Himself in which to let His work ripen to avenge His blood, and to provide the service of atonement in His blood. He does not curse the furious horses of the last judgment, He does not restrain them; He merely prays that the Father may withhold them for the present, in order that His hand may presently take the reins. Father, let them go today, for the whole of judgment must be made the prerogative of the Son. Do not dismiss Him, Father, before the time has come.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, even within Luke's passion account, there is no obvious contradiction between Jesus' words of compassion from the cross and the thought that he took the whole of Psalm 69 as part of his self-understanding, and even took all of its words on his lips in prayer. Moreover, as we have seen, in the sequel to his Gospel, Luke makes it

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<sup>38</sup> Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 137.

clear that the whole of Psalm 69 is to be understood in relation to the arrest of crucifixion of Jesus. In Acts 1:16, 20, Peter explains Judas' suicide as a fulfilment of the Holy Spirit's words through Jesus in Psalm 69:25. So, the curses of the Psalm find their fulfilment not only in A.D. 70, but also more immediately in the tragic destruction of Judas.

## Conclusion

Jesus would have sung the psalms from childhood, including Psalm 69 with its imprecation, and others like it. As the Son of David, the psalms of David shaped his self-identity and sense of vocation. This is nowhere seen more clearly than in the way he uses the psalms in his passion and crucifixion, among them Psalm 69. At key moments in his ministry, as he warned of the coming destruction of Jerusalem for the people's role as the enemies of David's Son as described in the Psalm, he also took its imprecations on his lips and directed it against them. That Jesus prayed the imprecatory verses of this psalm can be little doubted, however shocking that may be to some modern sensibilities. Nevertheless, the Scriptures teach us that he did, and the demise of Judas and the events of A.D. 70 demonstrate that his Father heard and answered. In their love and compassion, the Son asked for, and the Father granted a temporary stay of execution, but for those who remained hardened, eventually wrath came.

This should not leave members of the Church complacent. Judas was, after all, a disciple. And Martin Luther observed that 'May their table become a snare' could also refer to the Lord's Table.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Hebrews 10:26-31 uses imagery from Psalm 69 to warn of the fearsome, fiery wrath (cf. Ps. 69:24) that awaits Christians who spurn the Son of God and his covenant blood. The patience of God, withholding judgment for a while, is a wonderful thing; but woe to those who in the day of salvation harden their hearts.

MATTHEW W. MASON  
Washington, D.C.

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<sup>39</sup> Cited in Goldingay, *Psalms*, 356; cf. 1 Cor. 11:27-30.