

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

1.1 Need for the Present Study

The book of Psalms is one of the most read and most popular books of the Bible in the church. It is often used for devotional readings in the life of the church and believers.

Despite its popularity, in academic circles, the study of the Psalter is problematic because of the numerous questions surrounding authorship, setting, composition, interpretation, theology and application (Walton, 2000:341). Not least of all, is the problem of the interpretation and use of the “imprecatory psalms.” In fact, there are few areas in Old Testament theology that have puzzled scholars as much as the “imprecatory psalms.”¹ These psalms contain among other things, appeals for God to pour out his wrath on the psalmist’s enemies.

The need for the present study is demonstrated in this chapter, beginning in this section (1.1) with an introduction to the issues of the definition, scope and present-day application of the imprecatory psalms. This is followed by a survey of the present state of scholarship on the imprecatory psalms, pointing out the major problems in the previous and current studies on the subject (see 1.2). This informs the problem statement (1.3) and research aim and objectives (1.4) which, broadly speaking, are to find new study directions on the subject. After the central theoretical argument of this thesis is stated (1.5), the methodology and scope are clarified (1.6) before, finally the chapter divisions of this entire study are presented.

1.1.1 The term for imprecatory psalms

Scholars are divided on whether the term “imprecatory psalms” is an appropriate or accurate description of these psalms.² A number of scholars (e.g. Vos, 1942:123-138; Laney, 1981:35-44; Day, 2001:1-205; 2002:166-185; Okorochoa, 2006:606) seem comfortable with the use of the term “imprecatory psalms” when referring to these psalms. However, some scholars (e.g. Martin, 1972:113; Wendland, 1998: 48; Peels, 2003:90) argue that it is inaccurate to

¹ These are psalms in which the psalmist asks or prays “for judgment on the wicked, usually the perceived enemies of the psalmist” (Okorochoa, 2006:606). Some of these psalms “contain extremely harsh judgments upon the enemies of the psalmists” (Bullock, 2001:228).

² In the ensuing discussion, the common designation of “imprecatory psalms” is used when referring to psalms that contain one or more verses of imprecation such as: Psalm 35; 69; 83; 109; 137. Vos (1942:123-138) and Laney (1981:35-44) also use the same label when they discuss these psalms.

speak of these psalms as “imprecatory psalms.” Martin (1972:113) says that the phrase “imprecatory psalms” is misleading because it seems to imply that imprecation forms a major element in these psalms yet this is not the case. The imprecatory element in these psalms is a minor element, embodied in a single line, or a single verse in many of these psalms. Therefore, Martin (1972:113) argues that it is more accurate to speak of “imprecations in the psalms” rather than of “imprecatory psalms.” Like Martin, Zenger (1996:viii) sees the label “psalms of cursing” or “imprecatory psalms” as inappropriate because these psalms “do not curse; they present passionate lament, petition, and desires before God.”

1.1.2 The number of imprecatory psalms

There are various opinions with regards to the number of imprecatory psalms. Martin (1972:113) suggests that there are only 18 psalms in the whole Psalter that contain the element of imprecations. Luc (1999:395-396) considers Martin’s calculation to be conservative, so he suggests that there are “28 psalms that contain one or more verses of imprecation.” VanGemeren (1991:832) lists 24 psalms in the category of imprecatory psalms. Day (2002:170) suggests that there are 14 psalms which may rightly be classified as imprecatory psalms. The characterizing element of these psalms “is imprecations or cries for divine vengeance.”

Both the definition of imprecatory psalms (1.1.1) and the scope of these psalms (1.1.2) make the study of these psalms an intricate task, as will become clear from the survey below.

1.1.3 Tension with the New Testament

The imprecatory psalms seem difficult to reconcile with the New Testament teaching of loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us (cf. Matt 5:44) (Barnes, 1868:1:xxv-xxvi; Surburg, 1975:88; Laney, 1981:35). Day (2002:166) says that imprecatory psalms “naturally evoke a reaction of revulsion in many Christians.” In the New Testament, believers are to love their enemies (Matt 5:44), to “bless and not curse”³ (Rom 12:14). In trying to resolve the apparent tension between the imprecatory psalms and New Testament teaching, two main questions need to be explored:

- Why did the psalmists desire the destruction or doom of their enemies?

³ Unless indicated otherwise, Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*.

- Are there occasions when it is acceptable and right for the church and for Christians individually to use the imprecatory psalms in worshipping God, and if so, how can this be done in the light of the New Testament commands to love even an enemy?

In a brief survey in 1.2.2 below, it is demonstrated that scholars do not sufficiently answer these two questions.

The following survey of the study of imprecatory psalms underscores the fact that the issues mentioned above (1.1.1 to 1.1.3) are not sufficiently resolved and therefore motivates the need for the present study.

1.2 A Survey of the Study of Imprecatory Psalms

This section is a survey and review of the various solutions given by scholars and commentators to answer the two questions raised above. The section shows the various interpretations given by scholars and the reasons for their interpretations. The purpose of the survey and review is to become acquainted with the previous and current studies on the subject, come to some conclusions and to then point out major problems encountered in these studies and then suggest the need for an exegetical study of the imprecatory psalms. A discussion of the aforementioned questions will follow under the following two headings:

1. The basis of the imprecatory prayers in the Psalms; and
2. The imprecatory psalms and the Christian.

1.2.1 The basis of imprecatory prayers in the Psalms

1.2.1.1 Personal sentiment

Some commentators (e.g. Kittel, 1910:143; Lewis, 1958:22-25; Craigie, 1983:41; Holladay 1995:302, 308) argue that the imprecations in the Psalms are the expression of the psalmist's own sentiments before God. In other words in the imprecatory psalms, the psalmist is uttering sentiments from his own heart. Kittel (1910:143) argues that imprecatory psalms express sentiments that originated from men who thought of only conquest and revenge. This view implies the imprecations in the Psalms are personal expressions and should not be treated as inspired words (Laney, 1981:38; Vos, 1942:127-128). The argument is that the psalmist made these utterances when facing extremely painful realities of human life, and so spoke either out of his own frail human nature or out of a limited perspective of God (Craigie,

1983:41). Craigie (1983:41) suggests these “expressions of vindictiveness and hatred” cannot be “purified or holy” simply because they are in the Scriptures. They are the psalmist’s “natural reactions” to evil and pain, and “the sentiments are in themselves evil.” In fact, Craigie (1983:41) suggests that the sentiments may also be understood as a byproduct of the limited view of the psalmist as an Old Testament believer. C.S. Lewis (1958:23-25), in similar vein, writes that the language of imprecatory psalms breathes of “refined malice” and borders on being “devilish.” Holladay (1995:302, 308) echoes the same point when he says that the imprecations exhibit “a very different spirit” to the New Testament. The psalmists failed to distinguish the sin from the sinner. Instead they hated their enemies and the sin. This seems contrary to New Testament teaching, because in the New Testament, believers are exhorted to love their enemies.

1.2.1.2 Sentiment towards revelation

Some commentators (e.g. Augustine, 1853.5.213; Spurgeon, 1983:168, 174; Lockyer, 1993:446-447) see the psalmic imprecations as prophetic predictions, thus implying that these are divine announcements and not personal sentiments. This view implies that the psalmist was more than a poet; he was also a prophet. For example, David is called a prophet in Acts 2:30 and 4:25 (Luc, 1999:398). As Laney (1981:39) points out, this view seems to put the responsibility for the imprecation on God and it relieves the psalmist from the charge of speaking from a vindictive and revengeful spirit. Advocates of this view would argue that some of the imprecations in the Psalms are quoted in the New Testament (Ps 69:25 and Ps 109:8 in Acts 1:20; and Ps 69:22-23 in Rom 11:9-11) and this indicates that all the imprecations are prophetic. When commenting on Psalm 109, Augustine (1853.5.213) calls the imprecations in the psalm “predictions” which are in the “mode of predicting the future, under the appearance of wishing evil.” In a similar vein, Spurgeon (1983:168, 174) considers the curses in Psalm 109 as “predicting the future,” being a “mirror of warning” to Christ’s enemies. Lockyer (1993:446-447) also suggests that “it is better to consider them not as imprecations but as predictions” of the wicked.

Another similar view purported by some scholars (e.g. Laney, 1981:41-42; Harman, 1995:65-72) argues that the covenant is the basis of these psalmic curses. Laney (1981:41-42) suggests that the covenantal basis provided by the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1-3) is the

“fundamental ground on which one may justify the imprecations in the Psalms” and that “David had a perfect right, as representative of the nation” to pronounce the curses on Israel’s enemies. Harman (1995:66-67, 72) also argues that the imprecations are Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant curses “incorporated into the hymnology of Israel” since some of the imprecatory psalms reflect covenant terminology and structure. He uses Psalms 5 and 109 to illustrate his point. He shows that in Psalm 5, God is addressed as “my King and my God” (vs 2) and by his covenant name (vss 6, 8, 12) which reflects the covenant structure: the relationship between God and his people, then the law of God (vss 4-6) and finally blessings (vss 7 & 11-12) and curses (vss 9-10). He also points out that blessings and curses are important features of Psalm 109. But for Psalm 137 he justifies the imprecations on the basis of prophetic texts (Hos 13:16 and Isa. 13:16) which suggests a bit of an anomaly.

Like Laney (1981:41-42) and Harman (1995:65-72), Day (2002:168) acknowledges the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:2-3) as the basis of the imprecations in the Psalms. He argues that the psalmic imprecations also “root their theology of cursing, of crying out for God’s vengeance, in the Torah, principally in the promise of divine vengeance expressed in the Song of Moses in Deut 32:1-43” (Day, 2002:168). Day (2002:168) argues that this theology is carried through to the end of the New Testament (Rev. 15:2-4; 18:20). He discusses Psalms 58, 137, and 109 and observes that they allude to the Torah, namely the Pentateuch. Day (2002:171-172) argues that Psalm 58 alludes to Deuteronomy 32:21-43,

- Firstly in context – David felt powerless in the face of oppression and he cried in confidence to God. The same element runs strongly through the final verses of Deuteronomy 32 (vss 36, 39, 40 and 41).
- Secondly, there are similar words and concepts in both passages (e.g. Ps 58:11 cf. Deut 32:37; Deut 32:39 cf. Ps 58:4).
- Thirdly, the promise of divine vengeance in Deuteronomy 32 is central to the theology and hope of both testaments of Scripture.

With regards to Psalm 137, Day (2002:174-175) says the severe imprecations of the psalmist are not based on revenge but the principle of divine justice in Exodus 21:22-25, Leviticus 24:17-22 and Deuteronomy 19:16-21. He also argues that the psalmist was probably familiar with the prophecy of Jeremiah 50-51. Moreover, the imprecation in Psalm 137 is “based upon the very nature of God.... [God] is also a God of retribution” and this is also seen in the law. When commenting on the imprecations of Psalm 109, Day (2002:178-179) says that they are based on the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3).

Luc (1999:400) suggests the imprecations in the Psalms should be interpreted as prophetic judgments against the wicked. He argues that the “language and content of these imprecations are not very different from the direct or indirect judgment speeches of the prophets.” Luc (1999:400-405) argues that his approach is supported in the following way:

- Firstly, by the prophetic role of the psalmists. He argues that the fact that psalmists were writers does not mean that they could not be prophets. He says the approach that dissects the prophetic speeches and the Psalms into two very distinct genres imposes arbitrary patterns on these biblical texts (Luc, 1999:400). He further argues that the prophetic nature of the Psalms and their parallel to the prophetic writings has been observed in recent psalm studies. He cites Tournay (1991:31-31) who says the “prophetic dimension” of the psalmist has too often been neglected in modern psalm studies, a dimension long recognized by the Judeo-Christian tradition. For example, on Psalm 14:1, the Targum interprets that the psalmist David is “in the spirit of prophecy” and on Psalm 46:1 the same description is used to describe the sons of Korah. The *Midrash Tehillim* says that the sons of Korah predicted the future (see Chakam, 1986:13-15). Luc (1999:401) also points out that among the Dead Sea scrolls, 11QPs acknowledges that David “uttered through prophecy which was given him from before the Most High.” Luc (1999:401) further mentions that the prophetic role of the psalmists is recognized by the New Testament (e.g. Ps 41:9 in John 13:18 and Matt 26:23-24; Ps 35:19 in John 15:25). Luc (1999:401) in addition points out that David uses prophetic language similar to that of many prophets. For example, David makes such statements as “the Spirit of the Lord spoke through me” (2 Sam 23:2; cf. 1 Chron 22:8; 28:6) and “the hand of the Lord was upon me” (1 Chron 28:19). Like the prophets, David is called “the man of God” (Neh 12:24, 26). The other psalmists (e.g. Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun) are said in 1 Chronicles 25:2, 5 to have prophesied. Again, Luc (1999:400-402) observes that like in the Prophetic books, there are psalms which contain divine oracles (e.g. Psalm 89) and the oracles are introduced in a similar way to prophetic speeches such as “says the Lord” (Ps 12:5; 110:1), “God says” (Ps 50:16) and “God spoke” (Ps 60:6). He argues that all these similarities show that psalmists were prophets and they had a prophetic role. Luc (1999:402) also compares judgment predictions in prophetic utterances with the imprecations in the Psalms and he discovers a striking similarity between the two. He argues that “we should not place a sharp distinction in function between the imprecation and judgment predictions.”
- Secondly, the imprecations have many parallels with the prophetic speeches in language and function (Luc, 1999:403). Luc (1999:403-405) gives a list of verses from the Prophetic

books that contain imprecations parallel to the psalmic imprecations (e.g. Isa 26:11; Jer 11:20-22; Jer 17:18; Jer 18:21 cf. Ps 109; Isa 14:20-21; 47:3; 44:11 cf. Jer 50:27; Dan 4:23; Jer 13:10; Mal 2:12).

- Thirdly, like other prophetic judgments the psalmic imprecations depend on prior biblical teaching for their authority, especially that of the Pentateuch. Luc (1999:405) argues that behind many imprecations in the Psalms is the concern for social justice and the destiny of Israel amongst hostile nations. These two concerns are also echoed in the Prophetic books and the Pentateuch. The covenants serve as the general biblical basis for the imprecations when the concerns are violated (e.g. Ps 58:6-7; 109:16; cf. 10:9-11, 18; 12:5; 55:9-11; 94:5-7; 79:6, 12, 2,7; cf. 9:17-18; 83:2-5; 129:1 and 137:3, 7). Frequently, the psalmist's desire is for God's glory to be manifested because his enemies have ridiculed and reviled God for not protecting his people (e.g. Ps 28:5; 64:5; 69:6; 74:10; 79:6-10; 83:2; 109:27; 137:3).

Vos (1942:136) argues strongly that the imprecations in the Psalms are an appeal to the justice of God and a prayer that God's justice be executed upon the wicked. Since the imprecations are inspired by the Holy Spirit, they must be regarded as free from the suspicion of immorality. They are consistent with God's nature: God is sovereign and righteous and he has the right to destroy all evil in his universe. Vos (1942:137) says that we should assume that the imprecatory psalms are "necessarily prayers for eternal doom of the wicked and they may also be regarded as prayers for severe temporary judgments on the enemies of God."

Martin (1972:120) argues that the imprecations in the Psalms are not longings for vengeance but are:

- The expression of the longing of an Old Testament saint for the vindication of God's righteousness. The psalmist, David, was a man of piety and pure life, innocent of any crime. Yet he was a fugitive for years and was regarded as an outlaw while his enemies, men devoid of piety, truth and honour, were living in ease, safety and honour at Saul's court. Under his circumstances, the psalmist, David, felt that his faith in God's goodness and righteousness was put to a severe strain and so he wants God to reverse his situation as this would set his doubts and the doubts of others forever at rest (Martin, 1972:121).
- Utterances of zeal for God and his kingdom. David, as king, was a representative of God and as such, his enemies ceased to be private enemies. They were not simply guilty of national treason, but were now enemies of God and of his cause on earth (Martin 1972:123-124).

- An Old Testament saint's expression of abhorrence of sin. David's enemies were fearful embodiments of wickedness. Doeg, Cush and Ahithopel were examples of these vile men, who were characterized with falsehood, treachery, cunning, greed, hate, cruelty, arrogance and pride. David regarded his enemies as the enemies of God and the embodiments of sin (Ps 5:10) (Martin, 1972:124-125).
- Prophetic teachings as to the attitude of God toward sin and toward impenitent and persistent sinners. The psalms are lyric poems composed under the influence of the Spirit of inspiration and as such they are part of God's revelation of himself. Therefore from these psalms we may learn how God feels towards persistent sinners. David, as Peter informed his audience on the day of Pentecost, was a prophet. David was a prophet in the wider sense of being a spokesman for God and an official teacher of his will. So in the imprecatory psalms, David is warning men of divine wrath against sin and against persistent sinners (Martin, 1972:128-129).

1.2.1.3 Imprecations as prayers against evil forces

It has also been suggested by some scholars (e.g. Mowinckel: 1962b:44-52) that the psalmists pray curses or imprecations because their enemies are spiritual rather than human personages. According to this view, evil spiritual forces are personified as evil men (Laney, 1981:39). Mowinckel (1962b:44-52) suggests that the imprecations in the Psalms are curses uttered in God's name. God is the sure defense against the powers of darkness and he has the ability to overthrow the hosts of evil which are against his servants. As Vos (1942:42) observes, this view seems to be an attempt to find an easy way out of the difficulty by boldly explaining away the clear statements of Scripture. This view negates the setting in real life of the Psalms, since it is perfectly obvious that the enemies of the psalmists were wicked men and not spiritual forces.

1.2.1.4 Summary

From the above discussion:

- i) Some scholars argue that the basis of imprecatory psalms is personal sentiment, in which the imprecations in the Psalms are the psalmists' personal expressions of vindictiveness, hatred and evil.

- ii) Others argue that the imprecatory psalms express sentiment toward revelation, in which the psalmists pray for God's justice to be made visible to the nations according to his word (e.g. the Torah). Covenant and character are the basis of imprecatory psalms. This view implies that the psalmists were not mere poets, but prophets who had a prophetic ministry. They prayed for God's justice and proclaimed judgment oracles (i.e. imprecations) on the wicked who were God's enemies and the embodiments of sin. They made utterances of zeal for God and his kingdom. The psalmic imprecations portray God's abhorrent attitude toward sin and toward impenitent and persistent sinners.
- iii) Some scholars argue that imprecations are prayers made against evil spiritual forces, rather than human enemies.

1.2.2 The Imprecatory Psalms and the New Testament

The question of whether it is valid for New Testament believers (Christians) to use the imprecatory psalms normatively in their contemporary situation in relation to their enemies depends upon the basis of the imprecatory psalms. Scholars are divided with regards to the use of imprecatory prayers by Christians. Some (e.g. Laney, 1981:35-45; Luc, 1999:408-409) argue that it is inappropriate for believers to pray imprecatory prayers and others (e.g. Vos, 1942: 136; Day, 2002:168-169; Beisner, 1994:178) argue that believers may appropriately pray imprecatory prayers.

1.2.2.1 Imprecatory prayers are inapplicable to New Testament believers

Laney (1981:42-44) argues that it is inappropriate for a church-age believer to pray imprecatory prayers. It is inappropriate for Christians to call down God's judgment on the wicked because of the following reasons:

- Firstly, because the imprecations in the Psalms are grounded in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1-3), in which God promised to curse those who cursed Abraham's descendants. On the basis of the Abrahamic covenant, David had a perfect right, as the representative of the nation, to pray that God would effect what he had promised - cursing on those who cursed or attacked Israel. Therefore, imprecatory prayers are only appropriate for national Israel on the grounds of the Abrahamic covenant and inappropriate for New Testament believers because they are of a different covenant.

- Secondly, the New Testament does not encourage believers to pray imprecatory prayers. Instead, Paul exhorts believers saying “Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not” (Rom 12:14). Paul also admonishes the believers saying “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.” (Rom 12:19). In 2 Timothy 4:14, Paul does not pray imprecatory prayers regarding Alexander the coppersmith; rather he says that “The Lord will repay him for what he has done (Laney, 1981:44).

Like Laney, Luc (1999:408-409) argues that it is inappropriate for a New Testament believer to pray imprecatory prayers. He sees psalmic imprecations as prophetic (e.g. Luc, 1999:400-410; 408-409) and therefore argues that the imprecations, just like judgment proclamations, cannot be pronounced by Christians on their contemporary enemies because of the following two reasons:

- Firstly, the psalmic imprecation had a historical context. If the original audience did not expect the exact terms of punishment to apply to someone other than the intended person, we should not use the exact terms on someone today.
- Secondly, the prophetic view of history takes cognizance of the Messianic era as the catharsis toward which all prophetic messages directly or indirectly make a contribution. Prophetic proclamations of judgment must be understood and interpreted in light of the coming of Christ, an understanding reflected in the New Testament. The same is true of the psalmic imprecations. The New Testament interprets some of the imprecatory psalms of David as descriptions of the life of Christ or as prayers of Christ (e.g. Ps 69:21 in John 19:28). Therefore, from the New Testament perspective, the enemies in the imprecatory psalms are the enemies of Christ (Luc, 1999:409). Christ teaches the believer to love his/her enemies and pray for those who persecute him/her (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:26).

1.2.2.2 Imprecatory prayers are applicable to New Testament believers

Vos (1942:136) says that it is right for saints to pray imprecatory prayers because these prayers, like the psalmic imprecations, are an appeal to the justice of God. However, he cautions Christians not to offer petitions to God for the physical death of their enemies because they do not know which wicked persons, in the secret counsel of God, are reprobates and which are included in the election by grace (Vos, 1942:138). Believers may, indeed, pray for severe temporal judgments upon the enemies of God, but they must leave to God the

application or outworking of such petitions. Christians may use imprecatory psalms in worship and may offer them as prayers to God. Vos (1942:138) also argues that the prayer for the death of the wicked person, who is a reprobate, is not an immoral act but a righteous one because the Kingdom of God cannot come on earth without Satan's kingdom being destroyed (as implied in the Lord's Prayer). God's will cannot be done on earth without the destruction of evil, and evil cannot be destroyed without the destruction of wicked men.

Lensch (2000:20) argues that the Christian may pray imprecatory prayers. He argues that there is no conflict between the ethic of the Old Testament and the ethic of the New Testament. In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus teaches about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile when he addresses the believer's behaviour and attitude toward unjust, personal adversaries. Jesus never set aside *lex talionis* against social criminals who, as enemies of God, must be prosecuted (Lensch, 2000:19). Jesus himself not only pronounces a woe (a curse) upon Chorazin and Bethsaida, but He consigns Capernaum to Hades for its hard-heartedness in Matthew 11:21-24. Paul calls for a curse on anyone who does not love Christ (1 Cor 16:22) and who preaches a false Gospel (Gal 1:8, 9). He calls for justice against his and God's enemies, knowing that vengeance belongs to the Lord and that he will repay (2 Tim 4:22). John, the apostle, carries the message of the martyrs calling from the grave for retribution (Rev 6:10) (Lensch, 2000:20). While Lensch (2000:20) maintains that the believer may pray imprecatory prayers, he acknowledges the fact that imprecatory psalms are not so unequivocally endorsed and appropriated by the Lord Jesus. At the same time, he is sure that Christ's disciples did not view these psalms as the products of an unsanctified and unchristian temper. He advises Christians not to rush to sling wholesale imprecations against God's present enemies or to be troubled when they come across imprecatory prayer. Instead they should pray according to God's will knowing that justice belongs to him and that he will repay. He also mentions that the Christian's prayer should be "informed and shaped by God's objective Word and by an enlightened desire to seek His kingdom and His righteousness" (Lensch, 2000:20).

Day (2002:168) argues that believers may pray imprecatory prayers, but the premise for his view is different from Vos. He maintains that because the character of God does not change, this also applies to his ethical standards. Since the imprecations were appropriate for Old Testament believers, they are also appropriate for New Testament believers. He says that in both testaments, cursing and calling for divine vengeance are the believers' "extreme ethic and may be voiced in extreme circumstances, against hardened, deceitful, violent, immoral,

unjust sinners” (Day, 2002:168). Day (2002:169) argues that it is right for Christians to cry out for divine vengeance and violence because of the following reasons:

1. Vengeance appealed for is not personally enacted. It is God who is called upon and he is the one who executes vengeance.
2. These appeals are based on covenant promises (e.g. “whoever curses you, I will curse” Gen 12:3) and since God has given these promises to his people, it is not wrong in petitioning him to fulfill those promises.
3. Both testaments record examples of God’s people justly calling down curses or cries of vengeance, without any fear that God would reject their sentiments (e.g. Matt 11:20-24; 23:13-39). Day (2002:183) also acknowledges that these examples are not identical to imprecations, but the cry of “woe” in the ancient Near East bore a measure of semantic overlap.
4. Scripture also records a situation in heaven, where there is no sin, but God’s people cry out for vengeance and are comforted by the assurance of its near enactment (Rev 6:9-11).

Beisner (1994:178) argues that imprecations are relevant for believers. He appeals to the existence of curses in both the Old and New Testament and he argues for continued use of the curses (Beisner, 1994:178). Like Beisner, Zenger (1996:92) argues that the imprecations are relevant for believers today and denying the use of these imprecations is to refuse the sufferers “the right to lament...a fundamental act of humanity.”

Peels (2003:100) argues that imprecatory prayers are applicable to Christians but in a different way. He points out that imprecatory prayers are not condemned in the New Testament, since such prayers are cited (e.g. Ps 2, 35, 69, and 109). He further asserts that the New Testament is very serious about God’s wrath, judgment of sin and animosity against him (Peels, 2003:101). He argues that the coming of Christ, the proclamation of the Gospel and the coming judgment alter the imprecatory prayers. In the preaching of the Gospel, judgment is executed by the salvation of all who believe and the total expiation of all their sins. In this dispensation of mercy and grace, the Gospel spreads all over the earth and whoever rejects it will be finally judged (Peels, 2003:102-103). God’s judgment was executed in Christ. This explains why imprecatory prayers are less in the New Testament in comparison to the Old Testament. In this present period, the attitude of the believers is determined by the words: “bless those who persecute you; bless do not curse” (Rom 12:14). This does not diminish God’s honour and justice, and his destruction of evil. Peels (2003:104) argues that imprecatory

prayers are still heard in situations of emergency, even though times have changed. These prayers (in time of emergency) are prayers led by the Holy Spirit aimed at the enemies of God.

1.2.2.3 Summary

In summary, scholars are divided with regards to the use of imprecatory prayers in the light of New Testament teaching:

Some scholars argue that it is **inappropriate** for a believer to pray imprecatory prayers because of the following reasons:

- a) Imprecations in the Psalms are grounded in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1-3), in which God promised to curse those who cursed Abraham's descendants. The implication here is that the believer is of a different covenant; hence he/she cannot make imprecatory prayers.
- b) The New Testament exhorts believers to bless their persecutors and not to curse them (Matt 5:44; Rom 12:14). Believers are admonished to never take revenge but to leave this to God (2 Tim 4:14).
- c) The psalmic imprecation had a historical context. The imprecation cannot be applied to someone other than the intended person.
- d) The imprecations in the Psalms should be understood in light of Christ and the New Testament interprets some of the imprecations of David as descriptions of the life of Christ or as prayers of Christ. Therefore, from the New Testament perspective, the psalmist's enemies in imprecatory psalms are Christ's enemies.

Other scholars argue that imprecatory prayers are **applicable** to the New Testament believers because of the following reasons:

- a) Imprecatory prayers, like the psalmic imprecations, are an appeal to the justice of God.
- b) There is no conflict between the ethic of the Old Testament and New Testament. Jesus never set aside *lex talionis* against social criminals, who as enemies of God, must be prosecuted.
- c) The character of God does not change, the same is true with the ethical standards. Since the imprecations were appropriate for Old Testament believers, they are also appropriate for New Testament believers.
- d) Curses are seen in both the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures, therefore all

believers may pray imprecatory prayers.

- e) Imprecatory prayers are not condemned in the New Testament, in fact many imprecatory psalms are quoted in the New Testament.
- f) The New Testament is very serious about God's wrath on those who are hostile to him and about his judgment of sin.
- g) God's judgment was executed in Christ, therefore the attitude of believers is determined by the words: "bless those who persecute you; bless do not curse" (Rom 12:14).

Whether imprecatory psalms are applicable to God's people of the New Testament or not, is a question determined by various extra textual aspects such as one's view on the relation between the Old and New Testaments and broader ethical considerations. These issues are not directly the object of this study. However, conflicting claims about vengeance in the imprecatory psalms and its relevance for today, all refer to the text of these imprecatory psalms. An in depth study of these psalms may shed light on the extent and nature of the so-called imprecations. The outcome of such a study on the "ethical problem" of New Testament believers is important and underscores the need to study these psalms.

1.3 Problem Statement

The discussion of the need for the present study (1.1) and the brief survey of the study of the imprecatory psalms (1.2) has revealed at least three problems:

First of all, there seems to be no consensus among scholars with regards to the exact **number** of imprecatory psalms. The reason for this is that there are no defined criteria for identifying these psalms. Little work has been done to rectify the situation possibly because the search for such criteria has been arbitrary and subjective. In fact, it is probably unnecessary for scholars to sing in unison with regards to the exact number of imprecatory psalms. Therefore, rather than searching for some elusive criteria, it is more important to study the content of these psalms as this will enrich our understanding of both biblical poetic literature generally and imprecation in the Psalms specifically.

Secondly, there is a wide range of views regarding the **basis** of imprecatory psalms. There is no consensus among scholars and commentators and some of the suggested solutions are unsatisfactory e.g. the view that the psalmist prays imprecations because his enemies are evil forces rather than human beings (see 1.2.1.3 for more details). Therefore,

there is need to study each imprecatory psalm to establish the basis of imprecation from the text itself and then give clarity on the “ethical problem” for New Testament believers.

Thirdly, some scholars (e.g. Mowinckel, 1962b:44-52; Kittel, 1910:143) seem to have ignored the **historical context** of the imprecatory psalms. When commenting on imprecatory psalms, Wendland (1998:48) observes that it is important to read them in their total context from the point of view of the cultural and religious setting of their time.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

1.4.1 Aim

The aim of this present study is to carry out an exegetical study on the imprecatory psalms in order to grasp their content, context and theological implications.

1.4.2 Objectives

- To carry out a thorough exegetical study on a selection of psalms that are commonly classified as imprecatory psalms.
- To show the basis of imprecation in each of these psalms.
- To read each of these psalms in its total context (i.e. historical setting, life-setting and canonical setting). The literary genre of each psalm will be discussed.
- To synthesize the findings on the content, context and theological implications of the selected imprecatory psalms and give clarity on the “ethical problem” for the New Testament believers.

1.5 Basic Hypothesis/ Central Theoretical Argument

The imprecatory psalms in the Old Testament can best be understood when these texts themselves are thoroughly analysed.

1.6 Methodology and Scope of the Present Study

1.6.1 Methodological Consideration for the Study of Imprecatory Psalms

The present exegetical study on the imprecatory psalms will implement a new direction in the current study of the Psalms. As Mays (1995:152) observes, there is a major shift from focusing on psalms grouped according to categories and setting, to a concern with the distinctive literary features of individual psalms. In a similar vein, W.S. Prinsloo (1994:80) says, “there is an urgent need for a study of the Psalms in which close attention is paid to the meaning of the text. It is essential to utilize these insights in a well-defined theoretical framework, so that both formal aspects and the semantics of the Psalms as poetry can be better understood.” Therefore, a study of the literary features of individual imprecatory psalms, such as the poetic, stylistic, and rhetorical features, will be undertaken in order to understand the specific content and message of each of the imprecatory psalms. Only then may common literary features, content, and message be identified that are true of all imprecatory psalms.

When studying imprecatory psalms, the canonical context needs to be considered as well. In current studies there is a paradigm shift from the form-critical approach to a consideration of texts as literary entities in their canonical wholeness (Howard, 1999:329). Form criticism showed little interest in the Psalter as a whole (Zenger 2000a:414). Childs was the first to apply the canonical approach to the Psalter. He observed that form criticism “seems now to be offering diminishing returns” (Childs, 1976:378). Therefore, he suggested that the move beyond form criticism be made by directing attention to the final form of the Psalter in order to determine how the meaning of the individual psalms may be affected by their titles and their placement in the canonical form of the Psalter (McCann, 1993:18). Since Childs, many scholars have devoted themselves to the study of the canonical structure of the Psalter. Howard (1999:332-344) gives a detailed survey of scholars who have researched the canonical structure of the Psalter.

The diversity of exegetical methods has made the study of the Old Testament more difficult. Barton (1996:237) points out that some scholars tend to see their preferred exegetical method as exclusive and they claim that their method is the only one that can achieve legitimate results. Keegan (1985:7) observes that each method is limited, that no method is universal, and that no method is a panacea. Deist & Burden (1980:128) say that because not all exegetical methods are equally effective, one should supply sufficient reasons why one prefers one particular method rather than the other or why one makes no use of a particular

method or particular methods or why one combines a number of methods. Because of the exclusivistic claims of certain exegetical approaches among scholars, Jonker (1993:102) suggests the need for a multi-dimensional exegetical approach. This approach “evade(s) the problems posited by variety and exclusivity in exegetical praxis.” According to Jonker (1998:2), this multi-dimensional approach is not a “super method” and is not created by amalgamating the “strong” points of every available exegetical strategy. Such a methodological integration would be too subjective and would deny the plurality of existing approaches. Rather, this multi-dimensional approach recognizes the complex nature of texts and the complexity of their interpretation, and it attempts to understand and establish the relationship between the various facets of this complexity. For analyzing Old Testament poetry, a three-dimensional reading strategy has been suggested by some South African scholars (e.g. G.T.M. Prinsloo, 1992:225-251; W.S. Prinsloo, 1994:78-83 and Gräbe, 1990:43-59), namely the intra-textual, extra-textual and inter-textual reading of a poetic text (G.T.M. Prinsloo, 1992:230; W.S. Prinsloo, 1994:81-82). Intra-textual relations refer to the relations that exist at different levels in a given text. The analysis of intra-textual relations is of paramount importance for the interpretation of the text (Gräbe, 1984:137-138; also cited in G.T.M Prinsloo, 1992:230). Extra-textual relations refer to the biographical particulars of the author and his world. Inter-textual relations refer to the relations between a specific text and other texts (G.T.M. Prinsloo, 1992:230).

Therefore, the three-dimensional approach, namely the intra-textual, the extra-textual and inter-textual reading strategy will be applied in this study of imprecatory psalms. In the intra-textual reading, the structure and content of the selected imprecatory psalms will be discussed. Then the extra-textual reading will help the reader to understand how the content functions in its context with regard to the context of imprecatory psalms. Finally, the inter-textual reading will also help to understand the way in which the content of inter-related texts affects the theological implications of imprecatory psalms. Thus the three-dimensional reading strategy is an effective method for achieving a more valid understanding of the content, context and theological implications of imprecatory psalms.

1.6.2 Scope of the study of Imprecatory Psalms

Since this present study seeks to carry out a thorough exegesis of imprecatory psalms, the preliminary process of selecting representative imprecatory psalms is necessary. The previous discussions, sections 1.1.1 and 1.1.2, pointed out that there is no consensus amongst

scholars with regards to the definition and number of imprecatory psalms. However, while scholars differ widely from one another in categorising imprecatory psalms, the table below indicates the psalms which are commonly classified as imprecatory psalms by most scholars and commentators, through a process of elimination and of commonality. Five imprecatory psalms with the highest references will be selected as objects of study.

SUGGESTIONS OF PSALMS COMMONLY CLASSIFIED AS IMPRECATORY PSALMS⁴																			
	Book 1					Book 2					Book 3	Book 4	Book 5						
Boice (1994:300)			7		35					69					109				
Day (2002:169)			7		35	52	55	58	59	69	79	83	94	109	129	137			140
Harman (1995:66)	5	10		28		40		55		59	69	79			109		137		
Okorochoa (2006:606)			7		35		55	58		69	79				109		137		140
Laney (1981:36)			7		35			58	59	69		83			109		137	139	
Vos (1942:123)							55		59	69	79				109		137		
Bullock (1979:139)					35					69					109				
Wendland (1998:48)					35					69		83	94		109				
VanGemenen (1991:832)					35			58		69		83			109				
Luc (1999:395)					35			58		69		83			109		137		
Strawn (2008:316)								58			79	83	94		109		137		
Total	1	1	4	1	8	1	1	4	6	4	10	5	6	3	11	1	7	1	2

As seen from the above table, the five imprecatory psalms with the highest number of references are Psalms 35 (8 references), 69 (10 references), 83⁵ (6 references), 109 (11 references) and 137 (7 references). Therefore, it seems logical to choose the above five psalms as the main objects of study, seeing that they are commonly classified as imprecatory psalms by scholars. Therefore, this present study will focus on a thorough exegesis of the following imprecatory psalms: Psalms 35, 69, 83, 109 and 137.

⁴ Scholars selected in this table have done some research on the imprecatory psalms. Most of them have written articles on imprecatory psalms in academic journals, books and dictionaries.

⁵ Psalms 83 and 58 both have 6 references. In the interest of space, one of the psalms will be chosen for this study. For the purpose of this study, Psalm 83 will be considered over Psalm 58 because Psalm 83 is in the third book of the Psalter. It would be beneficial to analyse imprecatory psalms from the different books of the Psalter. Having said that, Psalm 94 from the fourth book was not selected because it has very low references (3 references).

1.6.3 Modus operandi in the study of Imprecatory Psalms

The *modus operandi* of the present study is as follows:

After the introductory observations in the present chapter (Chapter 1), Chapters 2-6 will be a comprehensive reading of each imprecatory psalm based on the three-dimensional reading, namely the intra-textual reading, the extra-textual reading, and the inter-textual reading; one chapter for each imprecatory psalm. For each imprecatory psalm,

- A short introduction will be given for the first part of the study.
- Then, the Hebrew text and the author's own translation of each imprecatory psalm will be given. The analysis of the five psalms will focus on the final text as it is presented in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS).
- The basic literary structure of each imprecatory psalm will be given. For practical purposes the selected psalms will be sub-divided into cola, strophes and stanzas.
- The content of each imprecatory psalm will be analysed based on the intra-textual reading of the psalm. In the intra-textual analysis, poetical, stylistic, semantic, and rhetorical features will be discussed. Translation problems will be discussed in the analysis of each imprecatory psalm.
- When discussing the semantic relations (also called coherence relations) between parallel lines (i.e., cola) the categories/terms of Wendland (1998) will be used in this present study, supplemented by categories indicated by Beekman and Callow (1974:69-73) and further developed by Cotterell and Turner (1989). The interpretation of key phrases, words or concepts will be explained, keeping in mind the guidelines set by Silva (2007:49-65).
- After the intra-textual analysis, the literary genre, historical setting, life-setting and canonical context of each imprecatory psalm will be discussed (inter-textual analysis), based on the preceding intra-textual analysis and the extra-textual clues of the psalm.
- Finally, all the preceding study outcomes of each imprecatory psalm will be synthesized in order to grasp the overall message of the imprecatory psalm and its implications.

Chapter 7 will summarise and synthesize all the preceding study outcomes in order to grasp the overall messages and theological implications of imprecatory psalms. The similarities and differences of the content, context, and theological emphases within the five imprecatory psalms will be compared in order to synthesize the entire study outcomes, their overall theological implications and give clarity on the "ethical problem" for New Testament believers.

Thereafter, some recommendations for future research on imprecatory psalms will be offered as the final comments of the present study.

1.7 Chapter Divisions

Chapter 1 (i.e. the present chapter) shows the need for the present study on imprecatory psalms. The chapter deals with introductory matters such as the definition, scope and modern-day application of imprecatory psalms. The chapter gives a survey of the previous and current studies on the imprecatory psalms which informs the problem statement, research aims and objectives of the present study. This chapter also states the central theoretical argument, methodology and scope of the present study.

Chapter 2 will focus on a comprehensive reading of Psalm 35. A three-dimensional reading strategy, namely the intra-textual reading, the extra-textual reading, and the inter-textual reading, will be applied to Psalm 35.

Chapter 3 will focus on a comprehensive reading of Psalm 69. A three-dimensional reading strategy, namely the intra-textual reading, the extra-textual reading, and the inter-textual reading, will be applied to Psalm 69.

Chapter 4 will focus on a comprehensive reading of Psalm 83. A three-dimensional reading strategy, namely the intra-textual reading, the extra-textual reading, and the inter-textual reading, will be applied to Psalm 83.

Chapter 5 will focus on a comprehensive reading of Psalm 109. A three-dimensional reading strategy, namely the intra-textual reading, the extra-textual reading, and the inter-textual reading, will be applied to Psalm 109.

Chapter 6 will focus on a comprehensive reading of Psalm 137. A three-dimensional reading strategy, namely the intra-textual reading, the extra-textual reading, and the inter-textual reading, will be applied to Psalm 137.

Chapter 7 will summarize, synthesize all the preceding study outcomes in order to establish the overall messages and theological implications of imprecatory psalms. The chapter will then conclude with research findings and some recommendations for future research on imprecatory psalms.