

“There are few ‘eureka’ moments in Psalms studies, but Steffen Jenkins has found one! The problem of retribution, especially the pesky imprecations (‘curses’), has been a sore spot in biblical theology for centuries . . . Jenkins, powered by a canonical approach, argues that David, in book 5, . . . has become the master teacher of how to pray for Israel and the nations, both objects of Yahweh’s undeserved ‘steadfast love and plenteous redemption.’”

—**C. HASSELL BULLOCK**

Wheaton College (IL), emeritus

“With sustained and careful analysis of psalms 1–3 and the shape of book 5, Jenkins demonstrates persuasively that the imprecatory psalms should not be understood as self-righteous requests for revenge. Rather, they ‘show concern for the welfare of the enemy, including . . . a desire for their repentance and blessing.’ His work also clearly shows how attention to Psalter shape continues to yield illuminating and important results—very impressive!”

—**J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.**

Eden Theological Seminary

“Steffen Jenkins has produced a fresh and stimulating analysis of the imprecatory psalms that will greatly aid academics and students for years to come as they explore this difficult portion of the Psalter.”

—**JONATHAN GIBSON**

Westminster Theological Seminary

“I am delighted to commend enthusiastically Steffen Jenkins’s study on the imprecatory psalms. Steffen’s commitment to the absolute trustworthiness of God’s word shines through his insightful and always engaging exposition of this often much abused portion of Scripture. Jenkins writes not only with academic care but also with pastoral sensitivity. I look forward to more coming from his pen (or computer).”

—**IAN HAMILTON**

Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“This study makes an important contribution to the theology and ethics of the calls for divine retribution within the Psalter. It can also serve as an accessible introduction to reading the Psalter as a book and with an awareness of significant links to other parts of the Old Testament. Having studied and lectured on the Psalms for years, I have nevertheless learned much from this work which broadened my perspective on the Psalter, deepened my understanding of individual psalms, and changed my mind on a few issues.”

—**THOMAS RENZ**

Oak Hill Theological College, retired

“Who hasn’t wondered about why the imprecatory psalms are in the Bible? . . . Were the people who prayed them self-righteous or deluded? Were they unaware of the call to love one’s enemies? Did they think they could simply say anything because they were suffering? Did they lack any idea of enemies turning to God? Jenkins shows that the answer to all these questions is no!”

—**JOHN GOLDINGAY**

Fuller Seminary, emeritus

“Imprecations in the Psalms have long posed a critical problem in their interpretation. Where the dominant approach in recent decades has been to look behind each individual poem, Steffen Jenkins suggests we look instead at the Psalter, which provides the context for interpretation. He shows that the final form of the Psalter provides the guardrails which guide how we are to read these prayers. This is a crucial work that will need to be considered by all who wrestle with this issue.”

—**DAVID G FIRTH**

Trinity College, Bristol

“In line with the righteous man of psalm 1, Steffen Jenkins has clearly spent long hours meditating day and night on the Psalter, and among the fruits of this are a significant number of astute and important observations about the shape of the Psalter. He makes a case that needs to be heard that there are signs of careful arrangement of the Psalter and that this contributes to how we should understand imprecatory psalms. I would be very glad to see his research disseminated more widely.”

—**PETER J. WILLIAMS**  
Tyndale House, Cambridge

# Imprecations in the Psalms

Love for Enemies in Hard Places

Steffen G. Jenkins

♠PICKWICK *Publications* • Eugene, Oregon

IMPRECATIONS IN THE PSALMS

Love for Enemies in Hard Places

Copyright © 2022 Steffen G. Jenkins. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Pickwick Publications  
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3  
Eugene, OR 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-7252-9239-0

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-7252-9240-6

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-7252-9241-3

*Cataloguing-in-Publication data:*

---

Names: Jenkins, Steffen G. [author]

Title: Imprecations in the Psalms : love for enemies in hard places / Steffen G. Jenkins.

Description: Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-7252-9239-0 (paperback) | ISBN 978-1-7252-9240-6 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-7252-9241-3 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible—Psalms—Criticism, interpretation, etc | Blessings and cursing in the Bible | Anger—Religious aspects | Bible—Psalms—Theology

Classification: BS1430.6 J46 2022 (print) | BS1430.6 (ebook)

---

01/25/22

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

# Contents

*List of Tables* | xv

*Preface* | xvii

*Abbreviations* | xxi

1. Introduction | 1
2. A Real, Biblical Problem: Retribution in the Psalter | 5
  1. What We Mean by “Imprecations” | 7
  2. Silence | 8
  3. *A Priori* Ethical Rejection—They Have No Place at All | 8
  4. Ethical Rejection, Canonical Acceptance—They Are Evil, but Have a Place in the Bible | 9
    - 4.A. Allegories: From Origen to Luther | 9
    - 4.B. Walter Brueggemann | 10
  5. Rejection Specifically for the Church—They Are Not Evil, but They Have No Place in the Church | 11
    - 5.A. Not Yet “For the New Testament Church” | 11
    - 5.B. No Longer “For the New Testament Church” | 11
  6. Cautious Appropriation—They Have a Place in the Church | 15
    - 6.A. Reformation and Onwards—Optimistic Appraisals of David’s Ethics | 15
    - 6.B. Dietrich Bonhoeffer—Christ at Prayer with His People | 18

- 6.C. Post-Modernism—Prayers of the Oppressed | 19
- 6.D. Global Church Solidarity—Praying with the Oppressed | 19
- 6.E. John N. Day—A Slight Shift in NT Emphasis | 21
- 7. Self-Righteousness—A Further Problem | 23
- 8. Point of Departure | 24
- 3. Reading the Psalter as Book: A Brief Guide for the Perplexed | 27
  - 1. Psalter Shape: A Venerable Enterprise | 28
  - 2. Psalms Have Superscriptions | 30
    - 2.A. Different Ways of Labelling Psalms | 30
    - 2.B. Descriptive Labels Are Useful | 31
    - 2.C. David in the Superscriptions—Applied History | 33
  - 3. One Psalter in Five Books | 36
  - 4. From Individual Psalm to Psalter Shape | 39
  - 5. A Fully-Fledged Book | 42
  - 6. From Psalter Context to Canonical Context | 43
  - 7. A Thematic Introduction to Guide the Reader | 44
- 4. Retribution in the Introduction to the Psalter: Psalms 1 and 2 | 45
  - 1. Retribution in the Introduction to the Book of Psalms | 46
  - 2. Psalm 1: Retribution Expected | 47
    - 2.A. Torah in Psalm 1 | 48
    - 2.B. Torah and the Expectation of Retaliation | 49
  - 3. Psalm 1: The Entrance to the Psalms in Light of the Exile | 52
    - 3.A. Exile Motifs from the Wider Canon | 52
    - 3.B. Torah for Exile: Learn to Pray with David | 57
  - 4. Psalm 2: The Enemies Are Invited to Repent and Be Blessed | 59
    - 4.A. *Excursus*: Textual Criticism of the Crushing Son and Fearful Rejoicing | 60
      - 4.A.I. Crush or Shepherd? | 60
      - 4.A.II. You Can Rejoice and Tremble | 63
      - 4.A.III. Son | 64
    - 4.B. The King Is the Judge | 65
    - 4.C. The Enemy Are Rebellious Kings and Judges | 66
    - 4.D. Rebel Judges Are Invited to Repent and Be Blessed | 66
    - 4.E. The Restored Leaders Are a Cause for Rejoicing among Their People | 70
  - 5. The Introduction to the Psalter in Summary | 73

5. Retribution in the Introduction to David: Psalm 3 | 75
  1. Psalm 3 | 76
  2. The Backstory to Psalm 3: Absalom (David Is Innocent); Bathsheba (David Is Guilty) | 77
    - 2.A. From Bathsheba to Absalom | 78
    - 2.B. David Is Simultaneously Innocent and Guilty | 78
    - 2.C. The Flight from Absalom: David as Innocent and Guilty in Psalm 3 | 79
    - 2.D. The Aftermath: David in Victory | 84
  3. David and Retribution in the Background of Psalm 3: Psalms 1–2 and 2 Samuel | 86
    - 3.A. The Theme of Retribution Extends into Psalm 3 | 86
    - 3.B. Literary Connections Within Psalms 1–3 | 88
    - 3.C. David’s Flight from Absalom within Psalms 1–3 | 90
  4. Retribution in Psalm 3 | 91
    - 4.A. The Imprecation in Psalm 3 Did Not Require Innocence | 91
    - 4.B. A Sinner Awaits a Merciful Verdict: vv. 5–6 [4–5] | 92
    - 4.C. What Is David Asking For?: v. 8 [7] | 93
    - 4.D. Blessing the Enemies: vv. 8–9 [7–8] | 97
  5. Conclusion | 103
  
6. Because of My Innocence: Self-Righteous or “Not Guilty”? | 104
  1. A Flawed Assumption: Innocence vs. Sinlessness | 105
  2. The Righteous vs. the Wicked in the Psalms | 105
  3. Confessions of Sin Coexist with Protestations of Innocence | 107
  4. A Plea of “Not Guilty” Is Not Self-Righteousness | 108
  5. A Word of Caution about “Grace” and “Salvation” | 111
  6. The Limits of “Template” Criticism | 112
  7. Conclusion: Not Self-Righteousness, but Specific Righteousness | 112
  
7. David and Israel in the Psalter | 114
  1. David and Absalom as Types of Israel and Babylon | 115
    - 1.A. Typology in the Absalom Incident | 115
    - 1.B. Typology of Exile | 117
  2. David’s Sin as a National Apostasy in the Psalter | 119
    - 2.A. David’s Second Introduction: Psalm 51 and the Golden Calf | 119



- 2.B. Divine Mercy: The Meaning of Exod 34:6–7 | 120
  - 2.B.I. The Meaning of חֶסֶד (*hesed*) | 120
  - 2.B.II. The Meaning of אֱמֶת (*emet*) | 127
  - 2.B.III. The Meaning of חַנּוּן (*hanan*)/חֵן (*hen*) | 129
  - 2.B.IV. The Meaning of רַחֵם (*raham*), רַחֲמִים (*raham*). | 129
  - 2.B.V. Combined Meaning in Exodus 34:6–7 | 130
  - 2.B.VI. These Terms for “Mercy” Do Not Always Imply Sin | 131
- 2.C. Exodus 34 and the Structure of the Psalter | 131
- 8. Retribution in Book I: Psalm 7 | 135
  - 1. The Setting of Psalm 7 | 137
  - 2. A Conditional Self-Malediction: vv. 2–5 [1–4] | 138
  - 3. Malicious Perjury, Not Mistaken Testimony: v. 15 [14] | 141
  - 4. May God Stop Their Evil Deeds: vv. 7–10 [6–9] | 143
  - 5. David Is Not Guilty and God Will Judge Rightly: vv. 9–12 [8–11] | 145
  - 6. The Enemy Can Repent: vv. 13–14 [12–13] | 147
  - 7. Mercy Triumphs over Justice | 150
  - 8. Psalm 7 in the Context of Book I | 153
  - 9. Conclusion | 154
- 9. Retribution in Book I: Psalm 18 | 155
  - 1. Who Is the Enemy and What Is the Extent of Retribution in Ps 18? | 155
  - 2. Blessing and Repentance in Ps 18 | 158
  - 3. Psalms 18 and 19 Read Together: Proclaiming Blessing to the Nations | 159
    - 3.A. The Blessed Life Is Available Globally | 160
    - 3.B. “My Righteousness” in Psalm 18 Is Available in Psalm 19 | 161
  - 4. Psalms 18–19 in the Context of Book I | 165
    - 4.A. Who Will Ascend the Holy Hill? | 165
    - 4.B. David the Exemplary Herald of Good News to the Nations | 168
  - 5. Conclusion In Book I | 169
- 10. David, Israel’s Teacher about Steadfast Love: The Structure of Book V | 172
  - 1. Steadfast Love and the Structure of Book V | 173

- 1.A. Pre-existing Collections Are Insufficient | 173
- 1.B. Markers of Structure: “Thank Him,” “Praise Him,”  
and “His Steadfast Love” | 174
- 1.C. Pleading and Praising for Steadfast Love:  
The Seam with Book IV | 177
- 2. David the Model Recipient of Steadfast Love in Book V | 179
  - 2.A. David Displaced in Book V? | 179
  - 2.B. David and Israel Have Experienced Steadfast Love | 180
  - 2.C. David Is the Model for the Exiled  
and Restored Nation | 182
- 3. David the Model User of Imprecations | 182
- 11. Retribution in Section I of Book V: Psalm 109 | 185
  - 1. Exposition of Psalm 109 | 186
  - 2. David’s Petition in Psalm 109 | 190
    - 2.A. Even While Innocent, He Appeals to Mercy . . . | 190
    - 2.B. . . . And He Shows Mercy | 192
    - 2.C. . . . Or Does He Ask for a Death Sentence After All? | 194
    - 2.D. David Repays Malice with Mercy | 195
  - 3. Psalm 109 within the Structure of Book V | 196
    - 3.A. David the Model for Israel: *Hesed* and the  
“Afflicted and Oppressed” | 196
    - 3.B. Psalm 107: Thank Yahweh for His Mercy | 198
    - 3.C. Psalm 108: How Shall We Pray about Edom? | 200
    - 3.D. Psalm 109: Receive Mercy, Show Mercy | 202
    - 3.E. Psalm 110: Repent or Perish | 204
    - 3.F. Response to Enemy in 107–110 | 205
  - 4. Concluding *Hallelujah*: Every Nation Invited to  
Be “Those Who Fear Yahweh” | 205
- 12. Retribution in Section II of Book V: Psalms 119, 129 | 213
  - 1. Opening *Hodu*: Psalm 118 | 213
  - 2. Imprecations in the Body of Section II (119–34) | 216
    - 2.A. The Place of Psalm 119 | 216
    - 2.B. Attitude to Self in Psalm 119 | 218
    - 2.C. Attitude to the Enemy in Psalm 119 | 220
    - 2.D. Psalm 129 in the Songs of Ascents | 221
  - 3. Concluding *Hallelujah*: Psalm 135 | 226
  - 4. Book V So Far—Lessons from the Past for Israel’s Future | 227

13. Retribution in Section III of Book V: Psalms 137, 139–44 | 229
  1. Opening *Hodu*: Psalm 136 and the Structure of Sections I–III | 230
  2. Body of Section III (Pss 137–144): Imprecations Are Followed by Universal Praise for *hesed* | 233
    - 2.A. The Puzzling Placement of Ps 137 | 233
    - 2.B. Structure of Section III: David Responds to Psalm 137 with Psalms 138–145 | 234
    - 2.C. Psalm 138: Response to Imprecations (I) | 235
    - 2.D. Psalm 145: Response to Imprecations (II) | 236
  3. How and When to Pray Psalm 137: Lessons from David | 240
    - 3.A. As David in Psalm 3, so Israel in Psalm 137 | 240
    - 3.B. The Imprecations in Psalm 137 | 242
    - 3.C. The Final David Collection (Pss 138–45) Teaches the Use of Psalm 137 | 245
    - 3.D. David’s Innocence Criterion Applied to Psalm 137 in Psalms 139–44 | 247
      - 3.D.I. Psalm 139 | 248
      - 3.D.II. Psalm 140 | 249
      - 3.D.III. Psalm 141 | 250
      - 3.D.IV. Psalm 142 | 252
      - 3.D.V. Psalm 143 | 253
      - 3.D.VI. Psalm 144 | 255
  4. Closing *Hallelujah*: Psalms 146–50 | 259
  5. Summary: Retribution in Section III (Psalms 137, 139–44) | 261
    - 5.A. Are These Imprecations Self-Righteous? | 262
    - 5.B. Is Perfect Righteousness Required to Pray Imprecations? | 262
    - 5.C. Cannot the Enemy Repent and Be Blessed? | 263
    - 5.D. Does David Teach Israel to Hate the Enemy? | 264
  6. Conclusion: David, Israel’s Model of Imprecation in Book V | 264
14. Conclusion | 268
  1. Imprecations Do Not Require Perfect Righteousness (Real or Imagined) | 269
  2. Imprecations Are Not a Symptom of Self-Righteousness | 269
  3. Victimhood Is Not Righteousness | 270
  4. The Enemies Are Redeemable: Even Enemy Kings and Nations Are Invited to Repent and Be Blessed | 271

*Contents*

xiii

5. The Psalms Would Rather Bless the  
Enemy Than Be Avenged | 272

6. A Missing Theology of the Cross? | 273

7. Contemporary Use of Imprecations | 274

*Bibliography* | 275

*Author Index* | 297

*Scripture Index* | 301

## Introduction

CERTAIN PRAYERS ABOUT ENEMIES in the Psalms have always jarred Christian readers: they appear to be at significant odds with the ethics of the New Testament. The psalmists are full of self-righteousness, blithely unaware of their own sinfulness, and imagining themselves to have earned God's favor against their enemies. They are vengeful and vindictive, wanting nothing more than retribution.

In response, many will grant the cleft between the Psalms and the New Testament, and say that it is only to be expected. The events and teaching of the New Testament *ought* to have improved on the ethics of the psalms. The legalism and exceptionalism of the Old Testament does lead to delusions of self-righteousness, earned merit before God, and superiority over the enemy. They could not have known better this side of the cross of Jesus. Similarly, there was no way for someone like David, born before the age of the gospel, to know that the wicked are redeemable. If he had no notion that the enemy could repent, he had no way of asking for the end of evil than to ask for the destruction of evildoers. Not having seen the example of the Christ, but living in a world where the friend is to be loved but the enemy is to be hated, how could the authors of psalms be expected to love their enemies, or to have known to pray for God to forgive and bless the wicked who troubled them?

A different tack would treat these prayers as only ever appropriate to Jesus, since he is sinless. Their time will come at the end of the age, when there is no more opportunity to repent but judgment finally arrives.

Responses such as these make common assumptions about the Old Testament which need to be investigated. In the Psalms, especially in the most brutal psalms that deal with enemies in very honest ways, we will test these presuppositions about the Old Testament:

1. Do prayers against enemies require perfect righteousness?
2. Alternatively, do such prayers stem from a deluded self-righteousness, which is unaware of the supplicant's own need for mercy and forgiveness?
3. Is suffering a sufficient qualification for praying against enemies?
4. Do the psalms understand that the enemy is able to repent, or do they imagine that they can only ask for the destruction of the enemy?
5. Do the psalms have any notion of loving the enemy, desiring their blessing, or do they simply demand vengeance?

After a brief survey of the responses to these prayers in the Psalms, we will introduce the art of reading a psalm within its context in the Book of Psalms. We will then examine the introduction to the Book of Psalms (Pss 1 and 2) and see that it already begins to overturn some of these assumptions. For example, Ps 2 clearly indicates that the enemy can and must repent. They are redeemable. The psalmist even desires their blessing.

We will see in Ps 3 that David is introduced at the most sinful point of his career and embattled with a wicked enemy. He is presented as a type of Israel in exile, embattled by Babylon. David serves as a model for individuals and for the nation of how to respond in prayer when faced by vindictive, wicked, and murderous enemies. Already in Ps 3, we find that he is well aware of his own guilt and the opposite of self-righteous. He does not presume on God's favor but knows himself to be reliant on God's undeserved mercy to rescue him.

When given victory over his enemies, he foregoes not only vengeance but even justice, and instead desires their blessing. David is presented in the psalms in the aftermath of his disgraceful incident with Bathsheba and Uriah, where David himself understands his sin to be a total apostasy, on a par with Israel turning from Yahweh to the golden calf. As representative king, his sin is equivalent to that of the nation. The same astonishing mercy which Yahweh showed to Israel in Exod 34 is what David has experienced, and psalms which appeal to it are strategically placed in every book of the Psalter.

In Book I, we examine imprecations in Pss 7 and 18, in their context. We find that each of the assumptions above about the pre- and/or sub-Christian Old Testament are ill-founded. David's appeals to righteousness are not the same as claims of perfection and certainly not appeals to merit. In Ps 7, they are an honest confession of "not guilty" in the face of particular false accusations. In Ps 18, they are followed by Ps 19, confessing David's precarious moral standing. As for the enemy, in Ps 7, David warns and desires for them to repent, and if they will not, he is restrained in what he asks for them; he is much harsher with himself than with them. In Ps 18, we see what happens when the enemy will not repent, but the surprising twist at the end of the psalm is that other enemies, kings and nations, come to David submissively. David then promises to tell the enemy kings and nations about Yahweh's forgiveness and relationship with him through his Torah, which he does in Ps 19. Far from living before the gospel age or being ignorant of the repentance of the wicked, we find David as an evangelist to the nations.

David's example in his prayers of Book I and the way that he is introduced by the Book of Psalms is picked up in Book V, which looks back on the brutal experience of the Babylonian invasion and exile. David is enlisted as the representative of the nation, who prayed about enemies in analogous situations, such as his flight from Absalom. Absalom sinfully attacked him, as Babylon did Israel. Absalom and Babylon were God's chosen agents of righteous judgment against sinful David/Israel. A prophetic oracle declared that the sinful agents would be overthrown and that sinful David/Israel would be rescued. How should Israel think and pray about Babylon and about such cobelligerents as Edom? David's prayers will show the way to appropriate Ps 137, where Edom and Babylon are in focus after the end of exile.

We will examine every imprecation in Book V. Book V is artfully divided into three sections, and the devices that signal those divisions make Yahweh's *hesed* prominent: his "steadfast love" which he showed to Israel when Israel deserved the very opposite.

David teaches the nation that their sin makes them entirely reliant on that undeserved mercy. There is no room for self-righteousness. David shows Israel that those who have received mercy must show it to others; why should wicked nations not experience the blessings that wicked Israel enjoyed? In fact, Book V builds up a growing chorus of calls to all the nations to join Israel in celebrating the mercy that Yahweh offers promiscuously to all. Not only can the wicked nations repent and be redeemed, but

they also are encouraged to do so. Further, Israel is encouraged to enjoy thanking Yahweh for his mercy alongside their former enemies.

In answer to our five questions, we will see that the gap with the New Testament is much less than often assumed:

1. Prayers against enemies do not require perfect righteousness, but only innocence in the conflict at issue.
2. The supplicants are well aware of their own need for mercy and forgiveness.
3. In any particular conflict, suffering will not supplant innocence: we are not entitled to divine intervention when we are being justly punished for our own wickedness.
4. The supplicants understand that the enemy is able to repent, and sometimes ask for an end to their wicked deeds, as preferable to the destruction of the enemy.
5. These prayers do not simply demand vengeance, but sometimes desire to show mercy to the enemy, even with a hope that the enemy will repent, be forgiven and be blessed.

Such an attitude is not only shown by individual psalmists against their private enemies, but also modelled to the people of God as a whole when faced by their corporate enemies.

While what follows is an exposition of the Hebrew Bible, I have dared to hope that readers from other disciplines will find the topic interesting. In an effort to make the text bearable, I have limited quotations from Hebrew, provided transliterations so that it can be pronounced, and offered translations where appropriate. I have tried to limit technical Hebrew discussion to the footnotes, but those who read below the line are assumed to be Hebraists. (The same goes for the excursus on the textual variants in Ps 2.) I apologize in advance for keeping the Hebrew term *hesed* in transliteration rather than translating it (as in the title!), despite how often it appears. The pregnant ambiguity of many of its uses in the Book of Psalms leaves me no option.