Imprecatory values in the Psalms?

Delia AMBROSIE, Andreea Cristiana LUCA, Irina-Ştefania VAIDA

Diese Studie setzt sich mit der Beschreibung der Beschaffenheit von Verwünschungen aus den Psalmen und ihrer Beziehung zum semantischen und theologischen Kontext auseinander. Sie verfolgt dabei das Ziel, die Berechtigung ihrer Abhängigkeit von den strukturellen und semantischen Formeln der Flüche zu erforschen. Die Form dieser Strukturen ist charakteristisch für Verwünschungen und zeigt sich durch die Präsenz von Verbalkernen, die ihre nominalen Ausdrücke anordnen, wobei sie einen musikalischen Akzent entwickeln. Die Bedeutung dieser Flüche ist allerdings völlig anders als beim einfachen Lesen ohne Kontext. Das didaktische Ziel der Verwünschungsstrukturen, ihrem prophetischen Wert, aber auch ihr permanentes Auftreten als Kontrapunkt des Segens, sind überzeugende Argumente für ihre Unterscheidung von bestimmenden Bedeutungen des Fluchs

Stichwörter: Linguistik und Stilistik, Die Psalmen, Verwünchungen

In the biblical dictionaries, imprecation is tightly linked to the meaning of curse. A definition which gives the actual meaning of imprecation was formulated by Gh. Dragomirescu: "Imprecaţie (execraţie) sau blestem (din lat. *imprecatio* – cu sensul de «rugăciune împotriva cuiva»), figură de stil în care se enunţă, la modul imperativ, dorinţa pedepsirii unei persoane, singulare sau colective, vinovată fie faţă de cel ce formulează rugăciunea, fie faţă de societate ori patrie. Este o figură cu evoluţie istorică ajunsă astăzi, ca şi alte figuri, la stadiul desuetudinii"[1]. The term in the Greek bibles is related to the root *ara*, with the meaning of prayer, imprecation or, especially, of calling a superior force against what is cursed[2].

The concept of revenge itself, essential for the semantic field of imprecation, is different in the biblical language from the one we have today, because it implied, for the civilization of the Old Testament, a reestablishment of justice and a victory over evil[3], a moral duty when justice was violated. Revenge which came from hatred was forbidden, but the moral kind of revenge became a responsibility which was at first individual, then social and, eventually, a divine attribution. The Hebrew etymon for punishing refers to the compensation and reestablishment of equilibrium, having a specific legal application, and also to the meaning of blaming or convicting a deed[4].

[1] N. Gh. Dragomirescu, *Mică enciclopedie a figurilor de stil,* Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1975, p. 79.

[2] Xavier-Léon Dufour, *Vocabular de teologie biblică*, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Romano-Catolice de Bucureşti, 2001, p. 71.

[3] Xavier-Léon Dufour, *Vocabular de teologie biblică*..., p. 626.

[4] J. D. Douglas, *Dicţionar biblic*, Editura „Cartea creştină", Oradea, 1995, p. 331.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

Therefore, the concepts we attempt to explain have undergone signficant semantic modifications according to us, influencing, of course, the apprehension of the biblical hypertext. We have focused especially upon the *Psalter* in its current translation[5], where numerous verses display structures of an imprecative form; although numerous, they are justified if we relate them to these alterations of meaning and to the prophetic content, recognised by the Jewish and the Christian civilisations.

Psalm 68[6], included in the category of the major imprecatory Psalms, contains, from the Christian theological perspective, King David's prophecies related to the way Christ was acknowledged by the Jewish people and to the consequences of the crucifixion suffered by them.

The verses considered imprecatory are preceded by God's invocation in the name of the Incarnate Son[7], which is particularized at the stylistic level by phrases dominated by verbs (1st pers. – "am aşteptat", "nu [...] am aflat"; 2nd pers.- "mântuieşte", "auzi", "ia aminte", "să nu întorci", "cunoşti" and 3rd pers.- "necăjesc", "ar milui", "ar mângâia", "nu era", "au dat", "au adăpat") and also by verbs converted to nouns and adejctives ("ocara", "înfruntarea", "îndurări", "zdrobit"). One can observe a juxtaposition of two antonymic semantic fields which obviously contrasts the redemption asked for in the prayer with the disgrace received from people. The accentuation of the verbs at the word order and suprasegmental level is also made through a number of verbs with positive form that are subsequently negated: "am aşteptat pe cel ce m-ar milui, şi nu era, şi pe cei ce m-ar mângâia, şi nu i-am aflat" (Ps. 68:24). The descending intonation with positive focus on the negative adverb intensifies the outlining of the downcast spirit[8]. Also, there is a gradation of the intensity of suffering, conveyed by the ascending order of such semantemes as: *noroi-adânc-vâltoare, ocară-ruşine-înfruntare, zdrobire-fiere-oţet*.

The apogee of suffering triggers the imprecatory formulas through which one begs for revenge, in its sense mentioned before, as "a reward for what they do" (Isaiah 3:10). These verses having an imprecatory form, they can be distinguished by a particular tonality. The nominal phrases are now predominant, being formed around a verbal nucleus in the imperative mood or, especially, in the subjunctive mood, but with imperative nuance[9]. This imprecatory meaning is also marked by

[5] *BIBLIA sau Sfânta Scriptură*, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucureşti, 2008.

[6] Psalm 69 in the English Bible, which numbers the Psalms differently from the Romanian Bible.

[7] Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul, Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*, Editura Egumeniţa, Galaţi, s.a., p. 790-792.

[8] „În limba română negaţia este un tip de adverbial în general accentuat", apud GALR, II, p. 908.

[9] H. Soltman writes in his clasification of the subjunctive about a *Konjunktiv des Wünsches*, which has an imperative value*: Syntax der Modi im moderne Französisch*, M. Niemeyer Verlag, Halle, 1914, p. 10.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

the fundamental exclamatory intonation[10], emphasizing the semantic nucleus of communication at the suprasegmental level.

The anastrophes ("şterşi să fie", "facă-se"), as well as the placement of the predicates in initial and ending positions, determine the focus on these words through different modulations of intonation[11] and develops the musical accent specific to imprecation. This type of accent is due to the fact that "the accented syllable of the imperative verb is pronounced with a melodic and dynamic pitch, being followed by an abrupt descent in voice pitch for the following syllable (or syllables)"[12], therefore the presence of several verbs with imperative nuance[13] determine a recursion of intonation modulations. In cases where the verb is preceded by a negative adverb ("să nu vadă", "să nu fie", "să nu intre", "să nu se scrie"), the negation is the one that represents the melodic peak[14]. The melodic qualities associated with intonation and intensity are characteristic of the whole verbal group and this fact can be distinguished especially in the case of enumerations: "Facă-se masa lor înaintea lor cursă, răsplătire şi sminteală" (Ps. 68:26). We may also add that the enumeration is part of a macrosegment in which all the three nouns have prominent syllables and form therefore three distinct intonations, characterised by their specific descending tone[15], suggesting once more the continuous moral and decline.

The role of the subjunctive mood is essential for the imprecatory structure, as the imperative mood has in the Romanian language no 3rd or 6th person and is at the structural level much closer to the primordial utterance[16]. Nowadays though, the meaning of the subjunctive mood is opposed to "the nuance of invariance of the indicative" or to "the nuance of the conditional mood which expresses the probable"[17], situating the verbal action under the sign of uncertainty[18]. H. Soltman states that the subjunctive mood reflects a state of the soul (*Seelenspiegelung*), while Georges and Robert Le Bidois describe it as "the mood of psychical energy, of the verbal dynamism"[19]. This energy more powerfully influenced the ancient world, a world in which it was believed that curses inevitably came true.

---

[10] LuminiţaHoarţă Cărăuşu, *Dinamica morfosintaxei şi pragmaticii limbii române actuale*, Editura Cermi, Iaşi, 2008, p. 73-74.

[11] *GALR*, II, p. 893 şi GA, p. 476.

[12] *GALR,* II, p. 920 (our translation).

[13] Apud *GALR,* II, p. 921, this descent melodic pattern specific to the imperative mode is also realized when the subjunctive form has an imperative nuance.

[14] Apud *GALR*, II, p. 942.

[15] Emanuel Vasiliu, *Fonologia limbii române*, Editura Ştiinţifică, Bucureşti, 1965, p. 70-72.

[16] The verbal form „facă-se" that appears twice in the imprecative structure reminds us of the well-known primordial utterance, in which the verb was equivalent to ενέργεια.

[17] Constantin Frâncu, *Conjunctivul românesc şi raporturile lui cu alte moduri*, Casa Editorială Demiurg Plus, 2010, p. 232 (our translation).

[18] Dumitru Irimia, *Gramatica limbii române*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2008, p. 276.

[19] R. Le Bidois, G. Le Bidois, *Syntaxe du français moderne, ses fondements historiques et psychologiques*, vol. I, Editions Auguste Picard, Paris, 1935, p. 501, in Constantin Frâncu,

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

To increase the imprecatory effect, some words are resumed in a semantic completion: "Varsă peste ei urgia Ta şi mânia urgiei Tale să-i cuprindă pe ei" (Ps. 68:28). The creation of the musical effect is observable also through the dominance of consonants and closed or medium vowels, specific to the whole incantational structure, enhancing the impression of human limitation and triviality.

One can also notice a gradation in the invocation of divine punishment through the ordering of the semantemes which denote it*: snare, trap, madness, darken, tremble, indignation, anger, desolation*, culminating with the *blotting out of the book of the living*. This punishment is motivated within the imprecatory structure itself and gains, through the use of pronouns, an intentional ambiguity, specific to prophesying: "For they persecute him whom Thou hast smitten, and him whom Thou hast wounded, they afflict still more" (Ps. 68:26). Thus the desire for 'revenge' becomes impersonal, indentifying itself with the valuing of justice - "Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous". The meaning of the whole imprecatory phrase is concentrated in this verse, which is polarized by two verbs with passive and negative signification.

The phonologic symbolism of verse 32 emphasizes in the actual Romanian version the particular meaning which sounds imply within the utterance of an imprecatory form. The musicality transmitted by the alliteration ("Şterşi să fie [...] şi [...] să nu se scrie"), accentuated by the internal rhyme, contributes to the highlighting of the two verbs. Also, the initial spirants and the accentuated closed vowels increase the expressive valence of the text and are associated with the negative feelings which the musicality of the incantations usually transmits. Starting with a verb that has a nefarious connotation, the verse ends circularly with the negative verbal antonym: therefore, the universe which it evokes is one permanently closed, idea which is sustained by the fact that each initial letter is a consonant. This annihilation from the world implied by the imprecatory structure functions as a supreme threat for the Hebrews and is interpreted in the Christian vision as a forecast of Christ's crucifixion, but also of the ulterior persecution of the Jews.

In Dosoftei's versified version, the imprecations have an obvious aesthetic form. The care to closely obey the content of the psalms, having a theological motivation, does not cause the neglecting of the prosodic aspects[20], therefore some ideas can be reduplicated in order to improve the rhyme: "Şi la siate oţătu m-adăpară/ Să le fie masa de ocară./ Să să pue nainte-le cursă,/ Ce-mi diaderă oţăt pentru mursă". The recurrence of the same ideas can be shown through their

---

Conjunctivul românesc şi raporturile lui cu alte moduri, Casa Editorială Demiurg Plus, 2010, p. 23 (our translation).

[20] N. A. Ursu believes, unlike Ion Bianu, that these versified Psalms have a great artistic value: „aproape toate versurile lui Dosoftei au o admirabilă cursivitate, care este dată tocmai de folosirea meşteşugită, în cadrul diferitelor structuri ritmice pe care le-a întrebuinţat, a accentului real al cuvintelor", describing the book as „primul monument al poeziei româneşti culte": Dosoftei, *Versuri alese*, Editura Virginia, Iaşi, 1994, pref. de N. A. Ursu, p. 19.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

respective synonyms ("Şi să-i viarse Domnulu cu mânie/Să-i ağungă undă cu urgie"); however, as we can observe, it is possible for a certain semantic content to be present twice even in the canonical text (as in the cases of the following verses: "Ce să le **radă** numele din carte/ Cu direpţii să **nu-i scrii** la viaţă"). This fact reminds us of the inclusion of the imprecation between "the figures of reflection", which "allow the writer to emphasize a topic, either by rephrasing it, either by expressing another idea in an exclamatory manner, meant to stress the topic".[21]

Placing the verbs of imperative value in a thematic position[22] is a particularity which can be found in Dosoftei's work; these verbs are sometimes coordinated by the copulative conjunction *şi* or implied by an ellipsis. This "typically oral syntactic phenomenon" [23] is a process of focusing the readers' attention towards the semantic nuclei. At the content level of the imprecations, it is known that Dosoftei "increases their virulence [...] in the spirit of popular mindsets"[24]. At the tonality level, the particularity which the poet-translator develops is shown by the increased attention towards the rhythm.

Returning to the 21st century Bible, we notice that the verses that follow the imprecatory apogee are characterized by a sudden decrease of tonality. If in the imprecatory sequence the number of verbs with an imperative value was almost double the number of verses[25], ulteriorly we have a similar percent for the verbs at indicative mode[26]; therefore, the tonality has, at the end of the psalm, a less important role[27].

The return to the personal confessional style ("poor and in pain I am"[28]) leads to the invocation of the divine instance, this time not for the instauration of justice through punishment, but for blessing and salvation. Blessing is not unidirectional, as we would expect after an imprecatory phrase, hence it is not invocated by the voice of the psalmist for his own benefit, but turns to God as a sign of thanksgiving (Ps. 68: 34-35) and offers glad tidings to the poor: "Let the poor see it and be glad"(Ps. 68.33).

This transition to a new state of prayer can also be explained through a causal bond between the two phrases: "Let them be blotted out of the book of the living [because I am] poor and in pain [...], [that is why] the deliverance of Your face

[21] N. Gh. Dragomirescu, *Mică*, *enciclopedie*... p. 80.
[22] *GALR*, II, p. 870.
[23] *GALR*, II, p. 807 (our translation).
[24] Dan Buciumeanu, Dosoftei poetul. *O hermeneutică a Psaltirii în versuri*, Editura Viitorul Românesc, Bucureşti, 2000, p. 286 (our translation).
[25] The 7 verses (Ps. 68: 26-32) contain in the Romanian version 3 verbs in the imperative mood, 9 in the subjunctive mood but with imperative nuance and only 3 verbs in the indicative mood.
[26] In the 8 Romanian verses (Ps. 68: 33-40),the indicative mood can be counted 14 times, the subjunctive 4 times and the imperative only once.
[27] Apud *GA*, p. 469.
[28] In the version of *King James' Bible*, a similar confessive expression characterized by inversion can be found in Psalm 108: "poor and needy I am" (Ps. 108:22).

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

[may] support me". The two adjectives assigned to the transmitter are intoned[29], emphasizing through their order and value in the phrase not only an attribute or a state of mind, but a consequence of this state, whose cause comes from without. In syntactic terms, the grammatical subject has, to use Fillmore's terminology[30], the role of *experiencer*: therefore, it implicitly refers to both the reaction provoked and to what determines the subject to suffer the action. This hostile prayer is preceded and also followed by the reasons which determined it: therefore, it requires justice and accentuates the image of imprecation as an effect and as a judgement, but primarily as a necessary warning. Xavier-Léon Dufour simplifies the definition of imprecation through the generalized formula: "If you do this, that will happen to you"[31] and in light of this it has been proved again that the utterances that seem impossible to assimilate for the Christian model have an instructive finality and not a destructive one. Besides, it is said that "the curse is never totally placed"[32], offering salvation as an alternative: "seek God and your soul shall live" (Ps. 68:36).

We notice that invocating the divine help for personal salvation through the destruction of evil ("sărac şi îndurerat sunt eu", "mântuirea Ta [...] să mă sprijinească") is also made for the benefit of those who are also suffering ("Să râdă săracii şi să se veselească"). The promise of life (Ps. 68:36) appears in contrast with the threat of being erased from the book of the living, being motivated in the interpretation of the Church Fathers by the fact that those bound by in chains are the ones that ask for salvation, being unable to be subjugated by a more overwhelming slavery[33].

The psalm ends with a new invitation to worship, which is this time universal: "Să-L laude pe El cerurile şi pământul, marea şi toate câte se târăsc în ea" (Ps. 68.38). The blessing is also generalized, keeping, however, the same causative meaning: "Că Dumnezeu va mântui Sionul [...] şi seminţia credincioşilor Lui îl va stăpâni pe el şi cei ce iubesc numele Lui vor locui în el" (Ps. 68:39-40).

The antinomy between the blessing of the poor and the curse upon the ones who persecuted structures the Psalm 108 as well, also illustrating the faith of the ancient world in the imminent fulfilment of the curses as a consequence of the unjust exploitation. Prophets are therefore forced to preach "violence and destruction" (Jeremiah 20:8), their curses including, once again, two bound terms: cause and effect ("Şi a prigonit pe cel sărman [...] şi s-a îmbrăcat cu blestemul ca şi cu o haină [...]. Să-i fie lui ca o haină cu care se îmbracă şi ca un brâu cu care pururea se încinge", Ps. 108:15-18).

---

[29] Apud *GALR*, II, p. 823.

[30] Charles J. Fillmore, *The case for case*, in *Universals in Linguistic Theory,* Edited by Emmon Bach and Robert T. Harms, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.

[31] Xavier-Léon Dufour, *Vocabular de teologie biblică*… p. 71 (our translation).

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 72 (our translation).

[33] St. Cyril of Alexandria interprets the chains as the sins of the pagans, through the boundings of the demons, apud *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*, Editura Egumeniţa, Galaţi, s.a., p. 779.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

The theologians insist upon the fact that imprecatory structures in the psalms are "not really curses and blessings, although they were written as curses and blessings, as the divine Chrysostom proves in detail in the foreword to this psalm"[34]. The fact that the psalm is "written as a curse" is essential to prove that we are not talking about simple imprecations; the linguistic arguments refer, thus, more to the *form and substance of expression*. However, to interpret the content we resort to patristic literature, because what seem to be imprecations marked by a profound personal and contextual note are, actually, prophecies about Christ's passions and the punishments which were to be upon Judas and upon the Jewish people itself" [35]: "nimeni, auzind pe Domnul legiuind a binecuvânta pe cei ce ne prigonesc, să nu socotească proorocia împotrivnică Puitorului de lege. Că nici aici proorocescul cuvânt nu vorbeşte blestemând, ci mai-nainte vestind pedepsele ce aveau să se întâmple Iudeilor şi Iudei"[36].

The psalm begins with an *invocatio Dei*, asking for the prayer to be listened ("do not pass over my praise in silence"). If silence however is unbearable from the Word's part, the absence of silence from the people means hatred and fighting: "For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful are opened against me" (Ps. 109:2). What seems to be told in King David's name is Christ's prayer as Human[37] – the praise to which God will not be silent (Ps. 108:1), which is actually the suffering culminating with the crucifixion (John 12.23). The "mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful" refer, by use of metonymy, to Judas[38], who has committed the sin of selling Christ and the cunningness of telling him afterwards "Hail, Rabbi!"(Matthew 26:49). Moreover, the verbs from the following verses appear in the plural form ("they have spoken against me", "they [...]fought against me", "they have rewarded me evil"), reminding of the crowd that came armed in the Garden of Gethsemane, because the evil seems to merge into a single contradictory force which gradually increases its dynamism, preparing the triggering of imprecatory forms.

Listing the causes which require the reestablishment of natural balance culminates with the expression of the dichotomy between good and evil, between what should have happened and the reality: "In return for my love they would slander me, but I, I would pray", the semantics of the verbs being completed at the syntactic level by the oppositional conjunctive phrase. So, the prayer is an answer – being, unlike a passive state, the example of supreme holiness; at the linguistic level, the adversative conjunction *iar* has a semantic catalyzing effect[39] and relates

[34] Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul, Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*, Editura Egumeniţa, Galaţi, s.a., p. 442 (our translation).

[35] Apud St. Atanasie and Teodorit, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*… p. 442.

[36] Teodorit al Kirului, *Tâlcuirea celor 150 de psalmi ai proorocului împărat David*, Măn. Sf. Arh. Mihail şi Gavriil, Petru Vodă, 2003, p. 403.

[37] Teodorit al Kirului, *Tâlcuirea...*, p. 403.

[38] Apud the interpretation of Isihie, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*…, p. 442.

[39] *GALR*, II, p. 880.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

itself to the entire sentence, insisting thereby upon the thematic contrast[40] and cumulating through its adversative role an expressive-emotional function.

The increased role of affectivity is illustrated in the fifth verse by the inversions[41] and the contrastive outlining created by the repetition of the antonomy between good and evil that is evidently present in both the factual and the attitudinal levels: "Pus-au împotriva mea rele în loc de bune şi ură în locul iubirii mele". Therefore, the prophetic voice projects, through the same lexical verb with an abstract meaning from the previous verse, the results meant by the one who does evil upon himself, including once again the evenimential and the spiritual simultaneously: "Pune peste dânsul pe cel păcătos şi diavolul să stea de-a dreapta lui" (Ps. 108:5). The meaning of this reversed effect of evil, overtly present especially in the New Testament[42], is opposed to the general meaning of curse by the impersonal character which the idea of divine justice implies, while the imprecation is usually expressed with anger and contempt[43] (having, in cotradiction to the prophecies, an oral character par excellence).

It was said that the Pslam, consisting of 30 verses, contains thirty curses, just as the number of silver coins that Judas received to sell Jesus. The semantic content of these verses with an imprecatory character (representing the apogee of the psalm) is also valued by the phonological symbolism and by the increased role of the suprasegmental units. The alliteration ("pune peste dânsul pe cel păcătos") outlines, through the repetition of the bilabial occlusive, the inevitability of a chain of poisonous concequences which will eventually lead to the annihilation of oneself. Besides, almost any word starts in the Romanian translation with a consonant or with a flat or closed vowel, suggesting the idea that the curse triggers the presence of evil in the existence of the one who is regarded. The musical accent which the imprecatory structures develops is due precisely to the special situation in which the focal sequence covers the whole phrase; refering to this, it was said that "*the foused information* is reduced to the *illocutionary value* (actional value) associated with it's propositional content"[44]. We can say, following J.L.Austin's theory[45], that the psalmist's words have an effect upon the world because, doing more than asking the interlocutor "to introduce the situation in the real world" [46], the prophecies are created through the demiurgic power of the word: the Word, like the facts, has the capacity to bless or curse, to give salvation or damnation. The enemies shall therefore see the destructive power of imprecation, facing condemnation and having their prayer converted into sin (Ps. 108:6). Gradually, the

[40] Apud *GALR*, I, p. 641: „Conjuncţiile coordonatoare îşi modelează sensul în funcţie de semantica elementelor coocurente".

[41] Apud *GALR*, II, p. 933, inversion may express, together with the semantic content of the sentence, a certain frame of mind.

[42] Matthew 7:1-2; 26: 52.

[43] Dan Horia Mazilu, *O istorie a blestemului*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2001, p. 11.

[44] *GALR,* II, p. 901 (our translation).

[45] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Harvard University Press, 2011.

[46] *GALR,* II, p. 901 (our translation).

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

content of the imprecations becomes more and more terrifying, from the prediction of losing wealth and of premature death (Ps. 108:7), to the fatal poisonous destiny of the descendants (Ps. 108: 8-11) and the death of the bloodline (Ps. 108:12), culminating with the invocation of the terrifying divine judgment (Ps. 108: 13-14).

This complete decay is shown at the intonation level by the descending melodic pattern, which is present due to the use of the subjunctive form of the verbs with an imperative value[47]. The subjunctive is yet distinguished from the imperative by some overtones of semnatic nature, highlighting, in this case, not as such the uncertain realisation of the verbal action[48], but more its determination towards the conditions required and the direct connection with the finalities the action aims at: "să piară de pe pământ pomenirea lui, pentru că nu şi-a adus aminte să facă milă." (Ps. 108: 14). However, at the semantic level, the subjunctive of the prophecies from the Psalm is equivalent to the indicative mood. Explaining verse 6 ("Când se va judeca, să iasă osândit; şi rugăciunea lui facă-se întru păcat!"), Teodorit remarks: "În loc de: «va ieşi»" and "În loc de «se va face»", highlighting once more the distinct meaning from the one of imprecation.

Each curse mentioned in the Psalm 108 can gain a concrete meaning if related to the history of the Jews: it is known that 40 years after Christ's crucifixation, Hebrews were defeated and their women and children were taken into slavery, their possessions being stolen by the Romans[49]. The pain of the descendants is not meaningless if we adhere to the idea, expressed by St. John Chrysostom, that "there is also an useful orphancy", the parents being responsible (Ps. 108:13) of what they leave as a heritage to the ulterior generations –we recall that the Jews were the ones that killed the prophets (Matthew 23:30-31), anticipating the crowd that shouted afterwards "His blood be on us, and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25).

The phrase "*parents of Hebrews*" assigns, in Teodorit's interpretations, the ones that turned against God, while 'mother' is assigned to Jerusalem, the place in which Jesus was murdered[50]. The concept of *parent* is used in the Patristic Tradition especially with the meaning of spiritual guide or cause[51]; in this light, explaining some of the psalmist's prophecies referring to Juda's sin depicts him as Satan's son.

To such an apogee, the graduation of the imprecative construction is illustrated in the tonality level as well, through the vibration confered to the words. The particular forms of accent develop a musicality that becomes incantational by its sound ordering: "Să piară copiii lui şi într-un neam să se stingă numele lui". There can be observed, as for Ps.68, that curses are shaped around some verbal nuclei

[47] *GALR*, II, p. 921.

[48] Iorgu Iordan, *Gramatica limbii române*, Editura Cartea Românească, Bucureşti, 1937, p. 173.

[49] Apud Teodorit's interpretation of the Psalm 108, in *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*… p. 446.

[50] Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul, Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*…, p. 448.

[51] Saint John of the Ladder hierarchizes the passions and the virtues using the terms *mother* and *daughter*, in *Scara raiului*, Editura Învierea, Timişoara, 2007.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

which order their semantic forumulas in nominal groups that allow the focal sequences to cover the entire phrase.. As a result, the accentual form of the imprecatory structures is essentially different from the phrase in which the tonic accent occurs, as the musical accents show an increased global intensity and symmetrize the text. At the same time, being associated with the descending intonation, this accent contibutes to the verbalization of the emphatic and expressive functions of the text.

The extreme density of the phrase, specific to the incantation, is no longer active as soon as the climax of the imprecation is achieved, signaling its deconstruction by returning to the exterior resorts which have motivated it: thereby, the conjunctional causal phrase *pentru că* highlights the connection between judgement and curse. However, in the case of King David's prophecies that were going to be fulfilled only 28 generation later (Matthew 1:17), the act of laying stress on this type of causality receives a profound, moralizing meaning, proving that all negative consequences happen only as a result of a number of facts that cannot remain without an answer before the divine justice: "pentru că nu şi-a adus aminte să facă milă/ Şi a prigonit pe cel sărman, pe cel sărac şi pe cel smerit cu inima ca să-l omoare" (Ps. 108:15). Given the obvious connection with Christ's passions and words, the most important aspect in prophecies is their moralizing function, which is considered by the Jews a sacred thing, whereas they did not appreciate it for its core meaning.

The most important finality in the imprecative construction – which is far from being ephemeral, given the continuity of the written word – is not the man's eternal damnation, but his healing. The imprecations appear where the "goodly theme" (Ps. 44:1) and the glad tidings do not have an effect upon the inveterate soul anymore. Thereby, the same semnatic content of the imprecatory psalms is found in the evangelical parables or in the book of Revelation, in which the Word's energetic forces are shaded, at a structural level, by the wish to improve the aesthetic dimension of the language.

Law in the Old Testament offers, as *Deuteronomy* ilustrates it, an abundance of imprecatory examples for the ones who do not behave according to the law; it aims to warn and educate, thereby the ones that fall under the power of curse are not just simple victims of damnation, but are responsible begetters (Matthew 23:34-35). The facts cannot be seen as simple exterior actions, because they have an indissoluble connection with the human heart (Matthew 15:19). These ideas are overtly shown by the psalmist within a conclusive construction, antithetically structured, insisting again upon the connection between "curse" and the predictable and natural character of justice: "He loved to curse; let the curses come on him! He did not like blessing; may it be far from him! He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones!" (Ps. 108:16-17). The coat is not just like a second nature for the fallen man, but also a symbol of the soul, and, while the water suggests by its speed the power of the imprecatory

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

prayer, the oil shows, in Teodorit's interpretation[52], the unfailingness of curse and the man's inability to erase it after it became a part of oneself. The irreversibility of sin has been experienced at first by Judas, who could not amend the selling of his Master: he is the one who loved the curse (the money unfairly earned), refusing the blessing of the apostolic grace. Therefore, the imprecations are meant to confirm to the people the consequences of their actions, whose peratologic aspect do not require any further argumentation:"May it be like a garment which he wraps round him, like a belt with which he daily girds himself!" (Ps. 109:19).

These parallelisms specific to the imprecatory patterns are – as well as the entire content of the curses in the Psalm – conclusively concentrated in the verse that justifies our present interpretations: "Aceasta să fie răsplata celor ce mă clevetesc pe mine înaintea Domnului şi grăiesc rele împotriva sufletului meu" (Ps. 108:19), confirming not only the imminent nature of the word's fullfilment – by the form of the verb that retains its demiurgic value –, but especially the idea of suffering as a reward for the evil caused (John 5:29).

God's invocation does not require, however, justice for itself, but mercy: in Christian exegesis this is Jesus's prayer for the Father to teach us humbleness, evoking at the same time His sufferings (Matthew 26:37-39): "Izbăveşte-mă, că sărac şi sărman sunt eu şi inima mea s-a tulburat înlăuntrul meu." (Ps. 108: 28). The prayer continues with some some parallelisms specific to the Psaltery which keep, relating them to the content of the Gospels, their prophetic meaning. The phrase "Ca umbra ce se înclină m-am trecut; ca bătaia de aripi a lăcustelor tremur" suggests the proximity of death, but also the exclusion from the social hierarchy, as the Greek etymon of the verb has many meanings: to be removed, stopped, but also lost, killed or destroyed[53].

Deprived of the essentials for the bodily life, fasting and living in poverty (the oil symbolizing the desire for sweetening), Jesus has yet received hatred from people: "Şi eu am ajuns lor ocară. M-au văzut şi au clătinat capetele lor" (Ps. 108:24), just as Matthew describes the scene of crucificion (Matthew 27:39): "Iar trecătorii Îl huleau, clătinându-şi capetele". The climax of suffering is expressed through the invocation of the divine, asking for help and recognition before the opressor: "Şi să cunoască ei că mâna Ta este aceasta". God's hand is the power of the virtuous, St. Atanasie writing that it represented for Jesus the resurrection itself.

Verse 27, highlighting the contrast between blessing and imprecation, reminds of the crucifiction as a cursed death (John 7.49), but also of the essentially different states of mind that these two forces presume: "Ei vor blestema şi tu vei binecuvânta. Cei ce se scoală împotriva mea să se ruşineze, iar robul tău să se veselească". The imprecative structure that follows conclusively expresses once again the causal connection between sin and curse, cursing being necessarily

[52] Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul, Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*…, p. 450.

[53] *Ibidem*, p. 452.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

attributed to God and to men only in the case of authority or unjust oprimation[54]: "Să se îmbrace cei ce mă clevetesc pe mine cu ocară şi cu ruşinea lor ca şi cu un veşmânt să se învelească". The metaphor of curse as a clothe includes different semantic aspects comparing with the previous expression ("Să-i fie lui ca o haină"), the existential verb – semantically empty, through which the meaning of the verse pertains to the "passive world" as Leo Weisgerber[55] has described it – gaining , in verse 28, a dynamic and conscious meaning by the presence of the verbs *a îmbrăca* şi *a înveli*. The antagonist force of evil is also brought to light by the frequent use of the 3rd pers. plural pronouns (ei vor blestema), contrasting with the singular form for the 1st person (mă clevetesc pe mine cu ocară), but in counterpoint also with the presence of the personal pronoun "You" that invokes the divine help and the sacred omnipotence.

The Word is, more that adjudgement or threat, God Himself (John 1:1) and the praise is the well-doing that is brought to Him as a thanksgiving for the good things that happen to the virtuous: "Lăuda-voi pe Domnul foarte cu gura mea şi în mijlocul multora Îl voi preaslăvi pe El". This verse also suggests the fulfillment of the prophecies that are sentenced in an imprecative form in the Psalm. This interpretation is justified, at the syntactic level, by the causal and the consecutive subordinate clauses which follow it: "că a stat de-a dreapta săracului ca să izbăvească sufletul lui de cei ce-l prigonesc".

So, the deconstruction of the structures called imprecatory is realized by focusing on the salvation that is unspecific to the "act of verbal magic"[56] which is, as Xavier Dufour wrote, a reversed echo of blessing[57]. This definition is evident in Dosoftei's versified form, where the phrases announcing the suffering as a result of sin ("Când i s-a face giudeţul / Să-l scoată de gât cu băţul") appear next to the terms that are specific to blessing (*folosul, plata, boieria*).

The Romanian versification made by the metropolitan poet captures the feeling of national consciousness ("să-i vază tot omul"), which is more emphasized comparing to the canonical text. Therefore, the imprecatory structures are extended in the poem and one can easily observe – through the increased subjectivity and the presence of rhyme – some similitudes with the popular versified curses[58]: "C-au iubit din tot îndemnul/ De i-au venitu-i blăstămul/ [...] ca-n cămeşe să va-nveşte/ În blăstăm, ticăiţeşte,/ Şi ca apa i-a-mplea zgăul/ Blăstămul, cu de tot răul/ Şi ca măduha-n ciolane/ Să să-mbrace, ca-n căftane,/ Şi cu brâu ce-a vrea să-ncingă/ Ca

[54] Dan Horia Mazilu, *O istorie a blestemului*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2001, p. 33

[55] Leo Weisgerber, *Lehre von den Wortarten*, in *Die vier Stufen in der Erforschung der Sprachen*, Düsseldorf, 1963, preluat din articolul Luminiţa Hoarţă Cărăuşu, *Lumea în pasiv. În problema pasivului şi a transformării pasive în limba română*, in *Rezultate şi perspective actuale ale lingvisticii româneşti şi străine,* Editura Universităţii „Al. I. Cuza", Iaşi, 2007, p. 185-200.

[56] Ivan Evseev, *Dicţionar de magie, demonologie şi mitologie românească*, Editura Amarcord, Timişoara, 1997, p. 51.

[57] Xavier-Léon Dufour, *Vocabular de teologie biblică*…, p. 71.

[58] I. – Aurel Candrea, *Folclorul medical român comparat*, Editura Polirom, 1999.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

blăstămul să să strângă”[59]. The whole adaptation made by Dosoftei is organized around the semanteme *blăstăm*, which still preserves something from the core of the primitive incantational magic[60] and which illustrates through its overt presence the persuasive power of the word to cure and reform humanity, the searching for “the miraculous effect of a divine fright”[61].

From a diachronic perspective, the utterance in the seventeenth-century text was, at the structural level, much closer to the energetic dimension of the primordial language. Not only were the men in the past believing in the imminent materialization of the word, but the Word Himself has become substance (John 1:1). The spiritual evolution of humanity depending on listening to the Word, the imprecatory constructions appear, from time to time, in order to guide the impious people (which are expressively described in Dosoftei’s translation as “neam ţăpos şi sucit”[62]) on their way. In time, the wish to improve the aesthetic dimension of the language alienates it of that mythical-magical essence of the primordial utterance. This fact is illustrated in the Scripture through its conversion into esoteric language, which is evident in the book of the Apocalypse, but also present in the Evangelical Parables[63]. Here it is illustrated, practically, the same semantic content as in the warnings with an imprecatory form that are present in the Psalms.

We can conclude that the imprecative form that is present in the biblical Psalms does not justify, as we have seen in these two examples, tagging them as “curses” or “imprecations”, because the aim of these constructions differs from the one of the curses: being prophecies, the verses have a didactic finality, preventing some future facts. They are addressed to a wide public, while the curses are most of the times secretly uttered. The psalms have, as we noticed, a certain semantic ambiguity, the opposition I – they (“lauda mea”,“ochii lor”) being a deictic one. Also, imprecation never alternates with blessing and is never said as a desire to guide someone to a new set of values, but to invoke, as the definition shows, the divine wrath for a prejudice that was made. We may explain the use of this form through the intention to apprise – in a language compatible with the mentality of the Old Testament, in which justice was often a personal decision – of the necessity of adhering to an unique Judger and, of course, to reveal the dubious morality of those times.

Bibliography

A New English Translation of the Septuagint, edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wrigh, Oxford University Press, 2007

[59] To be compared with: “:Şi să învăscu în blăstăm ca în cămeaşe ş-au întrat ca apa în pîntecele lui şi ca oloiul în oasele lui. Facă-i-să lui ca o cămeaşe cu carea să îmbrácă şi ca brîul cu care pururea să-ncinge”, in *Psaltirea de-nţăles*, Text stabilit şi studiu lingvistic de Mihaela Cobzaru, Casa Editorială Demiurg, Iaşi, 2007, p. 569.

[60] Dan Buciumeanu, Dosoftei poetul..., p. 286.

[61] *Ibidem*, p. 288.

[62] Psaltirea de-nţăles... p.662.

[63] Mattew, chapters 13, 18, 20-22, 25; Mark, chapters 4, 12; Luke, chapters 8, 10, 13-16, 18- 20.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)

BIBLIA sau Sfânta Scriptură, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucureşti, 2008
Dosofteiu, Mitropolitul Moldovei, *Psaltirea în versuri publicată de pe manuscrisul original şi de pe ediţiunea dela 1673* de Prof. I. Bianu, Tipografia Academiei Romane, Bucuresci, 1887
Dosoftei, *Versuri alese*, Editura Virginia, Iaşi, 1994
Dosoftei, *Psaltirea de-nţăles*, Text stabilit şi studiu lingvistic de Mihaela Cobzaru, Casa Editorială Demiurg, Iaşi, 2007
New Testament and Psalms for Orthodox Christians, Military Edition, American Bible Society, New York, 2009
The Bible: Authorized King James version of the Holy Bible, edited by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford University Press, 2008
Youth Bible, Nelson Word Ltd., Nashville, USA, 1993
Buciumeanu, Dan, *Dosoftei poetul. O hermeneutică a Psaltirii în versuri*, Editura Viitorul Românesc, Bucureşti, 2000
Candrea, I. – Aurel, *Folclorul medical român comparat*, Editura Polirom, 1999
Dragomirescu, N. Gh., *Mică enciclopedie a figurilor de stil,* Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1975
Douglas, J. D., *Dicţionar biblic*, Editura „Cartea creştină", Oradea, 1995
Dufour, Xavier-Léon, *Vocabular de teologie biblică*, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Romano-Catolice de Bucureşti, 2001
Evseev, Ivan, *Dicţionar de magie, demonologie şi mitologie românească*, Editura Amarcord, Timişoara, 1997
Frâncu, Constantin, *Conjunctivul românesc şi raporturile lui cu alte moduri*, Casa Editorială Demiurg Plus, 2010
Gramatica limbii române, Editura Academiei Române, Bucureşti, 2005, 2 vol.
Gramatica limbii române, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, Bucureşti, 1966, 2 vol.
Hoarţă Cărăuşu, Luminiţa, *Dinamica morfosintaxei şi pragmaticii limbii române actuale*, Editura Cermi, Iaşi, 2008
Iordan, Iorgu, *Gramatica limbii române*, Editura Cartea Românească, Bucureşti, 1937
Irimia, Dumitru, *Gramatica limbii române*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2008
Mazilu, Dan Horia, *O istorie a blestemului*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2001, p. 11
Soltman, H., *Syntax der Modi im moderne Franzo̎sisch*, M. Niemeyer Verlag, Halle, 1914
Teodorit al Kirului, *Tâlcuirea celor 150 de psalmi ai prooroculuiîmpărat David*, Editura Mănăstirii Sf. Arh. Mihail şi Gavriil, Petru Vodă, 2003
Zigabenul, Eftimie, St. Nicodim Aghioritul*, Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinţilor Părinţi*, Editura Egumeniţa, Galaţi, s.a.

BDD-A177 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:23 UTC)