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The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms

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THE BOOK OF PSALMS heads the third division of the Hebrew Old Testament, known as the *Kethubim* or Writings. The Hebrew title of this book is *Tehillim*, the Book of Praises, a title which designates the main object of the book, viz. the worship of God. The book of Psalms has a peculiar character. It does not give a history of God's people or of God's ways with them, nor is it the inculcation of positive doctrines or duties, nor the formal prophetic announcements of coming events. These all are in the Psalms, it is true, but only in subordinate way. History, prophecy, providence, doctrine, law, are all in the Psalms, but these poems form nothing more than the frame around which the Holy Spirit has built praise, prayer, and adoration of the Lord's people. Worship in its broadest sense is the central idea of the Psalter. Professor Moorehead correctly asserted about the Psalms as follows:

Many of the Psalms, in whole or in part, are prayer-intercessions for the psalmist himself, for the Lord's cause in the earth, and for the reign of righteousness and peace. Many of them express deep and poignant sorrow for sin, and plead for pardon. Many of them are descriptive of the godly man, of his character, ways, afflictions, and deliverances. Others are didactic and predictive. Others pour forth the fervid praises of a glad and happy heart. But all of them are worship. They carry the worshiper directly into the divine presence, and deal with all that is in him and belongs to him as before God.¹

The Psalter is by its locality and importance the very heart of Scripture. What would the Bible be without the Book of Psalms? A Bible, without the Psalter in it, is simply hard to conceive. This Biblical book is not only a part of the Bible but of ourselves. In these inimitable poems are found the voice of the Church of the centuries, representing many different religious communions for in these Hebrew poems are reflected the varied experiences and emotions of the child of God.

I. THE PROBLEM OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

While the Psalms have been recognized as outstanding by both Jews and Christians and their excellencies have been sung by many psalm users, yet one aspect of the Psalter has puzzled many readers and users, namely, the presence of at least twenty-eight Psalms containing imprecations, curses and condemnations of enemies. For many a Psalter-user these imprecations have constituted a serious stumbling-block to the usage and religious appreciation of these Psalms. Hard and intensely spiritual expressions sometimes spring up as thorns among the sweet flowers of God. They have marred the

enjoyment of the poem containing them for many Christians and Jews.

The presence of utterances calling upon God to punish people and to judge them severely are felt by many readers of the Psalter to be out of harmony with the principle that the children of God should love even their enemies. Those who claim that they apply the principle of the spirit of Christ to these passages can find no justification for using them or even for justifying their writers in having uttered and penned such terrible imprecations and curses. It has been argued that the imprecations found in a number of Psalms are out of place in the Bible. This would hold true especially of Psalms 35, 69, and 109. It therefore is no surprise, especially in modern times, that these psalms have been subjected in many instances to unmeasured condemnation and categorized as the fruit of "a savage spirit," or as expressions of personal vindictiveness to unmeasured wrath, or as hasty utterances of men while their souls were "storm-tossed by passion." It is felt that the presence of curses, condemnations, imprecations is evidence against the teaching held traditionally by all Christian groups that the Bible was verbally and plenarily inspired. How could the Holy Spirit have caused the psalm-writers to have written such unchristian sentiments and words?

In his coronation-day sermon, delivered in 1916, Cardinal Mercier of Belgium agreed with those condemning the imprecations in the Psalter, when he said about Psalm 137: "The Psalm ends in imprecations: but we do not allow ourselves to repeat them: we are not of the Old Testament, tolerating the laws of retaliation. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Our lips are purified by the fire of Christian charity and utter no words of hate." Quite generally in modern commentaries the imprecatory assertions in the Psalter are looked upon as expressions of hate and personal vindictiveness. Thus Earle Cross wrote:

We question the worth for Christian worship of such Psalms as express a spirit of vindictiveness. Christianity is meekness, gentleness, peace. Even the wicked should be regarded as objects of redemptive search . . . The spirit of Jesus spoke of forgiveness even upon those who did him to death. As long as we retain in Christian worship material which breathes a spirit of aggression, self-assertion and vengeance, we are contradicting our faith. We cannot hope thus to make our doctrine clear to the world. With such contradictory elements in our worship, we should not be surprised that the spread of Christianity is slow. We may well wonder that it propagates at all.²

Again the same author asserted:

Between the two extremes of those Psalms which are quite militaristic throughout and vindictive in spirit, and those in which the unchristian notes are minute and not particularly obtrusive, there is a considerable list of psalms which the Christian Church would do well to preserve only in the ancient record, as evidence of the pit from whence we have been dug,

and to refuse a place in the liturgies of worship. Nevertheless, the sheer vindictiveness of these psalms does not ring true to the redemptive urge of Christianity. All men are objects of a shepherd's search. If at last they must be whipped into line, such a spirit would be better couched at least in a saving phrase which would indicate that they had once been the object of loving solicitude of the deity.³

T. K. Cheyne, a British Old Testament scholar, wrote in 1899 as follows:

Let us then ask, how we can put before our converts a Prayer Book which contains so many imprecatory Psalms? Will it not seem to those of them who think at all as if we were just as vindictive as heathen warriors? I think I would rather that a Japanese catechumen should be baptized by an American missionary, because he would then have in his hands the American Prayer Book—not that the American Prayer Book is at all completely, as regards the Psalter, what a thoughtful Church would desire to see it. I fear that our unmitigated adoption of the Psalter as it stands may counteract that spirit of love which is one half of Christianity.⁴

C. S. Lewis is considered to have been one of the greatest apologists for the Christian faith appearing in Great Britain in recent years, but unfortunately as far as the Old Testament is concerned he expressed and held defective and erroneous views which did not aid the cause of God's Word in the modern world. Thus he wrote concerning the Old Testament that the "human qualities of the raw materials show through, naivety, errors, contradictions, even (as in the cursing psalms) wickednesses are not removed."⁵ For this reason Lewis claimed that the Old Testament is not in its entirety the Word of God. Here, together with many other Biblical critics he shares the view that the curses in the Psalms are morally wrong and show the fallible and human character of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Dr. Alexander Maclaren, one of the most evangelical, reverent and spiritual scholars wrote concerning the cursing Psalms:

It is far better to recognize the discordance between the temper of the psalmist and that enjoined by Christ, than to cover it over. Our Lord has signalized the difference between his teaching and that addressed to "them of old time" and we are but following His guidance when we recognize that the psalmist's mood is distinctly inferior to that which has now become the law for devout men.⁶

After a little further discussion of the imprecatory psalm passages he somewhat nullified his harsh judgment by writing:

The form of these maledictions belongs to a lower stage of revelation, the substance of them considered as a passionate desire for the destruction of evil, burning zeal for the triumph of the truth, which is God's cause and unquenchable faith that he is just, is a part of Christian perfection.⁷

Lowther Clarke, an Anglican bishop and author of a one-volume Bible Commentary, claims that the presence of so many curses in the Psalms is a serious hindrance to the modern reader's appreciation of the whole Psalter.⁸ In his opinion some of the psalms never were used by the Jewish people in public worship. He believes that the imprecatory psalms were intended for private utterance, possibly connected with the judicial side of the temple organization. Lowther holds that the speaker protests that he is innocent and turns the accusations of his enemies against their makers. He is zealous for God and his zeal takes the form of wishing confusion to God's enemies. The idea of the hating the sins and loving the sinner is not supposed to have occurred at all to the Hebrew psalm-writers.

Dr. L. G. Robinson, scholar and teacher, speaks about the imprecations in the psalter as "discords in a book that is usually of saintly resignation."⁹ He wonders how such feelings as expressed in Psalm 83:13, 14 should have a place in the prayers of the people of God:

O my God, make them like a wheel;
As the stubble before the wind,
As the fire burneth the mountain on fire,
So persecute them with thy tempest,
And make them afraid with thy storm.

Or he asks how can a Christian justify the spirit of Psalm 109 in the light of the teaching of love and mercy in both the Old and New Testaments as essentials of righteousness?

There is no doubt that the average reader will wonder about the presence of these wishes for punishment and condemnation and, without investigation of the whole matter from all the light that the Scriptures itself throws upon the interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms, the natural reaction would be to advance and subscribe to the type of objections and condemnations set forth in the quotations of the scholars just referred to in the opening portions of this essay.

Many critical scholars propose that the psalms come from the period from between 400 to 100 B.C., during a period when God's revelation was supposedly in one of the low stages of development, and therefore the cursings reflect a sub-Christian morality which was to be rectified in the New Testament. Thus Driver wrote:

The only objections to the canonicity of the Psalter seriously entertained are based on a number of imprecations upon enemies and protestations of righteousness on the part of suffering servants of God. These objections are invalid because they fail to apprehend that these imprecations belong necessarily to earlier historic situations where they have their essential propriety.¹⁰

For Briggs these imprecations are never to be condoned by the Biblical reader. In criticizing the imprecations Briggs further asserted:

There is a place, therefore for imprecation in the highest forms of Christianity, only it is more discriminating than in the Old

Testament religion and much more refined. In substance, the imprecations of the Psalter are normal and valid; in their external form and modes of expression they belong to an age of religion which has been displaced by Christianity.¹¹

S. R. Driver, in preaching on one of the imprecatory Psalms, 109, said:

And it is just this feeling of personal hate and personal animosity which, judged by the standpoint of Christian ethics, stands condemned. We must admit it; and can only see in it the voice of persecuted righteousness not yet freed from discord by the precept and example of Christ . . . The voice of human passion is heard in them [i.e., the imprecations], in a manner which is intelligible, perhaps even justifiable, in the age in which the authors wrote, but which is not in harmony with the higher level on which Christ has placed us. The Old Testament contains a progressive revelation; and it is the essence of what progresses that the earlier stages should be less perfect and less mature than those which come after.¹²

The Interpreter's Bible reflects a similar position on Psalm 109:

If justice is to be done to historical character, they must be judged by the standards of their times . . . We must remember that the Israelites . . . had not heard the Christian Gospel or been taught the maxims of Christian morality.¹³

The author then proceeds to speak about progressive revelation in terms of J. R. Seeley, who claims that there have been "three stages in the history of the treatment of crime." The first one does not apply to Scriptural literature and is the stage of "barbarous insensibility." But the stage of the psalmist, that of "law and justice" is distinctly contrasted to the stage of "mercy and humanity" which Jesus uttered in with His morality of mercy. "We are so used to His [Jesus'] words that we can hardly appreciate their significance; but they opened a new era."¹⁴

II. A LISTING OF THOSE PASSAGES IN THE PSALMS THAT CONTAIN MALEDICTIONS AND CURSES

In the passages that will be listed it should be noted that all five books of the Psalter (1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 107-150) contain imprecations, maledictions and curses: 5:10; 6:10; 7:9-16; 10:15; 17:13; 18:40-42; 18:47; 26:4-5; 28:4; 31:17, 18; 35:3-8; 40:14; 54:5; 55:9, 19; 56:7; 58:6-10; 59:11-15; 68:2; 69 (most of the psalm); 70:2-3; 71:13; 79:6, 12; 83:9-17; 104:35; 109:6-20; 129:5; 137:7-9; 140:8-11; 141:10; 143:12; 149:6-9.

The Psalms that are singled out for special censure by the critics of the Imprecatory Psalms are the fifty-fifth, sixty-ninth, one hundred and ninth, and one hundred and thirty-seventh. These psalms have been under such fire that many have revised the Psalter and removed these passages, which, in their reasoning, are unfit to be read by Christian eyes, much less uttered by Christian lips.

It is the contention of Chalmers Martin that only eighteen psalms truly contain imprecations. These eighteen psalms contain three hundred and sixty-eight verses, of which only sixty-five contain what is known as an imprecation. In the three psalms against which great objection has been made a total of only twenty-three verses out of ninety-three could be said to contain imprecations. Martin, therefore, contends that it would be more true to the facts to speak of "imprecations within the psalms" rather than to claim there are Imprecatory Psalms.

Those Bible interpreters and readers who do not believe that all of the Old Testament was inspired by the Holy Spirit and reject the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures have no problem with the imprecatory assertions found in a number of psalms. They can explain them as indications of how the Jews developed in their ethical beliefs. They would argue that God should under no circumstances be held responsible for having such unloving words recorded as sentiments worthy of emulation or repetition.

Just as there are those who do not believe imprecations belong in the Psalter so there are Psalm commentators that defend their presence in the Psalter.¹⁵ There are Bible expositors who contend that the maledictions are legitimate and that they can be defended when it is understood that the maledictions are not the expressions of the personal vindictiveness of men moved by an self-righteous anger and therefore are not reprehensible as many claim.¹⁶ The Psalms with the maledictions must be understood in the light of a number of Scriptural principles. In the following these will be cited and the Imprecatory Psalms interpreted in their light. One of the defenders of the entire book of Psalms as verbally inspired was Moorehead, who stated:

We are to offer no apology for these and the like Scriptures. If we believe in the plenary inspiration of the Bible, we are able to hold firmly to the truth that these psalms, terrible as they may be to us who see so little of the real nature of sin and its heinousness and of God's unalterable purpose to punish forever, are the expressions of the mind of the Spirit concerning evil and persistent, incorrigible evil doers.¹⁷

III. FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE EVALUATION OF THE CURSES AND IMPRECATIONS IN THE PSALTER

All the Psalms, together with their imprecatory passages are part and parcel of the Old Testament of which Paul wrote that "all Scripture is God-spirated" (II Tim. 3:15). Paul did not tell Timothy that the entire Old Testament with the exception of the imprecatory passages is God-breathed, i.e., came out of God as the breath comes out of a person's lungs. Therefore, it should be recognized that whatever difficulties allegedly exist in the Psalms are created by the Bible itself. Albert Barnes called attention to this matter as follows:

The record is one which the sacred writers have themselves made. This fact is proof of the candour, and of the consciousness on their part that there was *nothing* in this record which

was not founded on truth, which really did not occur; that is, that these feelings really existed in their minds. It cannot be pretended that the writers indulged in feelings which they were unwilling to record; which they were ashamed to make known. In fact, they took all the methods in their power to make them known, and have the record perpetuated. They not only recorded them but put them in permanent form, embodied them in poetry, which was to be employed in the public service of God.¹⁸

The Bible therefore did not hide what thoughts and sentiments were to be found in the writer's mind. Since they were permanently recorded, it must be assumed that the authors of the imprecatory statements in the Psalms believed that they could be harmonized and justified with other Scripture teachings. They obviously saw no difficulty with making the imprecations susceptible to explanation.

Some, as already has been shown, argue, in rejecting the Imprecatory Psalms as out of place and ethically indefensible, that Biblical readers must take into account the age in which the imprecations were uttered and penned. The Psalm-writers are simply supposed to have shared in the harsh and vindictive spirit which characterized the age in which they lived.¹⁹ This position is proposed on the supposition that the principles of religion and morality change with the times. What is morally objectionable in one century may receive the stamp of approval in another age. That would, however, mean that truth and holiness, right and wrong change depending upon the whims of human beings. But that is not true, because the holy and righteous God is the author and giver of ethical principles and true Biblical ethics is not simply a matter of human speculation at a given period of human history.

Some of the imprecatory passages might be interpreted as actually not wishing evil but merely predicting what would happen to the enemies of God's people. In some instances the verbs employed might have been rendered as futures instead of imperative forms. Several imprecatory passages might be so rendered, especially those that were predictive of the Messiah. Thus Barnes wrote:

Several of the passages of this kind which may properly be applied to the Messiah, are undoubtedly of this nature, and those passages are to be interpreted, when the laws of language will admit of such an interpretation, as expressive of what sinners *deserve*, and of what *will* come, and not as indicating any *desire* on the part of the author that it should be so.²⁰

However, while this solution might alleviate the problem with certain imprecatory passages, this will not account for many maledictions in the psalms cited on previous pages of this essay. Hebrew grammar would not permit this interpretation in many imprecatory passages and thus another explanation consonant with the fact of divine inspiration will need to be found. It is an interpretation that cannot be admitted as dealing effectively with the most difficult imprecatory passages occurring in the Psalter.

Those unable to justify the imprecatory psalm assertions have proposed that some of the maledictions found in the Psalter can be explained as merely recording the feelings of other people, as merely stating the gratification which individuals would feel in seeing vengeance visited upon evil men, even when this vengeance would be taken in a most barbarous and savage way. According to this explanation, the only thing for which the Holy Spirit would be responsible would be the correct recording of what was felt or said. Thus the Biblical writer who made a record of the cruelty of Jacob's sons (Gen. 24-25, 29; 46:6-7), or recorded the act of David bringing forth the people of Rabbah and "putting them under saws, and under harrows of iron, and making them pass through the brick-kiln" (2 Sam. 13:31), or the acts of Joab, Ahithophel, Absalom, Nebuchadnezzar, Ahab or Jezebel—the authors cannot be held responsible for the feelings and evil deeds perpetrated by these men and women. All for which the writers can be held accountable is the correctness of the historical reporting.²¹

An instance of this phenomenon would be found in Psalm 137:8-9: "O daughter of Babylon, who are not destroyed; happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast deserved. Happy shall be he that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stone." Barnes opines that there would be nothing against holding that here the feelings of those who take pleasure in seeing vengeance on Babylon are being expressed. Since the Babylonians had practiced similar cruelties in their dealings with concerned cities, so when Babylon would fall, that is what the enemies would likewise do to the Babylonians. Barnes contends that there is nothing here which requires the reader to assume that the author of the psalm would approve of such barbaric treatment. In this there is nothing which necessarily implies that the author of Psalm 137 would approve of it, or that he would have killed an infant as described in the last verse of this captivity psalm. Barnes in commenting on this verse believes that even if it is supposed to indicate the common feelings of the Hebrew people, in view of the destruction of an enemy under whom the Israelites had suffered so much and so long, this imprecation is still only a record of what they felt and the Psalmist was only stating what the people felt. The writer was giving an accurate account of feelings that existed at that time; he does not subscribe to such cruelty.²²

This explanation, however, may take care of some passages but it does not meet the objections that can be advanced against other passages in the Psalms. The question needs to be examined whether or not it is right or permissible to utter the kind of imprecations that are found in numerous psalm passages. Many of the maledictory psalms are ascribed to David, called in the Old Testament, "the sweet singer of Israel," a man designated by Peter as a prophet of God, and as a person by whom Yahweh spoke. In the Old Testament the reader will find the following testimony about David: "I have found David, the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, who shall fulfill all my will." Toward the end of his life, in a document that has been called "The Last Will and Testament of David," the king of Israel said: "The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me, his word

is upon my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me" (2 Sam. 23:2-3). If the maledictions which are ascribed to David are expressions of his personal vindictiveness, then these statements would weigh heavily against his character and also against the encomium Scripture has pronounced about him that "he was a man after God's own heart."²³

The recorded facts in the life of David clearly seem to oppose the contention that David was motivated by personal vengeance against his enemies. After his victory over Goliath he was forced into public life and at various times was forced to fight for survival. When Saul realized that David would succeed him, the former attempted to kill David. For a number of years David was compelled to live the life of an outlaw with Saul hunting him as a wild animal. Twice Saul maneuvered himself into a position where David could have killed him, but David would not lay his hand on "the Lord's anointed" and spared Saul. David showed great magnanimity against Shimei who cursed David as he was crossing the brook Kidron in flight before his son Absalom. When David returned from defeating the forces of Absalom, he did not have Shimei killed, a punishment which certainly would have been commanded by any other Oriental monarch, given the same situation. David was patient with turbulent Joab; he was generous toward Abner and cried pathetically when his rebellious son was reported killed by Joab. How different from Herod the Great who killed many members of his family. We would agree with Webster who wrote about David's imprecations as follows: "Were these Imprecatory Psalms the language of more personal animosity to his foes they would mark David as one of the most savage, profane and cruel among men. People value the good opinions of their fellows sufficiently to deter them from writing down their own weaknesses or wickedness."²⁴

In the Old Testament itself there are explicit statements that indicate what the governing motives of the authors of the Imprecatory Psalms were. Regarding this Hibbard wrote: "They constantly professed their motive and object in praying for the destruction of their enemies to be the protection of the righteous, the honour of God, and the accomplishments of His gracious purposes in the earth."²⁵ The Lutheran scholar Tholuck employed similar reasoning in setting forth a like position. Psalm 35, one of the major psalms, might be mentioned in this connection. The first portion of the Psalm describes the malice and persistence of the foes of the psalmist. They appear to be opposing him and trying to bring about his destruction. When David was engaged in some great cause of great public concern involving the truth of God in public welfare, David prays for the confusion of his enemies "that the Lord may be magnified." That this prayer was not uttered from motives of personal revenge is evident from the psalmist's words: "But I, when they were sick, I wore sackcloth, I afflicted myself with fasting, I prayed with the head down on my bosom, as though I grieved for my friend or brother, I went about as one who laments his mother, bowed down and mourning" (vv. 13-14).

If the Imprecatory Psalms are ethically deficient and morally

wrong, then Jesus must be reprimanded because He quoted from Psalm 69 and 109, two of the most criticized of the Maledictory Psalms. Jesus referred to David as speaking by divine inspiration. Psalm 109 is cited in Acts 1:16 by Peter, who said that the Holy Spirit spoke by the mouth of David and who used statements from Psalm 69 and 109, two imprecatory psalms. According to Peter these psalms contain predictions about the perfidy and the end of Judas Iscariot. Since both Jesus and Peter ascribed 69 and 109 to David, it follows that those who are attacking the inspiration of the Imprecatory Psalms are also attacking the spotless character of Christ, under whose guidance David wrote; David is nowhere re-proved in the New Testament for his alleged hatred of his fellow men.

Attempts have been made to explain away the Imprecatory Psalms as indefensible because they were supposedly the product of an ethically inferior age. Compared with the New Testament dispensation the ethics and theology of the Old Testament are held to be inferior. This position, however, ignores certain teachings of the New Testament on the punishment of sin and sinners as well as the teaching concerning a final judgment of men and nations. The argument that maledictions are a feature of the Old Covenant and not of the New is simply to ignore the data of the New Testament. Denunciations regarding incorrigible sinners are just as strong in the New Testament as they are in the Old. Witness the language which John the Baptizer used in addressing the Pharisees and Sadducees: "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" The Apostle Peter denounced Ananias and Sapphira, and with the announcement of the punishment came death to both. Peter said to Simon of Samaria: "Thy money perish with thee!" The Apostle Paul in writing to the Galatians invoked a curse on those who might preach any other gospel than that which he had proclaimed to the congregations of Galatia (1:9). Paul commanded the Corinthians, in the case of the incestuous man, "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to deliver such an offender unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh." Paul prayed that God would punish Hymenaeus and Alexander for what they had done against Paul. He asked God to reward Alexander according to his works. Paul indicted Elymas as "a child of the devil" and "an enemy of all righteousness," announcing that blindness would immediately fall upon him. In Hebrews, the author of that epistle writes that if the fuller light and greater privilege of the New Testament be neglected, the judgments of God will increase upon sinners with proportionate intensity. In Matthew 23 Jesus uttered a solemn series of denunciations against the Scribes and Pharisees. These denunciations of Jesus are among the most severe found in the entire literature of the Bible. In many of His parables Jesus announces punishment upon unrepentant and wicked men which cannot be mistaken by any one taking the text as it stands. Jesus predicted a doom more fearful than that which came on Tyre, Sidon, or Sodom for the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. In the Book of Revelation "the souls that were slain for the word of God and for the testimony which

they held" are represented as praying for vengeance as follows: "They cried with a loud voice saying, How Long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (6:10). This is given by John as the prayer of "the spirits of just men made perfect," who dwell in the presence of God.

These New Testament passages show that both dispensations have the same attitude toward sin. In fact, if there be any difference, the honest reader must notice that expressions of God's wrath found in the New Testament concerning sin and its punishment are more solemn and terrible than those in the Old Testament.²⁶ The unchangeable Triune God is the author of the contents of both testaments. Each shows a holy detestation of evil and evil-doers. Since in the Imprecatory Psalms, as well as in other Old Testament stories, God is depicted as punishing sin and sinners, the question can properly be asked whether asking God to punish those who hate him and oppose his devotees and thus are enemies of God's kingdom is wrong, as is the contention of those who believe that the Imprecatory Psalms are out of order and offend true Biblical religion. The same problem is also met with in connection with the imprecations uttered by Jeremiah.

In answer to the allegation that the Old Testament represents a lower stage in the ethical development of the Hebrew religion, thus showing why the Imprecatory Psalms must be rejected as representing a true aspect of God's revelation to man, especially when contrasted with the New Testament teaching on love and love of enemies, it should be pointed out that this contrast between the two Testaments is not in accordance with the facts. Like the New Testament, the Old forbids the taking of personal vengeance. It also enjoins loving one's neighbor as well as one's enemies. Leviticus 19:18, a product of the Mosaic period (1500-1450 B.C.), demanded:

Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart . . . thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

Jesus cited this Old Testament passage when He summarized the Second Table of the Law. Yet the same Scripture also contains the Psalms with their imprecations. The same Old Testament that has Psalms 35, 69, 109 has the high ethical standards set forth by Job in his final speech as given in chapter 31. In self-defense Job listed ethical actions of which he had not been guilty. He claims that he never wished evil to another man. Thus he asserted:

If I have rejoiced at the destruction of him that hateth me,
Or lifted up myself when evil found him,
Yes, I have not suffered my mouth to sin
By asking for his life with a curse (vv. 29, 30).

It is to the Old Testament that St. Paul turns when he desires to instruct the Christians as to the manner in which the enemies are to be treated. In Proverbs 25:21, 22 it states that people are to be kind to their enemies by heaping coals of fire upon their heads. Paul

quotes this in Romans. Thus, the Old Testament cannot be said to contain lower ethical standards than the New Testament.

The imprecations and maledictions in the Psalter may be understood to ask God to do with the ungodly and wicked exactly what the Bible says that God has done (for example, the punishment of the world in the days of Noah; the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's day; the punishment of Israel in the days of the Judges), is doing, and will do.²⁷ Without doubt, that person has made the greatest progress in godliness who in his thinking follows God and judges evil men exactly as the Psalm-writer asks God to do. The holiness of God cannot brook sin in any form, shape or manner. God has clearly and frequently announced that the unrepentant sinner will be punished. The Bible has much to say about the wrath of God that will be manifested against all ungodliness and wickedness of men. Starting from the proposition that the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that in our present Bible we have God's Word, we therefore, hold that the psalmists were not expressing their own personal views but were motivated by God to write the maledictions that they did. Hence the curses that are invoked upon evil men do not flow from passion and anger in the psalmist's heart, but they are prophetic utterances in the form of prayer, foretelling the ultimate doom of those who hate and persecute God's children. In support of this position, Dr. Theodore Graebner wrote:

Of course, God desires all their repentance and salvation, and He therefore often and earnestly invites them to return from their evil ways and to leave off from persecuting and troubling his children. But if they will not listen to these urgent calls to repentance, but persist in their evil ways, then at last His patience comes to an end and well-deserved punishments are hurled down upon their heads in all their awful severity. As warnings of these terrible punishments, we must view the imprecations in the psalm. It is God that utters these warnings through the Psalmist; they are not the expressions of the human passions of the hatred and anger in the Psalmist's breast.²⁸

In many of the psalms that contain maledictions the reader will find some of the sweetest expressions of the communion of the believer with God in the entire Psalter; thus there are found statements of praise and adoration side by side with awful imprecation; how is one to account for these combinations of blessings and imprecations in at least twenty-five different psalms? Can it possibly be that the imprecations are uttered as warnings and predictions of the punishment of God's people?

That the people upon whom the imprecations were uttered were not the personal enemies of David is the position that can properly be taken and thus an alleged set of vindictive expressions removed from David's record. Since David was God's anointed and also a type of Christ in certain respects, the enemies denounced were also Yahweh's enemies. He was Yahweh's representative to carry out God's purposes in Israel. Thus, those who opposed and hated David

were opposing and hating Yahweh Himself. It is as enemies of the God of Israel that they are spoken of in the Psalms by David, and David's enemies are spoken of as hardened sinners beyond the ken of repentance. It is from this perspective that the maledictions can be interpreted. That, of course, does not mean that David and others who under divine guidance uttered and penned these maledictions did not desire the salvation of their enemies. But the psalmists speak of their enemies as hardened, obdurate and unrepentant sinners. While it is true that God loves the sinner but hates the sins he commits, there comes a time when the hardened sinner no longer can repent. Take the case of Pharaoh in Moses' time. Under these circumstances to wipe out the sins results in the destruction of the sinner.

That it is improper to use the Imprecatory Psalm today is a questionable assertion. There have been periods in the history of Christianity when it was proper to employ them. When the Spanish Armada swept down upon the shores of England, pious and patriotic Christians united in the psalm verse: "Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered, let them also that hate Him flee before Him." The Psalter was given to the Church of all ages as its prayer-book and this book would be incomplete without the Imprecatory Psalms. The "Justice Psalms" were needed and used properly by the persecuted Waldenses, the hunted Camisards, the oppressed Covenanters. Quite in the spirit of these Imprecatory Psalms is the noble sonnet of John Milton, written on the occasion of the massacre of the Waldenses, of which the opening line is:

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold.

When all is quiet and peaceful in the Church, many may not feel very keenly the need for the use of the Imprecatory Psalms. Some may study them merely in an academic way. However, when persecution bursts upon the Church, as has been the case in communistic and atheistic Russia, in Communist China, in Cuba where Christian pastors and their flocks have been subjected to torture, inhuman indignities and death, when the faith of God's people is severely tried by the enemies of the Lord, Christians instinctively have turned to these psalms. Some people may have considered the Imprecatory Psalms an offense in better days, but their relevancy has been brought home to them, when the forces of evil have persecuted and tortured them because of belief in God and faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Christians have found comfort in them because in the Imprecatory Psalms they find the assurance that the Judge of all the earth guarantees the ultimate destruction of their enemies as well as the complete triumph of their cause.

In the light of these considerations Professor Pieters asserted about the Imprecatory Psalms:

Therefore, to sum up, these Imprecatory Psalms must be accepted as inspired by the Holy Spirit and as an integral part of the Holy Scriptures, without apology and without deprecating

ing the spirit displayed in them. The warfare between good and evil, light and darkness, is no holiday entertainment; it is stern and real beyond the comprehension of most of us and it has times when nothing will do but battle hymns like these.²⁹

In defending the presence of the imprecatory statements in numerous of the Psalms Reed wrote:

These Psalms have been singled out and given an unenviable prominence by designating them as Imprecatory, Cursing, Condemning Psalms. Placed on this pedestal, the thoughtless, and those who hold otherwise have criticized, have wagged their heads at them, and shot out their lips and in refusing them have failed of the moral tonic and strength that these Psalms are calculated to afford. This much can be safely said: men lose sight of the enormity of sin before they utter their mawkish sentiments against these Psalms, which they have separated, condemned, and made unnecessarily offensive to many.³⁰

Dr. Gleason Archer in his discussion of the Imprecatory Psalms believes it would be a mistake to explain away the curses and the imprecations in the Psalter as expressions of a degenerate form of religion or on the principle of "progressive revelation." If one wants to speak of progressive revelation, Archer claims it is "not to be thought of as progress from error to truth, but rather as a progress from the partial and obscure to the complete and clear. A consistent evangelical must hold that all portions of the Word of God are true in the sense intended by the original author under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, even though couched in terms which perhaps may have been more comprehensible and relevant to God's people at the time of the composition than in later years."³¹

Archer has also pointed out that during Old Testament times, prior to the birth of Christ, the only way in which certain Biblical truths could be shown to human observers was the pragmatic test of disaster coming on those who violated the laws of God and of deliverance to those who obeyed and served God. As long as the evil triumphed and appeared to flourish the power and sovereignty of Israel's God was challenged and refuted.³²

FOOTNOTES

1. W. G. Moorehead, *Outline Studies in the Books of the Old Testament* (Chicago, Toronto and New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1893), p. 167.
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3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
4. T. K. Cheyne, *The Christian Use of the Psalms* (London: Isbister and Company, 1899), pp. 26-27.
5. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bliss, 1958), pp. 110-112.
6. As cited by Albertus Pieters, *The Psalms in Human Experience* (New York: The Half Moon Press, 1942), p. 94.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

8. Lowther Clarke, *Concise Bible Commentary* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), p. 477.
9. L. G. Robinson, as quoted by Sanford Calvin Yoder, *Poetry in the Old Testament* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, 1952), p. 168.
10. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (editors), *The International Critical Commentary: The Psalms* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), I, p. xcvi.
11. *Ibid.*, p. c.
12. S. R. Driver, *Studies in the Psalms* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), pp. 223, 225-226.
13. G. A. Buttrick, (editor) *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), IV, p. 584.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 585-586.
15. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1959), pp. 20-22; William Arndt, *Bible Difficulties. An Examination of Passages of the Bible Alleged to Be Irreconcilable with Its Inspiration* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), pp. 37-40; Theodore Graebner, *A Dictionary of Bible Topics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1943), pp. 73ff.; Chalmers, Martin, "Imprecations in the Psalms," reprinted in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., ed., *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), pp. 113-132.
16. Pieters, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-99.
17. Moorehead, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-168.
18. Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament Psalms*: (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950 Reprint), I, p. xxviii.
19. Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. xxx.
20. *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.
21. *Ibid.*, p. xxxi-xxxii.
22. Pieters, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
23. J. H. Webster, "The Imprecatory Psalms," in John McNaugher, editor, *The Psalms in Worship* (Pittsburgh: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1907), p. 299.
24. As quoted by J. H. Webster in "The Imprecatory Psalms," *op. cit.*, p. 300.
25. Pieters, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
26. Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-304.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 303.
28. Graebner, *op. cit.*, pp. 73.
29. Pieters, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
30. James A. Reed, "The Imprecatory Psalms," in McNaugher, *op. cit.*, p. 311.
31. Gleason Archer, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), p. 437.
32. *Ibid.*