

# **An exegetical study of imprecatory Psalms in the Old Testament**

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***Dedication***

***For my wife, Patience, with deep appreciation***

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to read the imprecatory psalms in the Old Testament more effectively. In the introduction, the current research of the imprecatory psalms is surveyed and three problems are identified. 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. 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 illusive criteria, this study focuses on the content of these psalms in order to enrich our understanding of imprecation in the Psalms. Secondly, there is a wide range of views regarding the basis of imprecatory psalms. There is no consensus among scholars and many of the proposed solutions are unsatisfactory. Therefore, this study focuses on each imprecatory psalm to establish the basis of imprecation from the text itself and then seeks to clarify the “ethical problem” in the light of the New Testament. Thirdly, some scholars seem to have ignored the historical context of the imprecatory psalms. Therefore, this study is an attempt to read the imprecatory psalms in their total context (i.e. historical, life-setting and canonical) before application is made to the modern context. Thus, the above research problems have provided motivation for this thoroughly text-based and text oriented exegetical study of a representative selection of the imprecatory psalms in order to grasp more accurately the content, context and message of these psalms.

In order to ensure the thoroughness of this study, the reading strategy utilized involves a three-dimensional approach, namely an intra-textual reading, an extra-textual reading and an inter-textual reading of each of the representative imprecatory psalms. From the perspective of intra-textual reading, the literary structure, morphological, poetical, semantic and rhetorical features of each of the representative imprecatory psalms are investigated. Following this, the extra-textual dimensions of each of the representative imprecatory psalms are discussed in order to scrutinize the socio-historical context of imprecatory psalms. The aspect of the inter-textual relationships of each of the representative imprecatory psalms is also examined in order to understand imprecatory psalms in their broader canonical context.

For the purpose of this study, five imprecatory psalms, namely Psalms 35, 69, 83, 109 and 137, have been selected, based on the fact that they are commonly classified by scholars as imprecatory psalms.

Psalms 35, 69, 83, 109 and 137 are multi-dimensionally read in the main body of the thesis (chapters 2-6, one chapter for each imprecatory psalm), based on the suggested three-dimensional reading, namely the intra-textual reading, the extra-textual reading and the inter-textual reading.

The thesis concludes by comparing the content, context and theological emphasis of the selected imprecatory psalms. It synthesizes all the study outcomes, the overall messages and theological implications of the selected imprecatory psalms and gives clarity on the “ethical problem.” Finally, some suggestions for future research on imprecatory psalms are offered.

## SAMEVATTING

Hierdie proefskrif is 'n poging om die vloekpsalms in die Ou Testament doeltreffender te lees. In die inleiding word die huidige navorsing oor die vloekpsalms oorsigtelik bespreek en word drie probleme geïdentifiseer. Eerstens, daar is klaarblyklik nie konsensus by kenners oor die presiese aantal vloekpsalms nie. Die rede hiervoor is dat daar nie duidelike kriteria is waaraan hierdie psalms uitgeken kan word nie. Min is nog gedoen om die situasie te verbeter, waarskynlik omdat die soeke na sodanige kriteria willekeurig en subjektief sal wees. Dalk is dit nie eers nodig dat navorsers dit met mekaar eens is oor die presiese aantal vloekpsalms nie. Daarom is dit belangriker om die inhoud van die psalms te bestudeer as om kriteria te soek wat 'n mens nie kan vaspen nie. So 'n studie van die inhoud verryk ons begrip van vervloekings in dié psalms. Tweedens, daar is uiteenlopende sienings oor die grondslag vir vloekpsalms. Daar is geen konsensus onder navorsers nie en sommige van die voorgestelde oplossings is onbevredigend. Gevolglik moet die teks van elke vloekpsalm noukeurig nagegaan word om die grondslag, die fundering, van die vervloeking vas te stel en om dan die “etiese probleem” in die lig van die Nuwe Testament uit te klaar. Derdens, dit kom voor of sommige navorsers die historiese konteks van die vloekpsalms ignoreer. Gevolglik is daar 'n behoefte om die psalms in hul volle konteks te lees (historiese, lewens- en kanonieke konteks) voordat die psalms in die moderne konteks van toepassing gemaak kan word. Bogenoemde navorsingsprobleme vereis deeglike uitleg van die vloekpsalms waarvolgens teksgebaseerde en teksgeöriënteerde eksegeese op 'n verteenwoordigende seleksie vloekpsalms gedoen word om die inhoud, konteks en boodskap van hierdie psalms beter te verstaan.

Vir die indringende eksegeese van die verteenwoordigende groep vloekpsalms, word 'n driedimensionele leesstrategie voorgestel, naamlik 'n intratekstuele, ekstratekstuele en intertekstuele persepektief op die vloekpsalms. Die intratekstuele perspektief behels die nagaan van die literêre struktuur, asook morfologiese, poëtiese, semantiese en retoriese kenmerke van die verteenwoordigende groep vloekpsalms. Hierna word die ekstratekstuele dimensies van die vloekpsalms bespreek om so die sosio-historiese konteks van die vloekpsalms te bepaal. Die aspek van die intertekstuele kanonieke vorm van die betrokke vloekpsalms word ook nagegaan om hierdie verteenwoordigende groep vloekpsalms binne die breër kanonieke konteks te verstaan.

Vyf vloekpsalms word vir hierdie studie uitgesonder, naamlik Psalm 35, 69, 83, 109 en 137. Die keuse berus op die feit dat hierdie psalms gewoonlik deur navorsers as vloekpsalms geklassifiseer word.

Psalm 35, 69, 83, 109 en 139 word in die hoofdeel van die proefskrif (Hoofstuk 2-6) multidimensioneel gelees, in ooreenstemming met die voorgestelde drie-dimensionele leesstrategie, naamlik die intratekstuele, die ekstratekstuele en die intertekstuele perspektief. Aan elk van die vloekpsalms word een hoofstuk bestee.

Die proefskrif sluit af met 'n gevolgtrekking waar die inhoud, konteks en teologiese klem van die verteenwoordigende groep vloekpsalms vergelyk word. Dit vat al die resultate, die algehele boodskap en teologiese implikasies van die verteenwoordigende groep vloekpsalms saam en gee duidelikheid met betrekking tot die "etiese probleem." Ten slotte word verskeie voorstelle vir toekomstige navorsing oor die vloekpsalms gemaak.

### **KEY TERMS**

An exegetical study; imprecatory psalms; imprecations in the psalms; imprecations; psalms of cursing; curses in the psalms; the Old Testament.

'n Eksegetiese studie; vervloekings psalms; vervloekings in die psalms; vervloekings; psalms van vervloeking; vervloekings in die psalms; die Ou Testament.

## ABBREVIATIONS OF BIBLE VERSIONS AND OTHER TEXTUAL WORKS

The following abbreviations of Bible Versions and Other Works are used in the present study:

ASV	American Standard Version
BBE	The Bible in Basic English
BHK	Biblia Hebraica, R. Kittel (3 <sup>rd</sup> ed. 1937, by Württembergischen Bibelanstalt)
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
BJ	<i>Bible de Jérusalem</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
KJV	King James Version
LXX	The Septuagint
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NBV	New Netherlands Translation
NEB	New English Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJV	New Jewish Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SPCL	Spanish Common Language Version
TEV	Today's English Version
<i>TgPss</i>	Targum of Psalms
TOB	<i>Traduction œcuménique de la Bible</i>

## GENERAL ABBREVIATIONS

Ed.	editor
Vol (s)	volume (s)
Trans.	translation
Vs(s)	verse(s)

## ABBREVIATIONS OF THE NAMES OF BIBLICAL BOOKS

Gen	Ps	Hab	Eph
Exod	Prov	Zeph	Phil
Lev	Eccl	Hag	Col
Num	Isa	Zech	1-2 Thes
Deut	Jer	Mal	1-2 Tim
Josh	Lam		Titus
Judg	Ezek		Philm
Ruth	Dan	Matt	Heb
1-2 Sam	Hos	Mark	Jas
1-2 Kgs	Joel	Luke	1-2 Pet
1-2 Chron	Amos	John	1-2-3 John
Ezra	Obad	Acts	Jude
Neh	Jonah	Rom	Rev
Esther	Mic	1-2 Cor	
Job	Nah	Gal	