

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1 the direction of study to be followed was clarified, based on the problems of previous studies on the imprecatory psalms in the Old Testament. Next, the aim of the present study was established, which was to study the content, message and theological implications of imprecatory psalms. Appropriate to this aim, the method proposed as most effective for this study of imprecatory psalms was a three-dimensional reading strategy, namely an intra-textual reading, an extra-textual reading and an inter-textual reading. For the object of study, five imprecatory psalms (Psalms 35, 69, 83, 109 and 137) were selected, based on the fact that they are most commonly classified by scholars as imprecatory psalms.

In Chapters 2 to 6 the selected imprecatory psalms were read in accordance with the reading strategy established in Chapter 1. This reading strategy mainly consisted of a synchronical study of the morphological and stylistic features of these psalms. Poetical, semantic and rhetorical features were also taken into account.

In this chapter, conclusions and theological implications will be drawn from the preceding study. A comparison regarding the similarities and differences of the content (7.2), context (7.3) and theological emphases (7.4) within the five selected imprecatory psalms will be presented in order to synthesize the entire study outcomes in terms of the overall message and theological implications of the imprecatory psalms. Following this the “ethical problem” for New Testament believers will be clarified (7.5). Finally, some recommendations will be made for future research on imprecatory psalms (7.6).

7.2 Contents and Implications

This section looks at the common words, phrases and themes of the five imprecatory psalms. The identification of common words, phrases and themes in the selected psalms will not only help in formulating and determining the overall message of imprecatory psalms, but may also serve as criteria for the classification of psalms as imprecatory psalms.

7.2.1 Common words and phrases

From the intra-textual study of the contents of the five selected psalms, one observes common words or phrases that occur in these psalms as listed below.

Hebrew	English identifier	Verses in Psalm 35	Verses in Psalm 69	Verses in Psalm 83	Verses in Psalm 109	Verses in Psalm 137
רֹדֵךְ	pursue	3,6	27	16	16	none
בּוֹשׁ	be ashamed	4, 26	7	18	28	none
לִבְ	heart	25	21	6	22	none
אָרֶץ	earth/land	20	35	19	15	none
נִצָּל	deliver	10	15	none	21	none
עַנִּי	afflicted	10	30	none	16, 22	none
נֶפֶשׁ	soul	3, 4, 7, 9, 12, 13, 17	2, 11	none	20, 31	none
בְּקֻשָּׁה	seek	4	7	17	none	none
אֲבִיוֹן	needy	10	34	none	16	none
שָׂנְאִי	those who hate me	19	5	3	none	none
חַנְמָם	without cause	7	5	none	3	none
יְדֻעָה	know	11, 15	6, 20	19	none	none
תְּפִלָּה	prayer	13	14	none	4	none
הַלְּלָה	I will praise	18	31, 35	none	30	none
אַל-תִּחְרֶשֶׁ	do not be silent	22	none	2	1	none
עַבְדָּה	servant	27	18, 37	none	28	none
בָּהָ	mouth	21	16	none	2, 30	none
לְשׁוֹןָ	tongue	28	none	none	2	6
רָאשָׁה	head(s)	none	5	3	25	none
כְּלִמְדָה	disgrace	26	20	none	29	none
בְּשָׁתָה	shame	26	20	none	29	none
לֹא זָכַר	not remember	none	none	5	16	6
שִׁירָה	song	none	31	1	none	3, 4
כְּלָם	be dishonoured	4	7	none	none	none
כְּקַשׁ/מִזְרָחָה לְפָנֵיךְ/רוּחָה	like chaff before the wind	5	none	14	none	none
עָצְמוֹ	bones	10	none	none	18	none

אִיב	enemies	none	5	3	none	none
בְּצֹום	with fasting	13	11	none	none	none
לְבַשְׂרִי	my clothing was sackcloth	13	12	none	none	none
לִחְם	fight	1	none	none	3	none
יָדָה	I will give you thanks	18	none	none	18	none
צֶדֶקְךָ	your righteousness	24, 28	28	none	none	none
חֲפֵץ	delight	27	none	none	17	none
יִשְׁוֹעָה	salvation	3, 9	30	none	none	none
הַוְשִׁיעָנִי	deliver me	none	2	none	26	none
חָפֵר	reproach	none	8, 10, 11, 21	none	25	none
חַסְד	loving-kindness	none	14, 17	none	12, 16, 21, 26	none
יַלְבִּשׁ	let them be clothed	26	none	none	29	none
שֻׁון	iniquity	none	28	none	14	none
מַחַה	be erased	none	29	none	13	none
גָּדוֹל	magnify	26, 27	31	none	none	none
צִיּוֹן	Zion	none	36	none	none	1, 3
רַעַתְּמַוְנִי רַעַתְּפַתְּתָה טוֹבָה	they repay evil for good	12	none	none	5	none
שְׁמֵךְ	your name	none	none	17	21	none
יָמִין	right hand	none	none	none	6, 31	5
קָום	arise	2	none	none	28	none
זָכָר	remembered	none	none	none	14	1
שְׁלָלָם	repay	12	none	none	none	8
שְׁלָלָם	peace	20, 27	23	none	none	none

From the list above it is evident that there are clear philological links between the five imprecatory psalms.

Psalm 137 is a significant exception. The reason why Psalm 137 does not have such strong philological links with the other imprecatory psalms may be due to the fact that it is by far the shortest of the three psalms:

	Psalm 35	Psalm 69	Psalm 83	Psalm 109	Psalm 137
Number of verses	28	37	19	31	9

Furthermore, Psalm 137 contains two distinct topics: the Zion songs and a specific concern for two nations, the Edomites and the Babylonians. These topics are absent in the other imprecatory psalms.

Next, Psalm 83 does not have the same number of similarities as the remaining three (Psalm 35, 69 and 109). This psalm is also significantly shorter than the other three and also has a very specific focus on various nations and allusions to events in the past.

The remaining three psalms (Psalm 35, 69 and 109), which are the imprecations of an individual, have a lot in common (see section 7.3.1). Apart from general Hebrew words, which they share (e.g. לֵב, נֶפֶשׁ, אָרֶץ and שְׁלוֹם), they share the following words, which are significant in the context of threat and entreaty: הַלְלָה, תִּפְלָה, חֲנִמָּה, אַבְיוֹן, עֲנֵי, נְצֵל, בָּוּשׁ, רַדְף, בְּשָׂת, כָּלָמָה, עַבְדָּה.

The dearth of philological links in Psalms 137 and 83 with the other imprecatory psalms does not in itself disqualify these psalms as imprecatory psalms. It should be noted, however, that these psalms received relatively low counts in 1.5.2, where the five imprecatory psalms were selected on the basis of references by ten scholars.

7.2.2 Common concepts

The selected imprecatory psalms not only share philological links. These philological links reflect **conceptual affinities**, which are not necessarily restricted to the use of specific words. The intra-textual study of the selected imprecatory psalms has revealed the following:

- Firstly, **the concept of deliverance** is seen in the imprecatory psalms. The psalmist prays for deliverance (Pss 35:1-3, 22-24; 69:2-4, 14-16, 17-19, 30; 83:2; 109:1, 21-26). In Psalm 35, the psalmist begins with an urgent call for YHWH to contend and fight for him (verses 1-3; 4-8). The psalmist wants YHWH to be his advocate and warrior. The psalmist appeals to YHWH, the all-seeing judge, to intervene in his situation. He wants YHWH to execute justice by declaring him innocent of all charges according to his divine righteousness (verses 22-24). In Psalm 69, the

psalmist commences with an urgent call for deliverance (verses 2, 14-16, 17-19, 30). The psalmist is on the verge of death and he hyperbolically makes use of the image of the overwhelming waters, which have reached his throat, to portray his life threatening situation (verses 2-4). The overwhelming waters have reached the suppliant's throat, he has no foothold, he is mentally and physically weary and he has begun to sink in the deep waters (verses 2-4, 14-16). In Psalm 83, the psalmist begins with an urgent call for YHWH to act on behalf of Israel (verse 2) because the surrounding nations want to destroy Israel (verses 3-6). He calls down on Israel's enemies the same defeats suffered by their enemies in the past (verses 10-13). In Psalm 109, the psalmist commences with an urgent petition for God not to keep quiet or remain inactive but to act by delivering the psalmist from his predicament (verse 1). The psalmist's appeal for deliverance is based on his loving-kindness (Pss 69:14, 17; 109:21, 26). YHWH is portrayed as the one who delivers the afflicted and the needy (Pss 35:10; 69:34). An explicit cry for deliverance is absent from Psalm 137, but is contained in the plea that YHWH must remember the wrongs done by the enemies (i.e. Edom and Babylon) and that He must execute justice. Thus, the psalmist prays for divine retribution (*lex talionis*) because of their atrocities against Judah (see section 6.5.4).

- Secondly, **the concept of persecution by wicked men** is seen in the imprecatory psalms. The psalmist is persecuted or pursued by wicked and hostile men. This is prominent in the three imprecatory psalms by individuals (see Pss 35:3; 69:27; 109:16). In Psalm 35, the enemies of the psalmist have stood up against the suppliant and falsely testified against the suppliant in an outrageous way with the purpose of bringing the suppliant to death (verses 11-12). In Psalm 69, the enemies of the psalmist are numerous (verse 5) and they have made the psalmist a laughing stock (verses 8-14). The enemies have brought shame and disgrace which have led the psalmist to despair (verses 20-22). In Psalm 109, the psalmist is surrounded by his enemies who are making false allegations against him. The psalmist asks God to pursue his enemies (Pss 35:6; 83:16).

The enemies of the psalmist are portrayed as wicked and hostile men. This is also evident in the two psalms where the nature of the threat is on a national level (Pss

83 and 137). The persecution is also regarded as that of evil men attacking or persecuting the innocent without cause. In Psalm 83, the enemies of God, who are also the enemies of Israel, gather to attack Israel and plot her destruction (verses 3-6). In Psalm 137, the psalmist and his companions are being persecuted by the Babylonian masters who have asked them to sing songs of Zion while they were in exile (verse 3). The Babylonian captors show themselves to be wicked men because they want the Israelite captives to participate in the mockery of YHWH.

The conduct of the enemies towards the psalmist or God's people is characterised by hatred (Pss 35:19; 69:5; 83:5; 109:3, 5). As wicked men, the enemies hate the psalmist for no reason whatsoever (Pss 35:7; 69:5; 109:3) and they make false accusations against him (Pss 35:11-12; 69:5; 109:2). As wicked men, the psalmist's enemies return evil for good (Pss 35:12; 109:5) and bring more misery to the psalmist when he is vulnerable (Pss 35:15; 69:21-22; 109:22-25). The enemies of the psalmist in Psalm 109 do not show kindness to the vulnerable, but ill-treat them (see verses 16-20). The enemies are also portrayed as hostile and deceitful people (Pss 35:20; 69:5).

- Thirdly, in some of the psalms, **the psalmist is identified with prayer and love**, although this is not always very prominently stated. The psalmist responds to his enemies' attack in love and prayer (Pss 35:13; 69:14; 109:4). In Psalm 35, when the enemies were sick, the psalmist grieved over their illness by fasting and praying for their recovery (verses 13-14). In Psalm 69, after experiencing communal shame and ridicule for his zeal for the temple (verses 8-13), the psalmist returns to God in prayer (verse 14). In Psalm 109, the psalmist responds to his enemies' hostile behaviour in love and prayer (verses 4-5).

The themes of prayer and love are conspicuously absent from the two imprecations on behalf of the nation (Psalms 83 and 137).

- Fourthly, **the concept of the psalmist's innocence** is a major motif in the imprecatory psalms. The enemies accuse the psalmist of crimes he has not committed. The psalmist is innocent of his enemies' charges and the enemies hate him without cause and they have no basis for their attack (see Pss 35:7, 13-14, 19-21; 69:5; 109:3). This theme is absent from the two imprecations on behalf of the

nation (Psalm 83 and 137). The reason why this is the case, is not clear. Perhaps the innocence of God's people as a whole may be taken for granted, whereas it needs proof when an individual is victimised.

- Fifthly, **the concept that the individual psalmist is YHWH's servant who is filled with his zeal** is seen in the imprecatory psalms. This flows from the theme of innocence (fourth theme), since his dedication to YHWH would be proof of his righteousness. The psalmist identifies himself as the servant of YHWH (Pss 35:27; 69:18, 37; 109:28). As God's servant, the psalmist has deep love and loyalty towards YHWH. The psalmist's commitment towards YHWH is seen in the psalmist's deep concern for the temple (Pss 69:8-10 and 137:5-6). In Psalm 69, the psalmist's deep care for the temple in Jerusalem creates trouble for him. He becomes the object of taunting from God's enemies (verses 8-14). In Psalm 137, the psalmist and his companions have a deep concern for the temple. Their sad memory of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem causes them to mourn and stop playing their instruments. When asked to sing the songs of Zion sung to worship YHWH in the temple, the Israelite captives refuse to participate in the mockery of YHWH. The psalmist deems it impossible that he would forget Jerusalem and fail to exalt her. The psalmist's devotion to YHWH takes the form of a solemn vow invoking upon himself the penalty of total or partial paralysis should he forget where his loyalty lies. He would lose control of the most important organs of a musician – his hands and tongue (verses 1-6). The only exception to this common theme of zeal for YHWH seems to be Psalm 83. However, the psalm ends with the psalmist's concern that the nations may know that YHWH alone is the supreme ruler over all the earth. Instead of personal vengeance, the honour of YHWH has the last say.
- Sixthly, in all the imprecatory psalms studied, the **notion of judgment on the psalmist's enemies, who are also YHWH's enemies** is seen. As the servant of YHWH, the psalmist asks YHWH to mete out appropriate punishment on his enemies (Pss 35:4-8, 19-21, 24-26; 69:23-29; 83:10-19; 109:6-15, 27-29; 137:7-8). The enemies are to be ashamed and disgraced by YHWH (Pss 35:4, 26; 83:18; 109:28-29). The enemies are to be hopeless and worthless before YHWH's judgment like chaff before the wind (Pss 35:5; 83:14). The enemies are to be caught

up in their own treachery (Pss 35:8; 69:23). In Psalm 35, YHWH is called upon to use weapons against the enemies (verses 1-3) and the enemies' attempt to pursue the psalmist is to be futile and unsuccessful (verse 6). The psalmist wants God to prevent his enemies from rejoicing over his misfortunes (verses 19-21, 24-25). In Psalm 69, the psalmist wants YHWH to punish his enemies with blindness, to deprive them of strength, to pour out his wrath and anger on them, to destroy them together with their families, to punish them continually, and to erase them from the book of life (verses 23-29). In Psalm 83, the psalmist calls down on Israel's enemies the same defeats suffered by their enemies in the past (verses 10-13). The psalmist prays for the complete annihilation of Israel's enemies for the ultimate purpose that the enemies recognise the universal lordship of YHWH (verses 15-16, 17b, 19). In Psalm 109, the psalmist calls upon YHWH to punish his enemy severely (verses 6-15). YHWH is to appoint a wicked man, the accuser, to legally condemn his enemy (verse 6). The enemy's attempts to be declared innocent in court and to receive mercy from God are to be futile and unsuccessful (verse 7). The psalmist prays for the enemy's premature death (verse 8), for the enemy's children to be fatherless and his wife a widow (verse 9). He prays for his enemy's family to be reduced to dependency, indebtedness and destitution (verse 11) and to be deprived of the community's kindness and generosity (verse 12). He prays for the extermination of his enemy's descendants (verse 13) and he asks YHWH not to forgive or forget the sins of his enemy's previous generations (verses 14-15). In Psalm 137, the psalmist asks YHWH to punish the Edomites for their hostility towards Israel (verse 7). The psalmist also prays for the total destruction of Babylon as a nation because of her ruthless atrocity against Judah (verses 8-9). Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem, the centre of the YHWH cult. YHWH's honour will only be restored if Babylon is destroyed (verses 8-9). The general tenor of the imprecatory psalms is that YHWH will execute justice by vindicating his righteous people and reversing the fate of their enemies who are also YHWH's enemies. Although it is only stated overtly in the first two psalms (Pss 35:24, 28 and 69:28), the concept of קִדְשָׁה (and cognates: קִדְשָׁה and נִקְדָּח) ("righteous" and "righteousness") is central to all the imprecatory psalms.

- Seventhly, **thanksgiving and praise** is a major motif in the imprecatory psalms. The psalmist vows to give thanks and praise to YHWH (Pss 35:9-10, 17-18, 28; 69:31-34;

109:31. In Psalm 35, the psalmist vows to rejoice and give thanks and praise to YHWH publicly, in the community gathered for worship (verses 17-18) in response to the anticipated deliverance by YHWH. He will testify of YHWH's saving grace or deliverance because YHWH delivers the afflicted and the needy from their powerful oppressors (verses 9-10). In fact, frequently the psalmist identifies himself with the afflicted and the needy (Pss 69:30; 109:16 and 22). The psalmist also vows to proclaim YHWH's righteousness because YHWH delights in providing justice to his servants (verse 28). In Psalm 69, the psalmist vows to praise God with a song of thanksgiving because YHWH is more pleased with thanksgiving than with an animal offering. The psalmist's act of thanksgiving in the temple or his deliverance by God will be a witness to God's faithful servants. Those in similar situations to his own will be encouraged and rejuvenated in their faith in YHWH because YHWH hears the needy and he delivers them from their troubles (verses 31-34). In Psalm 109, the psalmist vows to use his mouth in giving thanks and praise to YHWH publicly in the temple because YHWH always defends and delivers the needy from their accusers (verses 30-31).

The psalmist also makes a general call to praise YHWH (Pss 35:27; 69:35-37). In Psalm 35, the psalmist calls his friends, who want to see him declared innocent, to praise YHWH for his greatness (verse 27). In Psalm 69, the psalmist bursts into a doxology and exhorts the whole universe to praise God because he will deliver Zion (verses 35-37).

From the above, it is clear that the selected imprecatory psalms (Pss 35, 69, 83, 109 and 137) have philological and thematic links among the Psalms. The common words, phrases and themes may be used as criteria for identifying imprecatory psalms. Sufficient common lexical and semantic traits were identified to uphold a distinct genre.³⁴ A further distinction between individual imprecations and those on behalf of the nation also became evident. The common themes listed above may be used as criteria to identify imprecatory psalms, in spite of doubts by some scholars that such criteria exist (see section 1.1.2).

The next logical step of the conclusion of the present study would be a comparison regarding the similarities and differences of the extra-textual and inter-textual study of the

³⁴ The genre of these psalms is discussed further in 7.3.

selected psalms in order to formulate the overall theological message and implications. After comparing and synthesizing the extra-textual context (section 7.3) and inter-textual messages (section 7.4), the overall message and theological implications of imprecatory psalms will be presented as a final conclusion of the study (sections 7.5 and 7.6).

7.3 Context and Implications

7.3.1 *The Literary Genre of Imprecatory Psalms and Its Implications*

This section summarizes the findings on the literary genre of the selected imprecatory psalms and then synthesizes an understanding of the genre of these psalms within the broader context of the entire Psalter.

The present study has revealed that **Psalms 35 and 69** may be classified as **individual laments** on the basis of structure and content (see sections 2.6.2 & 3.6.1). The usual characteristics of a lament are present in the psalm such as an urgent appeal for deliverance, imprecations, the suppliant's distress, complaint, confession of innocence or YHWH's omnipotence and a vow to praise God.

Psalm 83 is regarded as a national lament and the psalm manifests several characteristics of this form. The nation of Israel is in a time of distress; they are being threatened by a coalition of nations. Therefore, the psalmist prays on behalf of Israel for deliverance from the surrounding enemies who are threatening to invade and destroy them (see section 4.6).

As seen from the present study (section 5.6), **Psalm 109** could best be described as an individual lament of a person who is being persecuted by enemies. Like Psalms 35 and 69, Psalm 109 has the usual characteristics of an individual lament such as an urgent appeal for deliverance, imprecations, the suppliant's distress, complaint, confession of trust in YHWH and a vow to praise God.

As the study of **Psalm 137** has shown (see section 6.6.1), elements of different genres are traceable in the psalm, but there is sufficient ground to argue that the psalm is a communal lament culminating in an imprecation on Israel's enemies.

The above findings on the genres of the five selected imprecatory psalms show, on the basis of structure and content, that imprecatory psalms are generally individual or communal laments. The imprecatory nature of these laments may justify a separate subgenre of individual and communal imprecations.

7.3.2 Historical and Life Setting of Imprecatory Psalms

This section summarizes the findings on the historical and life setting of the selected imprecatory psalms and then synthesizes an understanding of the historical and life setting of these psalms within the broader context of the entire Psalter.

As seen in the present study (section 2.6.4), there are many points of correspondence between the statements of **Psalm 35** and the experiences of David in Saul's day. The thematic affinities between Psalm 35 and I Samuel 17-26 show that the superscription "Of David" is a reasonable and possible hint to Davidic authorship of Psalm 35. With regards to the life setting of Psalm 35, while many scholars argue that the psalm was probably used in the temple in a liturgical setting, the language and imagery of Psalm 35 are open-ended enough to apply to a variety of circumstances. Therefore, the psalm was probably a resource for sufferers throughout the generations and served as a prayer for help and as a testimony to God's character. The intra-textual and inter-textual analysis portrays God as the one who helps, delivers and provides for the weak, the needy and the vulnerable.

With regards to the historical setting of **Psalm 69**, the exact context of the psalm is very illusive (see section 3.6). The closing verses of the psalm (verses 36-37) seem to presuppose a post-exilic situation after the destruction of Judah in 587 BC. Although verse 10 may be understood as an indication that the temple of the pre-exilic period was still in existence, it may be read as referring to one who is zealous to rebuild the temple (e.g. Haggai and Zechariah) after 539 BC. Some scholars interpret the expression "your house" in verse 10 as not referring to the temple but to the "household of faith." The difficulty of trying to establish the historical setting of the psalm has a ripple effect on the attempt to establish the "life setting of the psalm." There is a wide range of opinions among scholars with regards to the life-setting of the psalm. The "liturgical-theological profile" of the psalmist discourages identification with any one particular historical person. Rather it calls to mind several persons or groups such as Jeremiah (see Jer 11:18-20; 15:15-18; 17:14), the lamenting voice in Lamentations 3, the afflicted

community of Psalm 44 (see verses 22, 24), the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and Job. It is likely that Psalm 69 may have been informed and shaped in one way or another by the exile experience.

As observed (see section 4.6), scholars and commentators are divided on whether one is able to fix the historical context of Psalm 83. It is a difficult task to establish the historical setting of **Psalm 83**. The list of nations (verses 7-9) could be symbolic of the enemies of Israel throughout the ages. With regards to the life-setting of the psalm, the psalm could have been used as “a timely prayer” at many critical points when Israel was under military threat from foreign nations during and after the exile.

The historical setting of **Psalm 109** (see section 5.6) may have been a religious court where the suppliant claimed his innocence before priestly judges. The date of the psalm is uncertain. Some scholars argue for a post-exilic period and others argue for a pre-exilic date. With regards to the cultic setting, some scholars argue that the psalm may reflect a ritual connected with the obtaining of the divine decision in a complex legal case. Other scholars view the psalm as a prayer that grew out of healing rituals where curses and sorcery were removed from the innocent party - a view that seems implausible because sorcery was a forbidden practice and liable to punishment in Israel (see Exod 20:7). The historical setting of this psalm is undecided.

Of all the selected psalms, the historical setting of the events in **Psalm 137** is best established (see section 6.6). The psalmist seems to have been or to be in exile after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC. and may have been one of the temple musicians taken to Babylon as an entertainer (see section 6.6.2). Most likely, the author was a member of the Levitical guilds which were responsible for music and singing in the temple. With regards to the cultic setting of Psalm 137 (see section 6.6.3), the psalm seems to have been used at the festival of lamentation over the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Zech 7:1-5; 8:19) where prayers were offered to YHWH for the full restoration of Jerusalem and its people.

In conclusion, it is hardly possible to establish the historical and life setting of the imprecatory psalms. Overall, the imprecatory psalms seem to serve as prayers for help and deliverance and are applicable in any circumstance of personal or communal threat to God's people. They also serve as a universal testimony to God's character as the one who helps, delivers and provides for the weak, the needy and the vulnerable who call upon him for help.

Imprecatory psalms seem to have been a resource to YHWH's faithful who were undergoing unjust suffering at the hands of other people. The justification for the imprecations are not based upon any specific circumstance.

Since these psalms apply to a variety of circumstances in which the followers of YHWH were unjustly persecuted, the New Testament authors, when telling the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, often alluded to these psalms.

The cultic setting of the imprecatory psalms seems to be primarily the public setting of the temple, where the followers of YHWH would gather to worship YHWH because most of the imprecatory psalms contain a vow to give praise and thanksgiving publicly (see Psalms 35: 17-18, 69:31-34; 109:31).

7.3.3 The Canonical Setting of Imprecatory Psalms

This section summarizes the findings on the canonical setting of the psalms in order to understand the imprecatory psalms within the broader canonical context of the Psalter.

The study of the canonical setting of **Psalm 35** (see section 2.7) has shown that Psalms 34-41 have important philological and thematic links. The most important theme in Psalms 34-41 is the theme of deliverance: YHWH is the psalmist's salvation or deliverance. YHWH alone is a refuge in times of trouble. He rescues the afflicted and needy from their oppressors, the wicked. YHWH rescues the afflicted by punishing the wicked and bringing shame and dishonour to them. In this context Psalm 35 exhorts the listeners/readers to call on YHWH rather than to rely on themselves whenever they are being persecuted by their enemies. YHWH is the divine warrior who will fight for and defend his people from their oppressors. YHWH is also the all-seeing witness, righteous judge and champion of justice. He sees and knows all that is going on. He is going to execute his justice by delivering and vindicating the righteous and by punishing the wicked in his own time. Therefore the listeners/readers should continuously trust in YHWH, in the midst of difficulties or persecution, for their deliverance and refuge. The canonical setting of this psalm marks it as a plea that transcends a call for personal vengeance.

From the canonical setting of **Psalm 69** (see section 3.7), it was observed that Psalms 69-71 have significant philological and thematic links. The most important theme of Psalms 69-71 is also that of deliverance: YHWH is the psalmist's deliverer and refuge. YHWH alone is the one

who comes to the fore and brings deliverance to the psalmist. He rescues the afflicted and the needy from their adversaries, the wicked. He redeems his people by punishing the wicked and bringing shame and disgrace to them. Psalm 69 connects with this main theme by admonishing the followers of YHWH to call on him whenever they are persecuted by their enemies because YHWH will come to their aid. The psalm admonishes the followers of YHWH to be zealous for the true worship of YHWH. The psalm also teaches that YHWH's judgment is very severe on those who insult his servants, who have a deep care and commitment for the temple.

The study of the canonical setting of **Psalm 83** (see section 4.7) has revealed two main themes, which are closely related: God's sovereignty and name.

- **God's sovereignty:** God is the creator of the whole universe. He controls history. He is a warrior, YHWH of Hosts. He fights for his people and delivers them from their enemies. Psalm 83 bears evidence of God's sovereignty against the backdrop of a serious crisis. The enemies plot the destruction of Israel and they want to totally annihilate God's people. The psalmist calls down on Israel's enemies the same defeats suffered by their enemies in the past so that they will recognize YHWH's universal sovereignty and lordship over the earth (verse 19).
- **God's name:** God's name should be held high, called upon, honoured and praised. The psalmists' plea for deliverance and forgiveness of sins is based on God's honour and his name. When God does not deliver his people his honour and name are at stake. This context confirms the suppliant's zeal for God's name in Psalm 83. The suppliant's imprecation involves a plea for the reversal of the dire situation so that God's reputation as sovereign Lord would be confirmed. The psalm encourages the reader/listener to trust in God for his/her deliverance because God is sovereign and will deliver his people from oppression by foreign powers for the honour of his name.

The study of the canonical setting of **Psalm 109** (see section 5.7) has proved that Psalms 107-110 have important philological and thematic links. As with the contexts of the two other individual imprecatory psalms (Pss 35 & 69) the most common theme in this group of psalms is the theme of deliverance: YHWH saves his people from their distresses. This deliverance is based on his loving-kindness. The proper response to YHWH's acts of deliverance is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is thus an important supporting theme. The main theme is reflected

in Psalm 109 when the suppliant exhorts the listeners/readers to call on YHWH rather than to rely on themselves whenever they are being persecuted by their enemies because YHWH is their deliverer, the one who stands at their right hand, who fights for and defends his people against their oppressors. He executes his justice by delivering and vindicating the righteous and by punishing the wicked. Therefore the listeners/readers should continuously trust in YHWH, in the midst of difficulties or persecution, for their deliverance and refuge. Psalm 109 concludes with a resolve and a call to praise YHWH, which fits into the subtheme of this psalm's textual context.

The study of the canonical setting of **Psalm 137** (see section 6.7) has revealed two closely related main themes in Psalms 135-137: YHWH's sovereignty and complete loyalty to YHWH. These themes are also noticeable in the broader context of Psalms 120-134.

- **YHWH's sovereignty:** Psalms 135-137 may be seen as an appendix to the "Songs of Ascents" (Pss 120-134) because the opening psalms (Pss 120-134) portray the threats and difficulties of various kinds that could have been encountered by the post-exilic community. Psalms 135-137 may have provided special comfort and support to the post-exilic community as they meditated on these psalms and learnt that God is sovereign. The message is clear: God is sovereign; He is the creator of the universe; He controls the forces of nature and the tortuous course of history. God's presence and protection would be with them during their journey to Jerusalem (cf. Ps 121). Psalms 135-137 may also be seen as a prelude to Psalms 138-144. Since the main theme of Psalms 135-137 is God's sovereignty, Psalms 135-137 function as an introduction to Psalms 138-144 because these psalms (Pss 138-144) explain in detail the theme of YHWH's sovereignty and faithfulness. For example, Psalm 139 teaches that YHWH has the ability to see everything within the human heart. The theme of YHWH's sovereignty, love and faithfulness is also highlighted in Psalms 138 and 140-144 when He rescues the psalmist from his distress. It is in this context that the psalmist in Psalm 137 appeals to YHWH (the one who controls history) to provide his divine justice by punishing Edom and Babylon for their atrocities against Judah. Psalm 137 encourages the listeners/readers to acknowledge the sovereignty of YHWH in history. Therefore, the reader/listener should trust in the Lord because he is sovereign and in control of everything. The acknowledgement of the sovereignty of YHWH gives hope for the present, and comforts and encourages the

followers of YHWH to persevere in their faith no matter how difficult their present circumstances may be.

- **Complete loyalty to YHWH:** In Psalm 137, the psalmist has complete loyalty and devotion towards YHWH. The psalmist's love for Jerusalem and Zion is not separate from love for God. The psalmist's devotion to YHWH is seen when he deems it impossible, unheard of, or unthinkable that he would forget Jerusalem. His devotion takes the form of a solemn vow invoking upon himself the penalty of total or partial paralysis, in which case he would lose control of the most important organs of a musician – his hands and tongue (verses 5-6).

The canonical settings of the five selected imprecatory psalms present two recurrent themes: YHWH's deliverance and YHWH's sovereignty.

- **YHWH's deliverance:** YHWH alone is the psalmist's deliverer and refuge. He rescues the needy and the afflicted from their oppressors and he punishes the wicked making them the object of shame and disgrace. YHWH's deliverance of the psalmist or his people is based on his loving-kindness. Therefore, YHWH's followers are exhorted to call on YHWH rather than to rely on themselves whenever they are persecuted by the wicked because YHWH is the divine warrior, the Lord of Hosts, who will fight for and defend his people against their oppressors. The readers should anchor their trust in YHWH in the midst of difficulties and persecution. By emphasizing that deliverance is from YHWH, the rhetorical impact of the imprecatory psalms is that one should rather ask YHWH for deliverance, than take personal revenge.
- **YHWH's sovereignty:** YHWH is the sovereign Lord. He is the creator of the whole universe. He controls the forces of nature and the course of history. He is the divine warrior, the Lord of Hosts who fights for his people and delivers them from their enemies. This forms the basis for the exhortations that the followers of YHWH are to trust in YHWH for their deliverance. They are to acknowledge the sovereignty of YHWH in history because this gives them hope for the present and comforts and encourages them to persevere in their faith in the midst of difficult circumstances.

7.4 Overall Message and Theological Implications of Imprecatory Psalms

7.4.1 Introduction

This section (7.4.2 to 7.4.7) reflects on the overall message and theological implications of imprecatory psalms derived from the preceding multi-dimensional reading of the selected imprecatory psalms. The section closes (7.4.8) by looking at the theological implications of the overall message of these psalms for contemporary readers.

7.4.2 YHWH as Divine Warrior and Deliverer

The theme that YHWH is the **divine warrior** is predominant in the selected imprecatory psalms.

In **Psalm 35**, YHWH is depicted as both the divine warrior and deliverer (see section 2.5.4). The psalmist begins the psalm with an appeal to YHWH to use weapons against his pursuers. YHWH is depicted as having the ability to wield different weapons which accentuates the comprehensiveness of YHWH's imminent attack and victory over the psalmist's enemies. Therefore, YHWH is portrayed as a warrior - a man of war who fights on behalf of the psalmist. The psalmist also anticipates the victory that would come when YHWH comes to his rescue.

In **Psalm 69**, the psalmist is in a life-threatening situation so he calls upon YHWH to rescue him from death and destruction (see section 3.5.6). YHWH is called upon to act on behalf of the psalmist. YHWH is portrayed as the divine warrior. He is explicitly referred to as "the Lord, YHWH of Hosts" (verse 7), implying that YHWH is a warrior who is in charge of the armies of Israel or the heavenly hosts or bodies or the armies of angels and other spiritual beings. The psalmist calls upon YHWH to defend him and establish justice. The psalmist's appeal for deliverance is based on YHWH's good loving-kindness, which expresses itself through compassion.

In **Psalm 83**, the psalmist also portrays YHWH as the divine warrior who fights for his people and delivers them from their enemies (see section 4.5.4). The psalm begins with a call for YHWH to change from his apparent silence and inactivity and fight on Israel's behalf. The hatred and hostility of the nations towards God has driven them to plot the destruction of Israel and in so doing they have set themselves against God because Israel are God's covenant people. On behalf of Israel, the psalmist calls down on Israel's enemies the same defeats and

fate suffered by their enemies in the past. The psalmist also prays for the complete annihilation and humiliation of Israel's enemies so that these enemies would acknowledge the sovereignty of God over the world.

The canonical contexts of the imprecatory psalms confirm this as a major theme. In section 7.3.3 it is demonstrated that YHWH's sovereignty is one of two major themes in the canonical contexts of these psalms. His sovereignty is very closely related to his actions as divine warrior.

As divine warrior YHWH is the source of **deliverance**. The canonical contexts of the imprecatory psalms point toward deliverance as the second of two major themes (see section 7.3.3). Deliverance was also noted as the first major concept in the five selected psalms (see section 7.2.2). The intra-textual reading demonstrated that petitions for deliverance is prominent in most imprecatory psalms (Pss 35:1-3, 22-24; 69:2-4, 14-16, 17-19, 30; 83:2; 109:1, 21-26).

The focus of **Psalm 35** is not on personal revenge, but on YHWH's deliverance (see section 2.5.4). The psalmist rejoices not in the downfall of his enemies but in YHWH's deliverance (verse 9). The occasion of the psalmist's thanksgiving is YHWH's deliverance (see verses 9-10; 18 and 28). The psalmist vows to praise YHWH because he is a deliverer - he delivers his people from the oppressed (verses 9-10, 27).

In **Psalm 69**, YHWH is portrayed as the deliverer of the psalmist. This is the main theme of the whole psalm (see section 3.8). The psalmist prays at great length for his attackers' downfall (verses 23-29). The final solution is not that the enemies would bear the brunt of God's wrath, but that God would set the psalmist free. God's solution for the psalmist's predicament is not the imprecation on the enemies but the psalmist's deliverance (verse 30). The psalmist turns away from the perpetrators of injustice and turns to God and his glory (verses 31-32). The object of the psalmist's praise and thanksgiving (verses 31-32) is not the enemies' demise but YHWH's deliverance and restoration (verses 30-37).

In **Psalm 83**, God is seen as the deliverer of Israel (see section 4.5.4). The psalmist emphasises the point that YHWH will deliver his people, Israel, from the hostile nations as he did in the past. So the suppliant recalls the great deeds by which YHWH delivered his people in the past (verses 10-13; also Pss 77 and 78).

Also in **Psalm 109**, the focus is on YHWH's deliverance (see section 5.5.4). Verse 31, which forcefully confirms YHWH's saving acts, forms the climax and the point of the whole psalm.

Although deliverance is not explicitly present as a theme in **Psalm 137**, the complete reversal of Babylon's and Edom's fortunes would effect deliverance for Israel from their plight at the streams of Babylon (see section 6.5.4).

YHWH is thus depicted as the divine warrior and deliverer in practically all the imprecatory psalms, which have been studied. He fights for his people and sets things right. The readers/listeners who are being persecuted by the wicked for no reason are not to despair but are exhorted to pray to YHWH for deliverance. The followers of YHWH are to continuously trust in him for their deliverance in the midst of difficulties or persecution.

7.4.3 Persecution as a Reality for God's People

The theme that *persecution is a reality for God's people* is seen throughout the selected imprecatory psalms. This is confirmed by the prevalence of concepts regarding persecution and the innocence of the suppliant (see second and fourth concepts discussed in section 7.2.2). From the ensuing summary it is clear that the nature of the persecutions varies from one psalm to the other.

In **Psalm 35**, the psalmist faces a *military threat* from his enemies, who want to kill him. The enemies have also falsely testified against the psalmist in an outrageous way with the purpose of bringing the suppliant to death. The psalmist is innocent and knows nothing about the charges brought against him. The psalmist does good deeds to his enemies but they have returned evil for good and caused the psalmist to experience emotional pain (see section 2.5.4).

In **Psalm 69**, the psalmist is in some or other *life-threatening situation* (see sections 3.5.1.1 and 3.5.6). He hyperbolically makes use of the image of overwhelming waters which have reached his throat; he has no foothold and he has begun to sink. The psalmist is being persecuted by numerous enemies who have hated him without cause and want to kill him. The enemies are making false allegations against the psalmist. The psalmist's zeal for the temple results in communal shame and ridicule which breaks his heart and has made him despair. He

expects sympathy, and comfort from comforters, yet on the contrary the enemies cause him more misery. Outward persecution thus causes emotional pain and distress.

In **Psalm 83**, God's people, the nation of Israel, are in a *military crisis*. The surrounding nations, driven by hatred and arrogance toward God, gather to attack Israel. They plot the total destruction of Israel as a nation (see sections 4.5.2.1 and 4.5.4).

In **Psalm 109**, the psalmist is surrounded by his enemies who are making *false allegations* against him (see sections 5.5.1.2 and 5.5.5). These allegations are inspired by hate against him. The psalmist is innocent of his enemies' charges. The chief enemy has not shown kindness to the vulnerable, but has persecuted them and brought about their *death*. The psalmist identifies himself with the afflicted and the needy who have been persecuted by the chief enemy.

In **Psalm 137**, the psalmist and his companions are being persecuted by their Babylonian masters who ask them to *sing songs of Zion while they are in exile* (see sections 6.5.2.1 and 6.5.4). The Israelite captives refuse to sing the songs of Zion because this would be a mockery to YHWH.

Overall, the imprecatory psalms teach the followers of YHWH to have the right attitude to persecution.

7.4.4 A Desire for God's Justice and Righteousness

In the selected imprecatory psalms, the psalmist's imprecations are not motivated by a spirit of personal vengeance but by a desire for God's justice and righteousness. This links with the observation that God's righteousness is a major concept linking the imprecatory psalms (see section 7.2.2, sixth concept).

The psalmist is thirsting for justice and righteousness. In Psalms 35, 69 and 109, the psalmist is innocent and he is the victim of his enemies' false allegations. In Psalms 35 and 69, the enemies have mocked and ridiculed the psalmist publicly. Therefore, the psalmist pleads for justice on the grounds that God's justice should prevail at all times (e.g. Psalm 35:7-8; 11-12; 19-24). Justice is the general tenor of these psalms (Psalms 35, 69 and 109).

In the imprecatory psalms, YHWH is depicted as the **righteous judge** who comes to the defence of his people. In Psalms 35, 69 and 109, the psalmist appeals to YHWH, the all-seeing witness and judge. He wants YHWH to be his advocate and judge, to draw near to him and intervene in his situation. He wants YHWH to execute justice by defending and declaring him innocent of all charges according to his divine righteousness. YHWH executes his justice by delivering and vindicating the righteous and by punishing the wicked.

The psalmist asks for **vindication**. YHWH is to set things right, not only as the divine warrior, but also as advocate and judge. His glory and righteousness are at stake if the suffering of the innocent continues in the hands of the wicked or the unrighteous. God's work of setting things right in the world will necessarily mean that God fights and judges the wicked. The psalmist is confident that if YHWH were to act as judge, he would be declared righteous while his detractors would be found guilty and be humiliated and disgraced publicly. YHWH's greatness is seen in his pleasure to set things right for the suffering and the vulnerable.

The psalmist also pleads for an **inversion of roles** in Psalms 35, 69, and 109. This is a further assertion of YHWH's righteousness and justice (see sections 2.8, 3.8 and 5.8). The psalmist simply asks God to ensure that his enemies experience what they have inflicted on others. As God's servant, the psalmist calls upon God to punish his enemies severely as a way of rectifying their injustices.

The plea for **retribution** in Psalms 69, 83, 109 and 137 is also an assertion of YHWH's righteousness and justice. When the psalmist prays imprecations in these psalms, he wants God to set things right. He wants God to execute his justice. The psalmist is aware of the fact that God is loving, faithful and compassionate. His love and compassion do not annul his righteousness. He has to provide justice to the needy, afflicted and oppressed. The imprecations calling for the punishment of the psalmist's enemies are calls for the proper reward or payback that God gives to the wicked to rectify injustices. The psalmist's imprecations therefore fit the crime of the enemy. For example, in Psalm 137, the psalmist prays for divine retribution (*lex talionis*) on both the nations of Edom and Babylon for their hostility and cruelty against Judah. YHWH is to repay them in kind for what they had done when they captured and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC.

As observed above, YHWH executes justice or sets things right. The readers/ listeners who are being persecuted by the wicked for no reason are not to despair but are exhorted to pray to YHWH for his justice to be executed.

7.4.5 Prayer and Love as Proper Responses to Unjust Persecution

The psalmists respond in love and prayer towards and on behalf of their persecutors. It has already been noted above that love³⁵ and prayer are a common motif in some of the imprecatory psalms (see section 7.2.2). When the enemies were sick, the psalmist grieved over their illness, fasted and prayed for their recovery as if the enemies were his relatives (Ps 35:13-14). Although his enemies attacked him for no reason, the psalmist loves them (Ps 109:2-5). In other words, the psalmists reflect, albeit very remotely in some of these psalms, what is required from the New Testament believer, namely to love one's enemy (Lev 19:18 cf. Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27-35).

The psalmists are also identified with the exercise of prayer (Pss 35:13; 69:14; 109:4). Thus they do not retaliate but bring their prayers for justice to God. They submit their prayers to God and leave vengeance to him (cf. Rom 12:19). Thus, for example, the psalmists' way of prayer is preferable and more commendable than that of the modern suicide bombers who bring about the death of many innocent people.

The slant of the imprecatory psalms is that the followers of YHWH should respond to unwarranted persecution in love and prayer, rather than retaliation. They are to bring their prayers for justice to YHWH and leave vengeance to him.

Prayer in the imprecatory psalms is also not restricted to one-dimensional pleas for help and vindication. In all these psalms God is the object of Israel's praise, zeal and thanksgiving. Two responses to persecution, other than pleas for help and vindication, are discussed in the subsequent sections (sections 7.4.6 & 7.4.7).

³⁵ The motif on love is not evident in all of the psalms but in Psalms 35 and 109. This is such an important motif in present study because there are number of scholars and commentators (see sections 1.1.3 and 1.2.1.1) who are that imprecatory psalms as irreconcilable with the New Testament teaching on loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us (Matt 5:44).

7.4.6 Devotion to YHWH as Proper Conduct in the midst of Persecution

The psalmist is portrayed as YHWH's servant, who is devoted to YHWH. The psalmist also identifies himself as the servant of YHWH (Pss 35:27; 69:18, 37; 109:28). In both Psalms 69 and 137, the psalmist's devotion to YHWH shows itself in his deep care for and commitment to the temple.

In **Psalm 69**, the psalmist's deep care for the temple in Jerusalem creates trouble for him (see sections 3.5.2.2 and 3.5.6). The psalmist probably sees improper worship at the temple and is aware of his own shortcomings. He grieves over the situation (unknown to us) by weeping, fasting and wearing sackcloth. This backfires – the whole community makes him a laughing stock. They probably infer from the signs of penitence that the suppliant needs to seek forgiveness for some grave personal sin.

In **Psalm 137**, the psalmist and his companions are loyal and devoted to Jerusalem and therefore to YHWH (see sections 6.5.2.1 and 6.5.4). They are in exile in Babylon; they recall the destruction of the temple and they are deeply saddened. As a result they have sat down and mourned. They have hung their musical instruments on the trees and would not play them again. When asked to sing the songs of Zion sung to worship YHWH in the temple, the Israelite captives refuse to participate in the mockery of YHWH. The psalmist deems it impossible that he would forget Jerusalem and fail to exalt her. The psalmist also pledges his complete loyalty and devotion towards Jerusalem and therefore, towards YHWH. The psalmist's devotion to the temple takes the form of a solemn vow invoking upon himself the penalty of total or partial paralysis, in which case he would lose control of the most important organs of a musician – his hands and tongue.

Four of the five imprecatory psalms contain zeal concepts (see 7.2.2, fifth concept), which confirm that devotion to YHWH as proper response to persecution, plays a major role in imprecations. The motive for calling on YHWH as righteous judge is an awareness of the holiness of his Name. The canonical context of all these imprecatory psalms is that God's name should be held high, called upon, honoured and praised (see section 7.3.3), even when the concept of devotion is absent from a psalm like Psalm 83.

Therefore, the imprecatory psalms teach the followers of YHWH, who are YHWH's servants, to remain faithful, loyal and devoted to YHWH when they face persecution, difficult times or trials. The imprecatory psalms challenge the followers of YHWH to persevere in their

faith in the midst of persecution. Nothing may eclipse their devotion to YHWH – not even resentment felt toward their enemies.

7.4.7 Thanksgiving and Praise as Proper Responses to YHWH's Deliverance

In the majority of the selected imprecatory psalms, the psalmist vows to give thanks and praise to YHWH as a response to his deliverance (Pss 35:9-10, 17-18, 28; 69:31-34; 109:31). Thanksgiving was also noted as a major concept in the imprecatory psalms (see section 7.2.2).

In **Psalm 35**, three times (see verses 9-10, 18 and 28) the psalmist vows to rejoice and give thanks and praise to YHWH publicly in response to the anticipated deliverance by YHWH. The psalmist vows to testify of YHWH's saving grace or deliverance because YHWH delivers the afflicted and the needy from their oppressors. The psalmist also vows to proclaim YHWH's righteousness (see section 2.5.4).

In **Psalm 69**, the psalmist vows to praise God with a song of thanksgiving because YHWH is more pleased with thanksgiving than with an animal offering. The psalmist's act of thanksgiving in the temple or his deliverance by God would be a witness to God's faithful servants. Those in a similar situation to his would be encouraged and rejuvenated in their faith in YHWH (verses 30-34) (see sections 3.5.5.1 and 3.5.6).

In **Psalm 109**, the psalmist vows to use his mouth in giving thanks and praise to YHWH publicly because YHWH always defends and delivers the needy from their accusers (verses 30-31) (see sections 5.5.4.1 and 5.5.5).

Overt thanksgiving and praise is conspicuously absent in the communal imprecations (Psalms 83 & 137). However, the notion of songs of praise is present in Psalm 137. The suppliant wants to sing a song of Zion and keeps on remembering the cult in Jerusalem, but due to circumstances in Babylon he cannot offer thanksgiving and praise.

Therefore, the imprecatory psalms teach the reader/listener that the proper response to YHWH's deliverance is thanksgiving and praise in the community of faith, so that those who are undergoing unjust persecution may be encouraged and strengthened in their faith and hope in YHWH. The thanksgiving may be offered in anticipation of deliverance, which would be indicative of trust that YHWH will surely help. Praise is thus given in the midst of afflictions. The notion is that praise and thanksgiving draws the attention of the afflicted away from their

persecutors to YHWH. In this respect the imprecatory psalms are paralleled by the book of Habakkuk with its call for justice (Hab 1:2-4, 1:12-2:1), eclipsed by a final hymn of praise (Hab 3:17-19).

7.4.8 Conclusion

The overall message and theological implications of imprecatory psalms show that imprecatory psalms are always contemporary and relevant to God's people. Imprecatory prayers are simply prayers asking God to destroy evil and to establish his justice and righteousness. Through reading and listening to imprecatory psalms, God's people are encouraged and exhorted to:

1. Continuously trust in YHWH for their deliverance and refuge in the midst of difficulties or persecution because YHWH is sovereign and is their refuge and the source of their deliverance.
2. Have the right attitude toward or understanding of persecution by being aware of the fact that they are placed amid a world that hates them and persecution will constantly be an inevitable reality for them because they do not belong to this world.
3. Love their enemies and spend time in prayer because this is the proper response to unjust persecution. They are not to retaliate in response to unjust persecution but they are to bring their prayers for justice to YHWH and leave vengeance to him.
4. Confront and oppose evil, injustice and oppression because YHWH is a righteous God who does not tolerate these things. They are also to embody YHWH's moral attribute of loving-kindness and show kindness and justice to the afflicted and the needy. They are to stand for the defenceless and vulnerable.
5. Remain faithful and devoted to YHWH in the midst of persecution, difficult times or trials.
6. Give thanks and praise to YHWH because of YHWH's deliverance even when YHWH's ultimate deliverance is not yet accomplished.

7.5 The “Ethical Problem” of Imprecatory Psalms for New Testament Believers Revisited

The survey and review of the study of imprecatory psalms showed that scholars are divided with regards to the use of imprecatory psalms by Christians (see section 1.1.4). Some scholars argue that it is inappropriate for New Testament believers to pray imprecatory prayers and other scholars argue that imprecatory prayers are applicable to New Testament believers.

As stated in the introduction, one of the objectives of this study was to give clarity on the “ethical problem” for New Testament believers (see section 1.3.2). Greater clarity is now possible on the basis of the foregoing study.

The synthesis on the life-setting of the selected imprecatory psalms has revealed that imprecatory psalms could have been a resource for YHWH’s followers who were undergoing various kinds of unjust persecution. If imprecatory psalms were a resource for YHWH’s followers undergoing persecution in the past, then the same psalms could be used as a resource for believers of all ages reading or hearing these psalms while undergoing unjust persecution. The fact that the historical and life setting of at least the individual imprecatory psalms is not known (see section 7.3.2) makes them all the more applicable to various life situations of subsequent readers and hearers.

The message of the broader canonical contexts of imprecatory psalms in the Psalter is also very relevant and applicable to believers who are going through trials and persecution. The study of the broader canonical contexts of the imprecatory psalms in the Psalter (see section 7.3.3) revealed that YHWH is sovereign Lord and he alone is the deliverer and refuge of those who are being persecuted for no cause. Therefore, the New Testament believer who is undergoing trials and persecution may also find comfort, encouragement and hope in the midst of persecution by reading and meditating upon the imprecatory psalms within their respective canonical settings.

The present study has shown that imprecatory psalms are essentially an appeal to the justice of God and a prayer that God’s justice be executed upon the wicked. New Testament believers also encounter unjust persecution so they may also appeal to the justice of God and pray for God’s justice to be executed upon the wicked. God’s throne is still the final court of appeal for believers of the New Testament, who are reminded that YHWH is the One who will take vengeance and will repay (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:20; cf. Deuteronomy 32:35). Ignorance of the Old Testament, where God’s justice is described very graphically and where the cries for justice in the imprecatory psalms are very articulate, will only result in a short-sighted reading of the New Testament. The significance of the New Testament message of atonement and of the final judgment can hardly be grasped without the background of Old Testament passages like the imprecatory psalms.

The overall message of the imprecatory psalms is consistent with the New Testament teaching and therefore the imprecatory psalms have a legitimate didactic role in the church.

- YHWH or God is the divine warrior and deliverer and the source of deliverance to God’s people (see section 7.4.2). As already observed (see section 7.4.2), the psalmists pray for physical deliverance from their enemies or danger, but in the New Testament the theme of deliverance is developed further. The theme of deliverance is

seen in reference to the great deliverance from guilt and sin wrought by Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 2:3). Jesus Christ is the deliverer and source of deliverance to God's people or believers. Through Christ's death on the cross, believers have been delivered from sin (1 Cor 1:30; Rom 3:24-26; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Eph 1:7; Col 1:20-22; 1 Tim 2:5-6; Titus 2:13-14; Heb 9:12-15; 1 Pet 1:18-23).

- Persecution is a reality for God's people (see section 7.4.3). The theme of inevitable persecution is developed further in the New Testament, where believers learn that they do not belong to this world (cf. John 15:18-25; Matt 10:22; Mk 13:13; 1 Pet 1:1; 2:11-12) and that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 4:12ff.).
- Prayer and love are the proper responses to unjust persecution (see section 7.4.5; Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36; 1 Pet 3:8-14 and Rom 12:11-12, 14-21).
- YHWH's suffering followers are to remain faithful and devoted to YHWH when they undergo persecution or trials (see 7.5.6 and Jas 1:12; Matt 24:13; 1 Cor 16:13; Gal 6:9; Eph 6:13, 18; Jas 1:1-4; Heb 12:1-13).
- Thanksgiving and praise are the proper responses to YHWH's deliverance. These are also the proper responses in the midst of trials and tribulations (see section 7.4.7; James 1:2-4). The theme of thanksgiving and praise is developed further in the New Testament, where believers are to be thankful to God, through Christ, for deliverance from sin (Rom 7:23-25). Believers are also exhorted to give thanksgiving and praise to God always (Eph 1:16; 5:20) and in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:18).

7.6 Concluding Recommendations for Further Study

As this present study comes to a closure, it is evident that there are still issues regarding the imprecatory psalms that need further study. These issues are as follows:

- While the aim of this thesis was not to define the criteria for identifying imprecatory psalms, the present study shows there are clear philological links between the five imprecatory psalms (see section 7.2.1). However, imprecatory psalms cannot be easily grouped or classified on the basis of common lexical terms alone because the relations between these psalms are inclined to be more by conceptual affinity than by lexical affinity. As observed (see section 7.2.2), imprecatory psalms share a number of common concepts such as
 - Deliverance
 - Persecution by wicked men
 - Prayer and love

- The psalmist's innocence
- The psalmist as YHWH's servant, filled with his zeal
- Judgment on the psalmist's enemies, who are also YHWH's enemies
- Thanksgiving and praise

The present study of the five representative imprecatory psalms has shown that, on the basis of structure and content, imprecatory psalms are generally classified as individual or communal laments (see section 7.3.1). Therefore, one may classify imprecatory psalms on the basis of the above conceptual affinities identified within the literary genre of individual and communal laments. Whether individual and communal imprecations should be defined as separate genres is a question that should be further investigated.

The present study focused on only five imprecatory psalms that are commonly classified as imprecatory psalms. These selected imprecatory psalms were regarded for the purposes of the research as genuine *bona fide* imprecatory psalms. However, further research on the criteria for identifying imprecatory psalms is necessary. The criteria suggested in the present study provide some first steps towards formulating better criteria for identifying imprecatory psalms. When these criteria for identifying the imprecatory psalms have been established, further research on the content, context and message of the remaining imprecatory psalms may be done.

- At the methodological level, the three-dimensional approach used in the present study, namely an intra-textual reading, extra-textual reading and inter-textual reading, has proved to be an effective reading strategy for gaining a thorough grasp of the content, context and message of imprecatory psalms. This three-dimensional reading strategy may also be used in determining the content, context and message of other psalms. In an ongoing study of the imprecatory psalms, more aspects may be brought into play, such as the rhetorical strategies used in the individual psalms.
- At the level of the study of the context of imprecatory psalms, there is a wide range of opinion among scholars with the result that the historical and life setting of imprecatory psalms has not been easy to establish. This, therefore, calls for further investigation and research on the historical and life setting of the imprecatory psalms. The further study of the historical and life setting of imprecatory psalms (extra-textual reading) should be based on the intra-textual analysis of imprecatory psalms.
- At the level of the study of the canonical setting of imprecatory psalms (or psalms in general), there are very few commentaries that deal with the canonical setting of the psalms, especially the imprecatory psalms. Therefore, more inter-textual studies on the imprecatory psalms are needed to elucidate the broader canonical context of

imprecatory psalms in the Psalter. The broader canonical context of imprecatory psalms gives insight and understanding of the message of imprecatory psalms in the Psalter.

- To fully deal with and give greater clarity on the “ethical problem” of imprecatory psalms for New Testament believers, there is further need to research the “Imprecations in the New Testament” where all texts dealing with imprecations or curses are noted and exegeted.