

PSALM 109: DAVID'S POEM OF VENGEANCE

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The byline of Ps 109 indicates that David is the author of this Psalm. As H. C. Leupold states, "In view of the reliability of the headings generally, we feel prompted to accept this claim of Davidic authorship as being correct."¹ It should be noted also that Pss 108 and 110 both carry the superscription "Psalm of David," generally accepted as being correct. This fact adds additional weight to the acceptance of David as the author of Ps 109.

Why do I thus emphasize the Davidic authorship of this Psalm? My reason is that as an Imprecatory Psalm, Ps 109 seems out of harmony with so many of the other psalms of David. In fact, Ps 109 is the most emphatic of the Imprecatory Psalms in calling down curses on an enemy, and as such has caused commentators to think up various explanations as to its meaning and the reason for its inclusion in the Psalter.

C. A. Briggs, e.g., maintains that this Psalm is a composite, the imprecatory section having been joined to a prayer for deliverance.² He sees this joining to be the work of a much later editor apparently preparing the psalms for congregational use, the imprecations being from a Maccabean psalm. E. A. Leslie, as well as others, supplies a different kind of explanation, namely, that "verses 6-19 . . . are not part of the psalmist's own prayer, but a recitation by him of the charges which have been preferred against him."³ He finds support in the fact that the imprecations are hurled against one man, whereas the prayer section refers to enemies in the plural; and he also argues that the imprecations do not fit in with David's character.

¹H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Columbus, Ohio, 1959), p. 763.

²Charles Augustus Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (New York, 1907), pp. 364-366.

³Elmer A. Leslie, *The Psalms* (New York, 1949), p. 388.

By far the greater number of commentators, however, appear to accept the Psalm as it stands. With reference to the view just mentioned, that the Psalmist is quoting his adversaries, *IB* indicates that "a more probable interpretation is that in verses 6-19 the psalmist himself is speaking, and that for the sake of vividness he refers to his enemies collectively as one person. . . ." ⁴ This concept is supported by other commentators. ⁵

If we then accept this Psalm without assuming that it is the work of an editor or that David is quoting his enemies, how do we explain David's use of such harsh and revengeful imprecations? F. Delitzsch proposes that "they are explained by the depth of David's consciousness that he is the anointed of Jahve. . . . It is not the spirit of Zion but of Sinai which here speaks out of the mouth of David" ⁶ Indeed, repeatedly in the OT we find the spirit of vengeance shown towards God's enemies, the enemies of God's people, and even against God's people themselves when they continued in their rejection of God. We should not think it strange, then, that David should utter words such as these, whether against a personal or national enemy. In either case, such an enemy must ultimately be an enemy of God.

With this background, we turn now to a literary study of this Psalm, which may carry implications as to the Psalm's basic unity as well as its message.

1. *Overall Structure of the Psalm*

Ps 109 falls naturally into three main divisions, having an A-B-A' pattern: A. There is a plea for help because of the wrong done the Psalmist by his enemies (vss. 1-5). B. Next follow imprecations against his chief enemy in the form of a prayer to God (vss. 6-20). A'. Finally, there is a further plea for help which concludes with praise to God for his salvation (vss. 21-31).

The Psalm can further be thought of as having six stanzas, each containing five verses, except the last stanza which has six verses: Stanza 1 is the Psalmist's plea to God for help; stanza 2 begins the imprecations against the Psalmist's enemy, with emphasis on his family; stanza 3 continues the imprecations with emphasis on his

⁴*IB*, 4: 582.

⁵E.g., Leupold, pp. 763-764, and *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C., 1954), 3: 878.

⁶Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1959), 3: 177.

enemy's possessions, ancestors, and posterity; stanza 4 concludes the imprecations with emphasis on his enemy's character; stanza 5 is a reiteration of the Psalmist's need; and stanza 6 is another plea for help, ending with praise for the deliverance the Psalmist knows is coming.

2. *Literary Features as a Lyric Psalm*

Ps 109 must stand high among the lyric psalms for its literary features. Several will be noted here.

Parallelism

As would be expected in Hebrew poetry, the Psalmist has continually used thought-parallelism. The outstanding examples are synonymous parallelism, as in vss. 2, 5, 9, 13, 27:⁷

For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me,
Speaking against me with lying tongues.

So they reward me evil for good,
And hatred for my love.

May his children be fatherless,
And his wife a widow!

May his posterity be cut off;
May his name be blotted out in the second generation!

Let them know that this is thy hand;
Thou, O Lord, hast done it!

In the last distich, there is also, in vs. 31, an example of synthetic parallelism of reason:

For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
To save him from those who condemn him to death.

It is interesting to note that of the thirty-one verses in this Psalm (as given in our English Bible), twenty-eight are distichs. The other three are tristichs.

Figures of Speech

Another important lyric aspect in Ps 109 is the use of figures of speech, as in vs. 18:

He clothed himself with cursing as his coat,
May it soak into his body like water,
Like oil into his bones!

⁷All quotations herein from the Psalms are from the RSV, used by permission of the Division of Education and Ministry of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Here the first line employs a metaphor to state that the enemy cursed so much that it was as if curses were continually around him as a coat is around a man. Then the Psalmist uses similes, "like water" and "like oil," to imply that the curses instead of being around his enemy should enter wholly into him and become part of him, thus acting on his life rather than on those originally cursed. This thought is further emphasized by the use of two more similes in vs. 19.

Another metaphor and simile combination is found in vs. 29:

May my accusers be clothed with dishonor;
 May they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle!

The first line gives the metaphor "clothed with dishonor" in requesting that everything about the enemy should only bring dishonor to him. The Psalmist then continues the synonymous parallel by employing a simile saying that his enemy's shame should cover him just as a mantle covers the body.

Vs. 23 furnishes an interesting example of a sequential use of similes:

I am gone, like a shadow at evening;
 I am shaken off like a locust.

The Emotional Element

Leland Ryken states that "the emotional element in a lyric poem is often considered its chief identifying trait — its differentia."⁸ Ps 109 is built around emotion. Section 1 (vss. 1-5) portrays a plea to God for help, uttered because of the depths of despair and helplessness in which the Psalmist found himself. His enemies spoke lies against him, attacked him without cause, and even returned hatred for love. What more could the Psalmist do than appeal to God? In section 2 (vss. 6-20), the Psalmist speaks from a heart filled with anger as he hurls imprecations against his chief adversary. He asks that his enemy's life be short, his goods be seized, his posterity be cut off, his sins be ever before the Lord and that all curses should become part of him. Although it is obvious that these curses arise from a heart full of anger seeking vengeance, it is not clear whether these curses are David's wishes against a personal enemy or whether they are uttered in behalf of the Lord God whose representative the

⁸Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1974), p. 123.

Psalmist is. Section 3 (vss. 21-31) is built on two emotions. First there is a repetition of the despair mentioned in section 1, and then the mood changes to gratitude and praise. The Psalmist's physical condition or position has not changed, but with the hand of faith he has grasped God's promises as having already been fulfilled, and he gives thanks for them.

Use of Concrete Terms

One other important literary aspect of this work is the Psalmist's use of concrete terms rather than abstractions. This is particularly true in section 2, where it would have been possible to utter abstract imprecations against his enemy. However, this section is brought to life by the use of concrete details, illustrated by the following, in vss. 9, 11, 13:

May his children be fatherless, And his wife a widow!
 May the creditor seize all that he has; . . .
 May his posterity be cut off; . . .

Each time, the concrete detail furnishes an added facet to the picture of ultimate destruction and oblivion that the Psalmist wishes on his adversary.

Conclusion

What meaning, then, can we get from this Psalm? The obvious or primary meaning is David's plea for divine help and his curses on his chief adversary. In addition, we could see this as a prophetic Psalm (cf. Peter's quoting of vs. 8 and applying it as a fulfilled prophecy in the experience of Judas Iscariot [Acts 1:20]), and we might, indeed, view the imprecations of this Psalm as prophetic utterances against all bad men.

Moreover, as R. G. Moulton reminds us, "We in modern times are quite accustomed to feel enthusiasm for the abstract thing we call 'a cause'; with the ancient world it was necessary for the cause to be embodied in a concrete party. . . . When the psalmist's hatred of evil men has once been translated into the form of hatred against evil, it will be felt that the passages cannot be too strongly worded."⁹ When viewed in the light of this concept, the overall structure and the lyric features we have noted above speak to the unified theme of

⁹Richard G. Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible* (Boston, 1895), p. 183.

Ps 109, but also raise another pertinent question: Can we not in this Psalm see more than merely a desire for a particular adversary to be brought low? Can we not indeed see David's desire for sin or wickedness itself to be extirpated? If so, moreover, can we not ourselves much more readily identify with David as Psalmist?