

Interpretation

The Imprecatory Language of the Bible

The Revd Stephen Dray

Zion Baptist Church, New Cross, London



There can be few Bible-believing Christians who have not been troubled when they have read in the Scriptures such phrases as, "happy is he . . . who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." (Psalm 137:8). A very real and natural repugnance to such language arises in the minds of spiritual men and women. Nevertheless, it is found in the Bible, and for those believers with a high view of Scripture these sentiments raise acute problems. Many may be led to ask whether the Bible can be entirely reliable, if such thoughts are expressed within its pages. Moreover, if the Bible is in error at this point it may validly be asked to what extent it may be wrong in other claims that it makes.

The problems are partly alleviated if we bear in mind the following facts:

1. The language of curse is, universally, a language of hyperbole or exaggeration and must not, therefore, be understood in a crudely literal way. This is just as true of Biblical passages such as Job 3:9, 10 and Jeremiah 20:16, 17 as it is of the person who says today, "I wish he were dead".
2. Moreover, it would appear that when imprecatory statements are uttered in the Psalms and elsewhere they are made in the clear consciousness that God alone is the author of vengeance and always acts justly. Thus an unjust curse is immediately invalidated. Proverbs 26:2 expresses the conviction with great clarity.
3. Not only is this so, but it is clear from a careful reading of imprecatory passages that they do not constitute crude cries for personal vengeance so much as pleas for the vindication of the LORD's name and honour. This is the case in the Psalm with which we began. The context of the imprecation in verse 8 is the third verse where, it is implied, the LORD is the object of the taunters' cries. A similar example is found in Psalm 83 where the second verse is the context for the subsequent imprecation.
4. A further important observation is the fact that cries for vengeance are seen as a way back to God for the wicked, and it is fully recognised that God does forgive the penitent. Thus, in Psalm 83, verses 16 and 18 indicate that the author's motive in calling forth vengeance is that men might seek the LORD and thus exalt his name. Psalm 86 conveys a similar thought, with the statement in verse 5 acting as a backcloth to the remainder.
5. Finally, there is an explicit recognition in the whole of the Bible (so, for example, Revelation 6:10) that a prayer for the vindication of God's name is also a plea for God's vengeance to be exercised against the wicked and unrepentant. The difficulty is, therefore, not simply an Old Testament one.

Nevertheless, the language of some of the Old Testament imprecations does seem to be over lurid at times, and other reasons need to be sought to explain this fact. Several possible explanations may be offered:

1. We may be at fault. Perhaps, in contrast to the Psalmists and others, we lack that spiritual maturity and insight which makes us as affronted with evil as God is himself. Perhaps we are an

We begin a series of short studies in problems that we face in making sense of the Bible, written with preachers in mind.

Stephen Dray begins with this discussion of a long-standing difficulty.

affront to him!

2. The person cited in the Old Testament may have been at fault. In Jeremiah 15 the prophet's vain words are rebuked but recorded for our instruction. (See especially verses 10, 19). This does not deny the reliability of the Bible but it does indicate that we do need to give more thought to the reason for the inclusion of passages with such sentiments by the original author. It must, however, be acknowledged that it is more difficult to apply this explanation to the contents of a 'hymnbook' like the Psalms. In that case the following comment is probably more applicable.

3. The present writer is convinced that as AD people we cannot read any of the BC literature except in the light of the cross — the supreme act of self-sacrificial love on behalf of enemies. Consequently, though we ought to grieve, as the Old Testament saints grieved, yet our response to such grief ought to be different. Our example is that of the Lord Jesus who bade his followers "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43). This explanation is consistent with the fact that the Old Testament is related to the New not only by way of parallel but also contrast. Thus what was possible under the lesser light of the Old Covenant is sometimes proscribed in the New. This is at least a popular interpretation of much that Jesus says in the early part of the Sermon on the Mount. In the end, therefore, we can learn a great deal from the language of imprecation, but we cannot take such language onto our own lips.

The writer owes a considerable debt to the writing of F.D. Kidner for his thinking on this subject, but any faulty reasoning he recognises as his own.