

Title: Calvin's Hermeneutics of the Imprecations of the Psalter

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation rehearses the issue of Calvin's Old Testament exegesis in the light of his hermeneutical approach to the imprecatory passages of the Psalter. The imprecatory passages of the Psalms offer an ideal place to examine the thesis that Calvin's exegetical principles shared elements of the late medieval hermeneutics, but also moved him away from late medieval exegesis toward a more direct application of the literal meaning of the text to his contemporary situation.

Our analysis of Calvin's exegesis of the imprecatory passages of the Psalter reveals that the Reformer of Geneva followed a three-pronged approach: With traditional and sixteenth-century commentators, Calvin read the imprecations of the Psalter historically. Calvin acknowledges that on the historical-literal level, the imprecations of the Psalter are prayers offered to the God of the covenant by David, the chosen King, and by Israel, the elected people of God. These prayers, although harsh and gruesome, are directed against historical enemies. In the individual Psalms, the imprecations are voiced against Saul and his followers, and Absalom and his conjuration. In the communal Psalms, the imprecations are directed against the nations opposed to the existence of Israel, as the elected people of God.

On the tropological level, Calvin continues the traditional exegesis' insistence on the need for believers to refrain from self-vindication. Following traditional and sixteenth-century biblical commentators, Calvin argues that the imprecations of the Psalter are not the expression of David's vindictiveness. But they are David's expression of faith in divine justice as expressed through his providence. Calvin encourages believers to renounce self-vengeance and entrust their cause to God's providence.

On the spiritual level, Calvin distances himself from the traditional prophetic Christological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter. Calvin disagrees with the traditional understanding of the imprecations of the Psalter as prophecies forecasting the future and eschatological demise of the enemies of David and of Christ. Instead, using the biblical doctrine of divine providence as a hermeneutical key, Calvin follows a theological reading that emphasizes the continuity between the manifestation of God's providence and judgment against David's historical enemies and his providence and judgment against the enemies of believers in sixteenth-century Geneva. Calvin's use of David as a paradigm of faith for his sixteenth-century readers allows him to bypass the traditional eschatological-Christological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter. Thus, Calvin's hermeneutics uses the traditional historical and tropological reading as a "springboard" for his theological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter. The doctrine of divine providence, developed in the *Institutes*, functions as the hermeneutical key for Calvin's understanding of the imprecations of the Psalter.