

Ponderings in the Psalms

The following is a Messianic Study on

The Imprecatory Psalms

By Paul Cohen, Messianic Bible Teacher.

Brit Chadashah (Sydney)

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The *Pondering* studies were published in the Brit Chadashah Newsletter. Brit Chadashah (*New Covenant*) is a Messianic Fellowship in Sydney. Led by Paul Cohen a Jewish believer in Messiah Yeshua (Jesus). We meet together fortnightly for Bible studies from a Messianic Jewish Perspective. We are a unique fellowship made up of Jewish and Gentile people who are believers in Yeshua as the promised Messiah of Israel.

If you don't know Yeshua as your Messiah, we encourage you to search out the Scriptures for yourself. God promised in the book of Jeremiah, "*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13). And we hope you will make contact with us so that we can share more about the Messiah, His life and ministry.

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Brit Chadashah; P.O. Box 304; Caulfield South, VIC 3162, Australia
Email: bc@celebratemessiah.com.au
Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/BritChadashah.Sydney>
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Pondering the Imprecatory Psalms

Amongst the psalms are different types of genres, for example the songs of Zion are praise songs and the Hallel are also called Passover songs, and most of the Lament Psalms have verses that are prayers and praise to our God.

I won't list every type of genre in the Psalms, but here are some:

1. **Wisdom** Psalms (Psalm 1-2, 8, 15, 19 and 119)
2. Songs of **Thanksgiving** (Psalm 29, 67, 95, 117-118 and 138)
3. Individual and communal **Lament** Psalms. (Psalm 44, 60, 74, 80 and 85)
4. The **songs of Zion** (Psalm 46-48, 84, 87, 137 146-147 and 149)
5. The **Hallel** - Hallelujah Psalms (Psalm 113-118)
6. Songs of **Ascent** or Pilgrimage Psalms (Psalm 120-134)

The genres often overlap and only a very few of the Psalms have only one type of genre (for example Psalm 117). Most of the psalms have two or more genres blended, for example Psalm 35 contains a cry for deliverance, a vow of thanksgiving and it also contains some harsh language.

There is one more genre of Psalm, one which gives great consternation to some believers:

7. **Imprecatory Psalms** (Psalms 69 & 109 are the two main imprecatory psalms, with other psalms containing imprecatory stanzas or verses like Psalm 5, 6, 11, 12, 35, 37, 40, 52, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 79, 83, 94, 137, 139, 140 and 143).

If you are like me and did not grow up with Shakespearian English you might ask yourself 'what is an Imprecatory Psalm?' The Holman Bible Dictionary defines imprecatory as: "*Act of invoking a curse. In the Imprecatory Psalms the author calls for God to bring misfortune and disaster upon the enemies.*"

When we think of the Psalms we quickly think of praise but there are also imprecatory verses:

- ⁴ Let those be ashamed and dishonored who seek my life; Let those be turned back and humiliated who devise evil against me. ⁵ Let them be like chaff before the wind, With the Angel of the Lord driving *them* on. ⁶ Let their way be dark and slippery, With the Angel of the Lord pursuing them. ⁷ For without cause they hid their net for me; Without cause they dug a pit for my soul. ⁸ Let destruction come upon him unawares, And let the net which he hid catch himself; Into that very destruction let him fall." Psalm 35:4-8
- "Because of wickedness, cast them forth, in anger put down the peoples, O God!" Psalm 56:7
- "Pour out Your wrath upon the nations which do not know You, And upon the kingdoms which do not call upon Your Name." Psalm 79:6

Some Messianic believers, and even denominations in the Body of Messiah, refuse to read these psalms, because they claim that they are not in the Spirit of the Brit Chadashah (New Covenant). They assert that it is offensive, and that the verses were not inspired by God, but were just the expressions of the angry men who wrote them.

Other believers disagree and say ‘No, they are part of scripture.’ However the words of Yeshua in the Brit Chadashah overwrite these type of prayers; and like Yeshua we should pray for our enemies “..I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” Matthew 5:44. The apostle Paul repeats this command “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14).

As I ponder the Psalms, including the imprecatory Psalms, I find myself in disagreement with both these groups, because “**All Scripture is inspired by God** and profitable for *teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness*” (2 Timothy 3:16). *All Scripture* means that I am not able to ignore some verses that I find objectionable. If God is the all-wise God, and He is, then He knew what would be in His Word, so we must be careful here not to stand in judgement over His Word.

If we only had Yeshua’s words on the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5:21-48; Luke 6:27-30,32-36), to bless our enemies and pray for them, then it would be an open and shut case. However, there are other verses from Yeshua Himself that need to be examined.

Firstly, note that Yeshua quoted from the imprecatory psalms in John 2:17, where he quotes from Psalm 69:9 and in John 15:25 he refers to either Psalm 35:19 or Psalm 69:4.

Secondly, Yeshua used imprecatory language when he told his disciples to wipe the dust off their feet, and to be aware that “*it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for*” such and such a town. Yeshua lists those towns where He had ministered for years and the people had refused to believe (Luke 10:10-16). The same imprecatory words are used in Matthew 10:14-15, and note it is for the individual, household and towns. There are also the seven woes in which Yeshua used imprecatory language (Matthew 23:13-29). Let me highlight one verse, Matthew 23:33: “*You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?*” Yeshua is not always ‘*meek and mild,*’ He is also the judge, who is coming to open the seven seals of the tribulation to come (Revelation 6). Note the imprecatory request from the martyrs for Yeshua to judge and avenge their blood (6:10).¹

The apostle Paul used imprecatory language in some of his epistles (Galatians 1:8; 1 Corinthians 16:21-22; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10). The apostle Peter quoted from the imprecatory Psalms when condemning Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:20 quotes from Psalms 69:25-28 & 109:8-15), and both Paul (2 Timothy 4:14) and Peter (Acts 1:20) declared a curse on specific people.

Should we or can we pray an imprecatory prayer?

Note that these imprecatory prayers were not emotional outbursts; they were all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Some of the prayers are against the enemies Israel² and of God, but what scares me is that same imprecatory language is used against Israel, God’s very own people. In Deuteronomy 27 and 28 Moses and the Levitical priest pronounce curses for disobedience upon Israel. The apostle Paul tells us to sing Psalms, and that would include

¹ Incidentally, when we pray the disciples’ prayer “Your kingdom come,” it includes the judgement that is coming, so we are in a sense praying a prayer that includes both the blessing for the righteous and the imprecatory for the unrighteous.

² Imprecatory language is used against the enemies of Israel, such as Edom in Obadiah; the seven nations that dwelled in Canaan (Hittites, Amorites, Philistines etc) in Exodus 23:20-33, and against the Babylonians in Psalm 137. All of them stood against the Jewish people and God’s plan.

imprecatory Psalms (Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16). These psalms then include warnings for us the Body of Messiah to walk in faithfulness with God.

It should never be for personal vengeance, as vengeance belongs to the LORD (Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19). David used imprecatory language, yet we know David was not a bitter, vengeful man. But he did pray *vindicate me O LORD* (Psalm 26:1, 35:24) and then left it with the LORD to deal with the people and the situation.

Considering the life of David, he had plenty of enemies, even amongst his own people. Consider these trouble makers: in his early twenties there was his father-in-law, king Saul (2 Samuel 3:1). Some years later there was Shimei, a man of the family, of the house of Saul (2 Samuel 16); decades later there was David's own son, Absalom (2 Samuel 14-19 & Psalm 3:1). Yet David, throughout all this time, did not pray for personal vengeance. His prayer and actions were that God would act justly in dealing with transgressors.

In many of the imprecatory psalms the curses are called upon the enemies of God (Psalm 5:10; 139:20-21). The apostle Paul clarifies who the real enemy is; not the person but the spirit behind him, for "*we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but...against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 6:12). As such we ought to obey Messiah's command to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44), that God will bless them and turn their hearts to Him (2 Peter 3:9), but in some extreme circumstances, a time may come when after years of harassment, you may sense a godly desire to pray an imprecatory prayer. When that feeling comes, first make sure that your heart is pure. David confessed his sins (Psalm 51), and even went beyond that: "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way*" (Psalm 139:23-24).

Friends, we need to pray for, rather than against, our enemies. Secondly, we need to make sure that our hearts are pure, and that it is not revenge that we seek. Thirdly, pray in the Spirit against spiritual forces of darkness, before we finally ask the LORD to vindicate. After that it is best to leave it with Him to deal with the situation as He sees fit, for "...will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?"⁸ "I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly...." (Luke 18:7-8). Fifth if after all that, the problem is still there and if you feel from the Spirit to pray in this way, well that maybe part of our ministry in the world too.

Selah
Shalom in Messiah Yeshua
Paul & Sue