

## Excursus: Imprecation and Christian Sonship

Imprecation is an important feature of the Psalms, which shows that it was a fundamental aspect of Israel's life and worship as Yahweh's covenant son, *but in a particular sense*. Many think of scriptural imprecation as simply calling upon God to eliminate one's adversaries or oppressors. Such imprecation is nothing more than self-concern that looks to God for deliverance from personal difficulty. But this perspective doesn't at all reflect the nature and orientation of imprecation in the Psalms (or elsewhere in the Scriptures).

As seen, scriptural imprecation is an aspect of *lament*, which is a core expression of faith and hope, not dissatisfaction and unhappiness because of unpleasant personal circumstances. Lament is *eschatological angst*: it looks eagerly toward and longs for the purging and restoration God has promised from the beginning. Thus lament is as much a Christian phenomenon as it was an Israelite one; though Christians live in the "fullness of the times," they, too, look with longing to the full realization of God's intent for His creation. Christians live in faith and hope, and so are a lamenting people. But this means that they are equally an *imprecating* people, since imprecation pleads with God to act on behalf of His own designs; to arise on behalf of His people and creation and put all things right by eliminating all that contradicts and opposes His purposes and will (ref. Psalms 5, 11, 12, 52, 54, 79, 83, 94, 137, 143, etc.).

Imprecation, then, reflects and gives voice to concern and zeal for God and His creation, not for oneself per se. In its scriptural form, imprecation expresses jealousy for what God is jealous for, and thus it is a key dimension of worship – *Christian* worship as much as Israel's worship during the era leading up to Messiah's coming. Imprecation is an aspect of true worship, but only in its scriptural sense; God is neither honored nor worshipped when people entreat Him out of self-concern for the sake of their own ease and comfort (cf. Psalms 35, 36, 40, 56, 57, etc.).

But if imprecation continues to be a dimension of worship in the Christian era, does this mean that it is unaltered from its previous Israelite expression? Put differently, can a Christian, in his own worship, claim for himself and lift up to God the imprecations found in the psalms in the way that the various psalmists expressed them? If not, why not, and what should be different with Christian imprecation? Perhaps a more significant question is how imprecation – whether Israelite or Christian – should be understood and approached in the light of Jesus' insistence that true sonship involves loving one's enemies and praying for one's persecutors (Matthew 5:43-48). Given that Jesus issued this instruction to His fellow *Israelites* (not to the Christian community that was yet to emerge after His resurrection and ascension), one might reasonably conclude that He found fault with imprecation, even as it occurs in the Psalms. The implication that follows from this is that such psalms express the psalmist's personal sentiment, not the attitude and prayer orientation that God desires. And if this is the case, then one must rethink the way in which the imprecatory psalms are inspired scripture. But these quandaries are resolved when imprecation is understood and applied *scripturally*.

1. Almost certainly Jesus' instruction about enemies would have startled and even confused at least some of those listening to Him on that hillside in Galilee. Jesus suggested as much with His introductory qualification, "*You have heard it said, but I say to you...*" This showed that He recognized that His teaching differed from His countrymen's traditional understanding of how they were to view and relate to their enemies.

They'd been taught that they were to *hate* their enemies (i.e., those who were not their Israelite "neighbors"), and this instruction had a basis in Israel's *Torah*. While some have argued that hatred for enemies was a rabbinical innovation not prescribed by the Law of Moses, the *Torah* did indeed speak to this issue.

- a. First of all, the Mosaic obligation of neighborly love was broad and provided no explicitly concrete definition of a "neighbor" (cf. Exodus 20:16-17, 21:12-14, 22:7-15; etc). But to the extent that the Law did define the concept, it associated a neighbor with a fellow Israelite, a proselyte, or a Gentile "God-fearer" (ref. Leviticus 19:17; cf. Exodus 12:3-4, 22:25-27 and Deuteronomy 4:41-42, 15:1-3).
- b. On the other hand, the Law clearly identified certain men as *enemies*: Israel's enemies were those who opposed God, His covenant, and His covenant people. Initially, this term applied to the nations of Canaan whom God would destroy in removing them from His sanctuary land (Exodus 23:20-28; Numbers 10:33-36). Later, "enemy" designated any and all people groups that opposed or threatened Israel's security and peace in the land (Leviticus 26:3-39; Numbers 10:9).
- c. And, while the Law of Moses didn't specifically command the sons of Israel to "hate" their enemies, it did directly and explicitly require them to *destroy* or *subjugate* them and radically *disassociate* themselves from them and their culture and practices (cf. Exodus 23:20-24; Numbers 21:1-3; Deuteronomy 3:1-6, 7:1-26, 13:6-15, 20:10-17, 33:26-29; also Joshua 11:1-23). The Law established Israel as Yahweh's unique covenant "son," and this sonship obligated the nation to live as a people fully consecrated and devoted to Him; *all who threatened or interfered with Israel's covenant identity and life were to be regarded as enemies and dealt with severely, even to the point of death.*

Thus it's easy to see why Jesus' instruction would shock His Israelite hearers. In fact, the only way one can argue that Jesus was simply reaffirming the Mosaic Law is if His instruction is limited to relationships *within the covenant community*. For the Law did prescribe a benevolent attitude toward "enemies" (Exodus 23:4-5), but this referred to fellow Israelites with whom a person had an estranged or hostile relationship. And so this particular commandment to do good to an "enemy" simply reiterated the Law's general requirement of love for one's fellow countryman (Leviticus 19:13-18); it said nothing about loving *Gentile* adversaries. But Jesus didn't seem to be placing any sort of limitation on His directive. In fact, if He was simply reaffirming the *Torah's* commandment to love one's fellow Israelite, it was pointless (and even confusing) for Him to contrast His instruction with His audience's understanding; they were already well aware that they were to love one another. No, He was saying something more; He was calling His hearers to rethink and reorder their attitude toward *all* enemies.

2. This raises two crucially important questions: First, in what way, and with what right, was Jesus altering Yahweh's command to Israel that they deal harshly with their national enemies, whether by subjugating them or even slaying them? And second, how should Christians understand His directive and apply it to their use of the imprecatory psalms?

- a. With respect to the first question, Jesus was clearly altering Israel's obligation toward enemies as prescribed by the Law of Moses. But this alternation was a matter of fulfillment, not deviation or abrogation. By His own insistence, He hadn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). And this fulfillment wasn't a matter of *doing* the Law as such, but of *embodying* it and living out its truths; Jesus fulfilled the Law by being the Son, Servant, Disciple and Witness the Law defined and prescribed to Israel.

The Law had demanded that Israel deal harshly with their enemies, *but as those enemies threatened and opposed God's purposes in the world*. Israel was His chosen instrument for banishing the curse and bringing creational renewal, so that opposing Israel was opposing Him and His cosmic designs. Jesus' directive didn't suggest that His Father no longer sought the destruction of His enemies; rather, it pointed to the astonishing truth that He intended to achieve that end through the Messiah He had sent into the world. *Israel's God was going to eradicate His enemies by eradicating all enmity*. God was going to take upon Himself, in the person of His incarnate Son, all human enmity and opposition – within Israel and the wider Gentile world – and put it to death, thereby reconciling to Himself all things in creation (ref. 2 Corinthians 5:14-19; Colossians 1:19-20).

*Thus Jesus' directive didn't deny, degrade or nullify Yahweh's instruction regarding enemies; rather it pointed to the fact that He was going to fully execute it. As God's True Israel, He would fulfill the commandment to destroy God's enemies by crucifying all enmity in Himself.*

- b. This, then, is the key to understanding the Christian's relationship to the imprecatory psalms and to imprecation as a key aspect of true worship. At bottom, that relationship involves *owning Jesus' imprecation* – His condemnation of all that opposes His Father's purposes and work in the world. If the imprecatory psalms give voice to eschatological angst by recording the psalmists' cry to God to act on His intent to vanquish all that opposes Him and them, Jesus is the quintessential imprecator: *He is the One in whom all of the imprecatory psalms find their "yes and amen," for His life, death and resurrection fulfilled every longing for judgment and renewal that burdened the psalmists' hearts*. And so, whether or not they were aware of it, all such psalmists uttered a messianic cry, yearning for and crying out to Yahweh to accomplish all that He had pledged concerning Israel and the wider world and establish His everlasting kingdom.

Israel's psalmists longed for that great day, and Christians *inhabit* it; they live in the "fullness of the times" in which the Messiah has triumphed over all enemies and taken His throne at the right hand of power (cf. Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:18-23; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 1:1-3). Jesus has won the victory God promised and inaugurated the kingdom of His new creation, but all enemies are not yet eradicated (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). Jesus has yet to consummate His triumph in the renewal of all things, so that His people continue to worship their God as imprecators; like the psalmists before them, they live in a state of eschatological angst marked by fervent faith and assured hope (Romans 8:12-39).