

## II.

### THE IMPRECATIONS IN THE PSALMS.

IT is usual to speak of "the imprecatory psalms," but it may well be questioned whether the phrase is not a misleading one, in so far, at least, as it seems to imply that there is a body of psalms in which imprecation forms a chief element. For this, of course, is far from being the case. There are in the whole Psalter not more than eighteen psalms that contain any element of imprecation, and, in most of these this element is a very minor one, embodied in a single line, it may be, or in a single verse. These eighteen psalms contain three hundred and sixty-eight verses, of which only sixty-five include anything that can be called an imprecation. Even in the case of the three psalms which show the largest measure of the imprecatory spirit, only twenty-three verses out of a total of ninety-five can be properly said to be imprecations. It is, therefore, more true to the facts of the case to speak of "imprecations in the psalms" than of "imprecatory psalms." But, of course, the real question is one, not of quantity, but of quality. It is not, How can we account for the presence of so many imprecations in the psalms? but, How can we justify it that there are any at all? And since this latter is the real question, it is fortunate rather than otherwise that the phenomenon with which we have to deal is one common in some degree to eighteen psalms instead of being confined to three or even to one. For we thus have a much wider basis for induction, and a much better chance, consequently, of arriving at the truth. Let us recall some of these expressions which have caused so much difficulty to readers of the Bible, not to say to many learned interpreters. Thus, for example, in Ps. v. 10, after describing the wickedness of his enemies, the psalmist prays:

"Hold them guilty, O God;  
Let them fall by their own counsels:  
Thrust them out in the multitude of their transgressions;  
For they have rebelled against thee."

In x. 15 he says:

"Break thou the arm of the wicked;  
And as for the evil man, seek out his wickedness till thou find none."

In xxviii. 4:

“Give them according to their work, and according to the wickedness of their doings:  
Give them after the operation of their hands;  
Render to them their desert.”

xxxix 17, 18, sounds still more harsh:

“Let the wicked be ashamed, let them be silent in Sheol.  
Let the lying lips be dumb;  
Which speak against the righteous insolently,  
With pride and contempt.”

In xl. 14, 15, we read:

“Let them be ashamed and confounded together  
That seek after my soul to destroy it:  
Let them be turned backward and brought to dishonour  
That delight in my hurt.  
Let them be desolate by reason of their shame  
That say unto me, Aha, Aha.”

Identically the same expressions are used in lxx., which is one with the latter part of xl. and language closely similar occurs also in lxxi. 13. In lviii. 6ff. the psalmist cries:

“Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth:  
Break out the great teeth of the young lions, O Lord.  
Let them melt away as water that runneth apace:  
When he aimeth his arrows, let them be as though they were cut off.  
Let them be as a snail which melteth and passeth away:  
Like the untimely birth of a woman, that hath not seen the sun.”

And he adds in ver. 10:

“The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance:  
He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.”

In xli. 9, 10, other but equally dreadful figures are made use of:

“As for the head of those that compass me about,  
Let the mischief of their own lips cover them.  
Let burning coals fall upon them:  
Let them be cast into the fire;  
Into deep pits, that they rise not up again.”

But it is in Ps. xxxv., lxix. and cix. that the difficulty presented by the seemingly malevolent expressions used appear in its most acute form. These three psalms constitute, as Delitzsch has observed, a fearful climax in this regard. In xxxv. 4-6, for example, David prays:

“Let them be ashamed and brought to dishonour that seek after my soul:  
Let them be turned back and confounded that devise my hurt.  
Let them be as chaff before the wind,  
And the angel of the Lord driving them on.

Let their way be dark and slippery,  
And the angel of the Lord pursuing them."

In lxix. 22ff. he says with regard to his enemies:

"Let their table before them become a snare;  
And when they are in peace, let it become a trap.  
Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not;  
And make their loins continually to shake.  
Pour out thine indignation upon them,  
And let the fierceness of thine anger overtake them.  
Let their habitation be desolate;  
Let none dwell in their tents.

Add iniquity unto their iniquity:  
And let them not come into thy righteousness.  
Let them be blotted out of the book of life,  
And not be written with the righteous."

And once more, in cix. 6-15, we come upon these terrible words:

"Set thou a wicked man over him:  
And let an adversary stand at his right hand.  
When he is judged, let him come forth guilty;  
And let his prayer be turned into sin.  
Let his days be few;  
And let another take his office.  
Let his children be fatherless,  
And his wife a widow.  
Let his children be vagabonds, and beg;  
And let them seek their bread out of their desolate places.  
Let the extortioner catch all that he hath;  
And let strangers make spoil of his labour.  
Let there be none to extend mercy unto him;  
Neither let there be any to have pity on his fatherless children.  
Let his posterity be cut off;  
In the generation following let their name be blotted out.  
Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered with the Lord continually,  
That he may cut off the memory of them from the earth."

What shall we make of such expressions as these? It has, indeed, been contended by some that they are just what they seem at first sight to be, the language of a heart that cries for vengeance. David, it is said, was a man of like passions with ourselves, as more than one incident in his history amply proves. And if ever a man had provocation to speak unadvisedly with his lips it was he. Innocent of any crime, deserving on account of his talents and character, as well as of his splendid services both to Saul and to the nation, of the highest honors that the king could bestow, he found himself an outlaw upon whose head a price had been set; he could find safety only in the rocks of the wild goats; and while his own conscience testified his absolute loyalty to Saul, he knew that the king's

jealous hate was daily being fed by the lying accusations of sycophants and intriguers such as Doeg the Edomite and Cush the Benjamite. What wonder, it is asked, if even a good man should, under such circumstances, be betrayed into occasional outbursts of fierce desire for vengeance upon enemies so mean, so false, so cruel! Such utterances were sinful, of course, but the sin was one for which much excuse may be made. The fact that David was guilty of it is to be put into the same category as the dissimulation of Abraham and Isaac with respect to their wives, or the anger of Moses when he smote the rock. Not everything is commendable which the Bible records; no more, it is suggested, is all the religious experience that finds expression in the psalms necessarily endorsed as pleasing in God's sight and meant for the imitation of those who read. Now while we may admit the greatness of the provocation which David had to anger against his persecutors, we can by no means accept this explanation of the expressions under consideration. For one thing, the psalms do not present us with an account of what David felt and uttered in the moment of extreme provocation. The psalms are literature, and literature of highly wrought, artistic form. However manifestly some of them may embody the thoughts and feelings begotten by such cruel experiences as David's outlaw life or his flight from Absalom, it is plain that they must have been composed at leisure; and while we may make excuse for harsh words uttered in the heat of anger, we cannot excuse the embodiment of the same words in permanent literary form. Imprecations on one's enemies should be repented of, not written down for others to read.

The explanation under review also fails in that it ignores the distinction between a lyric poem, not to say a hymn intended for use in the public worship of God, and a historical narrative. The latter may well claim to be a colorless, objective recital of facts (though in reality the Scriptural histories for the most part give clear intimation of the estimate proper to be put upon the facts which they record); but the former is in its very nature an expression of the poet's personal feeling, and involves an implicit claim that this feeling is in some sense true and right, such as others should sympathize with and, it may be, adopt as their own.

The attempt has also been made to account for these harsh expressions on the ground of the lower standard of morality which, it is alleged, obtained under the Old Testament dispensation. There were many things permitted, it is said, under the Old Covenant which are no longer allowable under the fuller light of the

New. The polygamous arrangements of the Patriarchs, the exterminating wars waged by the Chosen People, are adduced as illustrations of the prevalence of such a lower standard. The injunction "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you," had not been given. This was one of the "But I say unto you" of Him who was also to pray for His murderers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

But this explanation also falls to the ground in view of the fact that even the law of Moses forbids private vengeance, yes, commands kindness to enemies, witness Lev. xix. 18, "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people; but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," and Ex. xxiii. 4, 5, "If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him."

And it has been well pointed out that when Paul, in Rom. xii. 19ff., would forbid this very sin of a revengeful spirit, he does so by means of two quotations from the Old Testament—one from the Song of Moses (Deut. xxxii. 35), "Vengeance is mine, and recompence," the other from the Book of Proverbs (xxv. 21, 22):

If thine enemy hunger, give him bread to eat;  
 And if he be thirsty, give him water to drink:  
 For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head,  
 And the Lord shall reward thee."

Nor can we hardly doubt that David knew and understood these injunctions of the Law. The psalms everywhere bear evidence that their authors' minds were saturated with the thought and language of the Thorah. Moreover, it is to be remarked that in two of the three psalms in which the strain of imprecation is most pronounced David protests the kind feelings he had for those who were persecuting him. Hear him in xxxv. 12ff.:

They reward me evil for good,  
 To the bereaving of my soul.  
 But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth:  
 I afflicted my soul with fasting;  
 And my prayer returned into mine own bosom.  
 I behaved myself as though it had been my friend or my brother:  
 I bowed down mourning, as one that bewaileth his mother."

And so in cix. 4, 5:

"For my love they are my adversaries:  
 But I give myself unto prayer.  
 And they have rewarded me evil for good,  
 And hatred for my love."

Now, so far as David is concerned—and it is he principally among the authors of the psalms that comes into consideration, since thirteen of the eighteen psalms in which any imprecatory element is found, and all three of those that are the *loci magni* in this regard, are on good grounds ascribed to his pen—we can easily accept these protestations as true. Rarely has a man of equal strength of character and warmth of feeling shown himself so far from the spirit of revenge. The man who twice spared the life of his deadly enemy, and that, too, when others urged him to smite; who uttered the touching “Song of the Bow” when at last that enemy fell on Gilboa; who put to death the Amalekite who so far misjudged him as to think that the son of Jesse would rejoice in his rival’s death; who treated honorably with Abner while he was still the mainstay of Ishbosheth’s cause, and publicly avowed his horror at Joab’s treacherous deed of blood; who visited a quick but just punishment upon the assassins who brought him Ishbosheth’s bloody head; who would not suffer Abishai to carry out his purpose to cross the ravine and take off the head of scurrilous Shimei; who charged his captains as they went out of the gate of Mahanaim to deal gently with the guilty head of the rebellion, the young man Absalom—was this a man who would treasure up injuries in his memory, and breathe out his desire for vengeance in elaborate and many-sided maledictions? And if any one is disposed to find proof of such a savage temper in David’s purpose to revengé himself on churlish Nabal, it is sufficient answer to point out that a few well-chosen words of remonstrance on the part of Abigail were enough, not merely to turn him from his purpose (since a comely and tactful woman with a handsome present at her back might well lead him to lay aside his intention of violence), but to prick his conscience and bring him to a solemn admission of his error. And if it still be urged that though David, after the overthrow of Absalom’s revolt, spared Shimei and formally forgave him, he nevertheless afterward gave evidence of his lasting memory for injuries by charging Solomon to put the Benjamite to death, it may easily be shown that in giving this command David was acting not as a private person but as a king, who, as Keil says, “while he had forgiven the personal injury, had not forgiven, and as representative of the divine right in the theocracy could not forgive, the crime of high treason of which Shimei had become guilty by reviling the Lord’s anointed.” That David had faults, both as a man and as a king, is a fact which the Biblical writers take no pains to conceal; but surely, if they have given us a description of his character at all approaching the

truth, a revengeful and implacable spirit was not one of those faults.

Nor ought we to overlook one further consideration which serves to show that these so-called "imprecations" are not mere outbursts of the spirit of vengeance. It is that the poems which contain them have the form of direct addresses to God; in other words, they are prayers, or if regard be had to their adaptation to use in public worship, they are hymns. These very psalms are full of earnest pleadings with God for help, with acknowledgments of dependence upon Him, with appeals to His mercy, His truth, His faithfulness, with thankful recognitions of past favors, with vows of grateful thanksgiving for deliverance, with humble confessions of sin, with professions of zeal for His honor. Let any one take Ps. lxxxix, for example, and omit from it vers. 22-28, and ask himself whether any other psalm strikes more squarely the note of real piety. Is it believable that words such as these, words of supplication, confession, adoration, are in truth only prelude and postlude to a horrid discord of angry curses sounding forth from a heart that can neither forgive nor forget?

But if these "hard sayings" are not longings for vengeance, what then are they? Before we attempt a positive answer to this question there is a preliminary consideration that deserves attention. It is that we are dealing here with poetry, not with prose, and with that form of poetry which more readily than any other takes on strong color, viz., the lyric. We are dealing, too, with Oriental poetry, the poetry of a people with whom hyperbole is the commonest and best-loved figure of speech. The value of this consideration to our present discussion has been happily illustrated by Dr. John DeWitt, lately professor in the theological seminary at New Brunswick, N. J., by means of a contrast between the attitude of David toward trouble and suffering as this is conveyed by the historical books, on the one hand, and by the psalms of suffering on the other. The former, he truly says, represent David as a man of the highest courage, the noblest fortitude; the latter set him before us as moaning, groaning, filling the air of night with complaints, making his couch to swim with tears, because of the attempts of his enemies. Now this contrast is to be explained, says Dr. DeWitt, not by assuming that there were two Davids, one of whom was a hero while the other was a coward, nor by assuming that one of these pictures is true and the other false, but simply by remembering that the historical books are prose while the psalms are poetry. With regard to the lamentations and the imprecations of the psalms

alike, it is much to the point not to forget that we are dealing with the poetry of "the fervid, impassioned and demonstrative East, where to this day feeling of any kind is scarcely thought to be genuine unless it is expressed extravagantly."

Keeping this distinction between prose and poetry in mind, the first answer that may be given to the question we have raised is this: These so-called imprecations are *the expression of the longing of an Old Testament saint for the vindication of God's righteousness*. How much this subject of theodicy, or the justification of the dealings of God with man, engaged the attention of the Old Testament writers is well known. The whole Book of Job is devoted to it; it recurs often in the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; it appears again and again in the Psalms. In Ps. v., vii., x. and xvii. it comes prominently to view, while Ps. xxxvii., xxxix., xlix. and lxxiii. are wholly given to the discussion of it. Now it is obvious that this puzzle, how to reconcile God's righteousness with the facts of human experience, had never been presented in a more striking form than in the history of David. That he, a man of true piety, of pure life, innocent of any crime, whom God's prophet had anointed as Jehovah's chosen king, and who was conscious of the moving of God's Spirit within him—that he should be for weary years a fugitive, an exile, an outlaw, while his enemies, men devoid of piety, of truth, of honor, were living in ease, safety, honor, at Saul's court—surely it would be hard to conceive how the contrast between what was and what ought to have been could be presented in more glaring colors. What wonder if, under such circumstances, David should feel his faith in God's goodness and righteousness put to a severe strain, and should long for such a reversal of these conditions as would set his doubts and the doubts of others forever at rest! And that this was really the case we have abundant evidence in those very psalms which contain the imprecatory clauses. Thus in vii. 9ff. he cries:

"Oh let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end, but establish thou the righteous:  
For the righteous God trieth the hearts and reins."

In xxviii. 4 his prayer is that God will deal justly with the wicked:

"Give them according to their work, and according to the wickedness of their doings:  
Give them after the operation of their hands;  
Render to them their desert."



Note what the result is that David hopes for from the overthrow of his enemies. Hear how in lviii., after the request

“Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth,” etc.,

he adds:

“So that men shall say, Verily there is a reward for the righteous,  
Verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth.”

To the same effect is lix. 13:

“Consume them in wrath, consume them that they be no more;  
And let them know that God ruleth in Jacob,  
Unto the ends of the earth.”

And still more striking is lxi. 6:

“Let not them that wait on thee be ashamed through me, O Lord God of hosts:  
Let not those that seek thee be brought to dishonour through me, O God  
of Israel.”

Have we not in such passages the expression of the same feeling of perplexity at God’s dealings and the same longing for the vindication of His righteousness that breaks forth in the opening lines of xciv.?

“O Lord, thou God to whom vengeance belongeth,  
Thou God to whom vengeance belongeth, shine forth.  
Lift up thyself, thou judge of the earth:  
Render to the proud their deserts.  
Lord, how long shall the wicked,  
How long shall the wicked triumph?  
They prate, they speak arrogantly:  
All the workers of iniquity boast themselves.  
They break in pieces thy people, O Lord,  
And afflict thine heritage.  
They slay the widow and the stranger,  
And murder the fatherless.  
And they say, The Lord shall not see,  
Neither shall the God of Jacob consider.”

And from this point of view it is worthy of remark that, owing to the very vague knowledge of existence beyond the grave granted to David and the men of his time, they could not comfort themselves, with regard to these mysteries of Providence, with the thought in which we take refuge, that eternity will set right all the apparent inequalities of God’s dealings with men in this world. As Delitzsch has said: “Theodicy, or the vindication of God’s ways, does not yet rise from the indication of the retribution in the present time which the ungodly do not escape to a future solution of all the contradictions of this present world; and the transcendent glory which infinitely outweighs the sufferings of this present time still remains

outside the field of vision." Does not this consideration make it easier to understand how the psalmists, in their anxiety for the vindication of God's doings, were moved to invoke fearful and striking temporal calamities on the heads of the wicked?

The second answer we may give to the question as to the real nature of these so-called imprecatory expressions is that they are, particularly in the mouth of David, *utterances of zeal for God and God's kingdom*. This will be the more plain when we remind ourselves that the kingdom of God existed at that time not under an ecclesiastical but under a political form—the form, namely, of a theocratic monarchy—and that to this divinely ordained kingship David sustained, and that consciously, a close official relation through the greater part of his life. He had been set apart in his youth by anointing at the hands of Samuel. During all the years of his outlaw life he carried in his breast the conviction, not merely that he was innocent of any fault against Saul, but also that he had been divinely designated to the kingly office which Saul was so foully misusing. When he came at last to the throne, he received confirmation of the sign given in his youth, not merely in the providential blessings that marked his reign, but more unequivocally in the great promise granted him through Nathan, in which God declared that He had established and would maintain the closest relations between Himself, His name and cause, on the one hand, and David and his royal posterity on the other. How natural it was to David's mind and temper under such circumstances to invest himself with a sanctity far beyond that natural "divinity that doth hedge a king" we may discover by observing his attitude toward Saul. It was not merely military loyalty that restrained David in the cave from taking advantage of what seemed to his men a wonderfully providential opportunity to rid himself of his enemy. It was not admiration for Saul's splendid capacities, nor gratitude for favors received from the king in earlier and happier days, that held back his arm. It was not his covenant of friendship with Jonathan that made the sleeping Saul inviolably sacred. No; it was because Saul was the "Lord's anointed." "God forbid," this was David's awestruck reply to the urging of his men, "God forbid that I should stretch forth mine hand against the Lord's anointed." To have done so would, in David's esteem, have been to commit treason and sacrilege in one. Now it will easily be seen how a man who felt thus with regard to the theocratic office, even when it was being abused, when it was held by one from whom God had manifestly withdrawn His favor, would certainly, when this office

had been conferred upon himself, regard himself and everything that concerned him in the light of this official relation to God and God's kingdom. Such an one was not, and could not be considered, even by himself, a mere private person. He was the representative of God, in a different way indeed from priest or prophet, but not less really than either. And as he was God's representative, his enemies ceased to be private enemies; nor were they guilty of treason simply. They must be accounted the enemies of God Himself and of His cause on earth. As such David might anticipate for them, yes, he might even ask for them, a fate which he would never have desired for those who were mere personal opponents. And he could do this without sin, exactly as Paul could without sin write, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema maranatha."

But before turning to the psalms for proof that this was in fact David's attitude of mind toward his enemies, let me suggest a third answer to our question, one which is so closely allied to the one just presented that the evidence for both may best be sought at one time. It is this: *These fierce-sounding utterances are an Old Testament saint's expression of his abhorrence of sin.* Those against whom these hard sayings were directed were not, as we have seen, mere private enemies of David. They were not simple public enemies, as those would have been who should have plotted against the life of any other monarch of that day. They were not merely opposers of God and God's cause. They were also, in the psalmist's view, fearful embodiments of wickedness. And there is every reason to believe that his view of them was simple truth. For it must be remembered that the persons whom David had in mind in the psalms under review, which belong about equally to the time of his persecution by Saul and to that of Absalom's revolt, were not chiefly Saul, for whom he had high regard, and Absalom, his favorite son, but rather, as has been intimated already, the sycophants and intriguers who gathered about these and urged them on to deeds of which neither would have been capable without such incitement. Doeg and Cush and Ahithopel are types of these vile men, in whom falsehood, treachery, cunning, greed, hate, cruelty, arrogance and pride had come to their perfect fruit. What wonder if to David's mind such seem the very incarnation of wickedness, against whom every righteous man, not to say a righteous king, ought to feel the deepest indignation and abhorrence. And if it be answered that David should have done what we recognize it as duty to do under like conditions, that is to say, that he should

have pitied the sinner, even while he condemned the sin, the rejoinder is that this is just what David could not be expected to do, whether as a poet, a Shemite, a king, or an Old Testament saint. He could not do it as a poet, for poetry loves the concrete, so much so that had these sins lain before David's mind as abstractions he would have been compelled by poetic feeling to seek concrete forms under which to embody them. He could not do it as a Shemite, for the Shemitic mind has little taste for philosophical distinctions such as we make so readily. He could not do it as a king; for it is the duty of a king not only to hate evil but to punish evil-doers. A king, as Paul puts it, "is a minister of God, an avenger of wrath to him that doeth evil" (Rom. xii. 4). Ps. ci., that ancient "mirror for magistrates," may show us what was David's feeling as to the relation which he as a king should sustain toward wicked men:

"Whoso privily slandereth his neighbour, him will I destroy:  
Him that hath an high look and a proud heart will I not suffer.  
Morning by morning will I destroy all the wicked of the land;  
To cut off all the workers of iniquity from the city of the Lord."

And lastly, this distinction between the sin and the sinner was impossible to David as an Old Testament saint. This impossibility arose out of the fact that the doctrine of Satan, which makes it easy for us to pity the sinner while we hate and condemn the sin, was then very imperfectly revealed. We pity the sinner because we view him as not exercising an unconstrained choice of evil, but as being the victim of a cruel compulsion. Behind him, urging him on, we see that dark spirit of evil who at the time of the Advent emerged so clearly into view. There is no imprecation in the psalms which Christians of to-day would not be willing to adopt with reference to this enemy of God and man. But to David and his contemporaries this mighty power of evil had only the most shadowy existence. They could not see behind the scowling features of Doeg or the cunning face of Ahithopel the hellish outlines that we see. They thought of these men as choosing evil simply because they loved it, and therefore as being worthy to be hated by all those who loved and chose the good.

Turn now to the psalms themselves and see the evidence that, in asking for the judgments of God upon his enemies, David regarded these enemies as at the same time and chiefly the enemies of God and the embodiments of sin. For example, take the very first expression of an imprecatory sort that the Psalter presents (v. 10), and set it in its proper context. David's prayer is

“Hold them guilty, O God;  
 Let them fall by their own counsels:  
 Thrust them out *in the multitude of their transgressions;*  
*For they have rebelled against thee.*”

And the implication of the italicized words is confirmed by a consideration of the psalm as a whole. It is true that once in the course of it David does speak of those whom he has in mind as “mine enemies,” but it is not because they are his enemies that he desires their overthrow. It is because of their wickedness and opposition to God.

“For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness:  
 Evil shall not sojourn with thee.  
 The arrogant shall not stand in thy sight:  
 Thou hatest all workers of iniquity:  
 Thou shalt destroy them that speak lies:  
 The Lord abhorreth the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

For there is no faithfulness in their mouth;  
 Their inward part is very wickedness:  
 Their throat is an open sepulchre;  
 They flatter with their tongue.”

So x. 15 contains the fierce cry:

“Break thou the arm *of the wicked;*  
 And *as for the evil man,* seek out his wickedness till thou find none.”

But here again the italics are fairly representative of the true animus of the expressions used. For while, on the one hand, the psalm contains no intimation that the writer has any enemies, on the other, the first two-thirds of it are occupied with setting forth the irreverence, the arrogance, the rapacity, in short, the wickedness of the ungodly. Or if we turn to the three psalms which all have agreed upon as exhibiting the most striking illustrations of the phenomenon in question—I mean xxxv., lxix. and cix.—it is still the same. In the first of these, for instance, we must note that David lays stress not merely or chiefly on the injuries that his enemies have inflicted upon him, but upon the causelessness of their hate, their oppressive treatment of the poor, their untruth and ingratitude and malignity; nor must we overlook it that in the end he connects the triumph of his cause as a righteous person and a servant of God with the honor of Jehovah Himself. In lxix. David feels himself to be in such a sense the type and representative of all who fear God that his overthrow must be a stumbling-block to them (ver. 6); the reproaches that have been heaped upon him have been inspired by his zeal for God and God’s house (vers. 7–9); deliverance granted to him will become ground for thanksgiving

and source of blessing for the whole Church (vers. 30-36). Or see, finally, how in cix, in which these expressions reach their climax, emphasis is laid upon the falseness, hate, ingratitude, unmercifulness, love of cursing, with which the psalmist's foes were chargeable, and say whether we have not basis for the assertion that the real thought of David in these harsh-sounding utterances is that to which he gives voice in the close of cxxxix (vers. 19-22):

“Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God:  
Depart from me, therefore, ye bloodthirsty men.  
For they speak against thee wickedly,  
And thine enemies take thy name in vain.  
Do not I hate them O Lord, that hate thee?  
And am I not grieved with them that rise up against thee?  
I hate them with perfect hatred:  
I count them mine enemies.”

And we may well ask in passing whether a man whose heart was full of unholy enmity against personal foes would be likely to add:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart:  
Try me, and know my thoughts;  
And see if there be any way of wickedness in me,  
And lead me in the way everlasting.”

Once more, and finally, these so-called imprecations are *prophetic teachings as to the attitude of God toward sin and impenitent and persistent sinners*. The psalms are not merely lyric poems, embodying the feelings of their authors; they are lyric poems composed under the influence of the Spirit of Inspiration, and as such are a part of God's revelation of Himself. From them we may learn, not only how David, for example, felt toward persistent and high-handed sinners, but also and more particularly how God feels toward such. David, as Peter informed his hearers on the day of Pentecost, was a prophet. Nor was he a prophet simply in the narrower sense of one who by Divine inspiration foretells future events. He was a prophet in the wider sense of a spokesman for God, an official teacher of God's will. David himself realized this, as we may learn from the preface to what are called his “last words” (2 Sam. xxiii. 1-7):

“Prophetic utterance (פְּנִי) of David the son of Jesse,  
And prophetic utterance of the man who was raised on high,  
The anointed of the God of Jacob,  
And the sweet psalmist of Israel:  
The Spirit of Jehovah spake by me,  
And his word was on my tongue.”

As an official communicator of God's will to men, David no doubt felt it to be an important part of his duty to warn men of the Divine wrath against sin and persistent sinners. Now it deserves notice that there is scarcely a single expression used by David in the so-called imprecations upon his enemies which may not be found in other psalms as simple statements of fact with regard to the fate of the wicked. In these places the form of the verb is not jussive; instead we find the simple imperfect or perfect: the statement is not of that which David desires God may do, but of that which God has done or will certainly do. Compare, for example, the prayer and the positive teaching in the following pairs of quotations:

"Let them be as chaff before the wind" (xxxv. 5).

"The ungodly are not so,  
But are like the chaff which the wind driveth away" (i. 4).

"Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth:  
Break out the great teeth of the young lions" (lviii. 6).

"For thou hast smitten all mine enemies on the cheek bone;  
Thou hast broken the teeth of the wicked" (iii. 7).

"Let destruction come upon him at unawares;  
And let his net that he hath hid catch himself" (xxxv. 8).

"The nations are sunk down in the pit that they made;  
In the net which they hid is their own foot taken" (ix. 15).

"Let them be ashamed and confounded together that rejoice at mine hurt;  
Let them be clothed with shame and dishonour that magnify themselves  
against me" (xxxv. 26).

"All mine enemies shall be ashamed and sore vexed;  
They shall turn back, they shall be ashamed suddenly" (vi. 10).

And not to seek further for exact verbal parallels between what is asked for in one set of psalms and what is predicted or asserted as fact in the other, let any one read vii. 12-16:

"If a man turn not, God will whet his sword;  
He hath bent his bow, and made it ready.  
He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death;  
He maketh his arrows fiery shafts.  
Behold, he (the wicked) travaileth with iniquity;  
Yea, he hath conceived mischief, and brought forth falsehood.  
He hath made a pit, and digged it,  
And is fallen into the ditch which he made.  
His mischief shall return upon his own head,  
And his violence shall come down upon his own pate."

Or let him take note of the expressions that are used as to the fate of the wicked in xxxvii. 2, 9, 10, 15, 20, 35, 36, 38, or lv. 23, or lxiii. 9-11, or lxiv. 7-9, and say whether David anywhere invokes upon

his wicked foes any punishments more terrible than those which he sees to be in fact laid up for all the wicked. Now it is the duty of men to acquiesce in the righteous dealings of God, as well with the wicked as with the righteous. It was by divine command that all the people said amen to the fearful curses upon evil-doers that were pronounced from Mount Gerizim (Deut. xxvii. 15ff.). Deborah was not less expressing a pious sentiment when, after the destruction of Sisera and his host, she sang:

“So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord!”  
than when she immediately added:

“But let them that love thee be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might”  
(Judg. v. 31).

In view of these facts is it not easy to understand how David, with the terrible fate of the wicked before his eyes, should sometimes, not under the impulse of desire for revenge, but merely in the heat of poetic fervor, pass from the indicative to the optative, from the statement of a fact to the utterance of a wish? The form is different in the two cases, but the truth taught and intended to be taught is the same. This seems to be the view taken of the matter by our Lord and the apostles. For it may well make us cautious how we adopt the language of some who have felt themselves unable to justify the expressions under review—*e.g.*, Dean Stanley, who speaks of their “vindictive spirit” (*Lect. on the Jewish Church*, p. 170)—to remember what has been so strikingly put by Dr. Binnie, of Stirling (*The Psalms*, p. 285), that “except Ps. i., xxii., cx., cxviii., all great Messianic hymns, no other psalms have been so largely quoted by our Lord and His apostles as these ‘imprecatory psalms’ . . . . The 69th, which bears more of the imprecatory character than any other except the 109th, is expressly quoted in five separate places, besides being alluded to in several more.” And he adds: “The nature of the quotations is even more significant than their number. It would seem that our Lord appropriated this (69th) psalm to Himself, and that we are to take it as a disclosure of thoughts and feelings which found a place in his Heart during His ministry on earth. In the Guest Chamber He quoted the words of the fourth verse, ‘They hated me without a cause,’ and represented them as a prediction of the people’s hatred of the Father and of Himself (John xv. 25). When He drove the traffickers from the Temple, John informs us (ii. 17), His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up’ (cf. Ps. lxxix. 9), which implies that those words of the psalm expressed the very mind



that was in Christ. When Peter, after mentioning the crime and perdition of Judas, suggested to the company of a hundred and twenty disciples that they ought to take measures for the appointment of a new apostle to fill the vacant place, he enforced the suggestion by a quotation, 'For it is written in the Book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein, and his bishopric let another take' (Acts i. 20)—manifestly on the supposition that this psalm and the 109th (for the quotation is from them both) were written with reference to Judas. In the Epistle to the Romans the duty of pleasing, every one of us, our neighbor to his good is enforced by the apostle with the argument (Rom. xv. 3; cf. Ps. lxxix. 9) that 'even Christ pleased not himself, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me—an argument that has no weight if David alone is the speaker in the psalm, if Christ be not in some real sense the speaker in it also. Finally, we are taught in the same epistle to recognize a fulfillment of the psalmist's most terrible imprecations in the judicial blindness which befell the Jewish nation after the crucifixion of Christ (cf. Ps. lxxix. 22, 23, with Rom. ii. 9, 10).' All this proves that, if we are not to reject the authority of Christ and His apostles, we must take this imprecatory psalm as having been spoken by David as the ancestor and type of Christ. I do not say that the fact that these psalms are so unequivocally endorsed and appropriated by our blessed Lord explains the difficulty they involve. But I am sure that the simple statement of it will constrain the disciples of Christ to touch them with a reverent hand, and rather to distrust their own judgment concerning them than to brand such Scriptures as the products of an unsanctified and unchristian temper."

*Wooster, O.*

CHALMERS MARTIN.