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**Title** A Comparison of the Communal Lament Psalms and the Treaty-Covenant Formula

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**Abstract** Within the corpus of psalms in the Hebrew Bible is a group known as the communal laments. Characterized by their use of the first person common plural pronoun, some type of calamity experienced by the community, and a petition to God, these psalms incorporate similar imagery, terminology, and structure. This study explores these psalms and suggests that they relate closely to the Hittite treaty-covenant formula found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, yet differ in that they reflect an ongoing covenantal relationship rather than the establishment of such. Thus, these psalms emphasize Israel's expectation that God, as the senior covenantal party, will fulfill his covenantal obligations if Israel remained worthy. These psalms, therefore, are representative of the unique relationship that Israel had with her God, a relationship reflected in Latter-day Saint theology as well.

# A COMPARISON OF THE COMMUNAL LAMENT PSALMS AND THE TREATY-COVENANT FORMULA

Daniel Belnap

If we have forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange god; Shall not God search this out? for he knoweth the secrets of the heart. (Psalm 44:20–21 KJV)

Within the corpus of psalms in the Hebrew Bible can be found a unique grouping known collectively as the communal lament psalms. They are generally characterized by their use of the first common plural pronoun, some type of calamity experienced by the community, and a petition to God asking for deliverance from the calamity. These psalms are also connected to each other through similar metaphors, images, vocabulary, and structure. While the total number of psalms in this category is debatable, a core of seven psalms are universally considered communal laments.<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars argue that these laments derive from older, Mesopotamian laments,<sup>2</sup> yet their poetic and thematic structure more closely resembles a Hittite treaty-covenant formula, which is a literary structure widely attested in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Psalms 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, and 89. Often Lamentations is included, but this poem exhibits different characteristics than those of the communal laments in the psalter and should therefore be studied separately.

2. Paul W. Ferris Jr., *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); and Walter C. Bouzard Jr., *We Have Heard with Our Ears, O God: Sources of the Communal Laments in the Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), are the most extensive studies dedicated to this concept.

3. The literature on this pattern as found in the Old Testament is voluminous. Though this article will refer to a number of these sources, two in particular are useful for those interested in studying the pattern. See Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and*

## The Hebrew Bible and the Treaty-Covenant Formula

Elias Bickerman in 1951 first noted the similarities between Deuteronomy and the Hittite treaty texts,<sup>4</sup> but George E. Mendenhall's study, published in 1955, described in much greater detail the similarities in structure between the biblical law texts and the Hittite treaties.<sup>5</sup> He concluded that elements of the Hittite treaty-covenant formula were also used to describe the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.<sup>6</sup> In 1964, Klaus Baltzer followed up Mendenhall's seminal work in a study that examined the themes of covenant formula and covenant terminology within the Hebrew corpus.<sup>7</sup> Dennis McCarthy added to the discussion in 1981 with his comprehensive study of covenant texts in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern treaty-covenant texts. Since then, others have provided insights primarily concerned with the legal and cultic nature of certain terminology.

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*Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978); and Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary: In Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); also Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-cultural Relationships* (New York: Clark International, 2004); also Paul Kalluveetil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982). This literary structure can also be found in the Book of Mormon. See Stephen D. Ricks's article "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin's Address (Mosiah 1–6)," *BYU Studies* 24/2 (1984): 151–62, for the most comprehensive use of the treaty-covenant formula in the Book of Mormon. For a more recent article, see RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, "Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 48–61.

4. Elias Bickerman, "Couper une alliance," *Archives d'histoire du droit oriental* 5 (1950–51): 133–56.

5. George E. Mendenhall, "Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1955): 26–46, 49–76.

6. McCarthy summarizes Mendenhall's conclusions in *Treaty and Covenant*, 4: "An important element in this discussion is a presentation of the structure of the ancient treaty as revealed in the Hittite texts, and of the evidence for the possibility of Israelite-Hittite contacts. In the light of this structure and these possible contacts, Mendenhall argues to certain conclusions, among others, that the original *form* of the Israelite covenant as made on Sinai was that of the Hittite treaties and that this coincidence is an argument for the substantial historicity of the narrative in Exodus."

7. Klaus Baltzer, *Das Bundesformular* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1964).

McCarthy's formula of the Hittite treaty-covenant exhibits the following structure:

- I. Preamble/introduction
- II. Historical prologue
- III. Stipulations
- IV. Document clause
- V. List of divine witnesses
- VI. Curses and blessing(s)<sup>8</sup>

The preamble, or introduction, identifies both parties and specifically announces the suzerain's power and right to create the treaty-covenant. It establishes a relationship between the two parties. In many of the treaties the introduction comes after a historical narrative, or prologue, that gives the prior relationship—if there had been one between the suzerain and the vassal—in order to establish the new relationship enacted under the treaty.

The stipulations present the obligations of the two parties. While these were primarily obligations the vassal was to keep, some of the treaties contain mutual obligations suggesting that the senior member of the relationship had obligations to the junior, weaker member, particularly to protect and guarantee dynastic continuity.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth element, the document clause, records, preserves, and prescribes the periodic rereading of the treaty. The fifth general element of these treaties lists the deities from the suzerain's and the vassal's culture who invoked the witness and sanction of the treaty. Finally, the last element details the curses and blessing(s) that would fall on the vassal if the stipulations were either not met or broken. Though curses dominate this section, a few of the treaties include a general set of blessings if the treaty is adhered to.

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8. John H. Walton summarizes McCarthy's formula and presents it in a more readable form in *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 101–7.

9. For detail on these specific obligations, see McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 42–43, 58.

For the Hebrew Bible, the treaty-covenant formula can be found most prominently in the book of Deuteronomy because of the covenant relationship Israel entered into with God at Sinai. According to McCarthy, the Deuteronomic treaty-covenant formula should be outlined as follows:

- I. Historical prologue (chapters 5–11)
- II. Stipulations (12:1–26:15)
- III. Invocation-adjuration (26:16–19)
- IV. Blessing and curses (28:1–46)<sup>10</sup>

Noticeably, certain elements of the Hittite formula are missing in the above outline, but others have been expanded and new elements given precedence.<sup>11</sup> Though no explicit explanation is found in the biblical text itself (indeed the author does not explicitly indicate that he uses any template at all),<sup>12</sup> the changes appear to reflect the unique theological nature of the relationship between the Israelites and their God. Unlike the Hittite treaties, which establish a mortal-mortal relationship, the biblical texts describe the establishment of a mortal-divine relationship with God as the suzerain and Israel as the vassal. As opposed to the Hittite treaties, the biblical counterpart stresses the history of the two parties over the titulary, or list of titles establishing the identities of the two parties.<sup>13</sup> The biblical

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10. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 186. Deuteronomy 1–4 generally follows this same pattern but describes the covenantal history of God and the patriarchs.

11. Two characteristics present in the extrabiblical formula are gone in McCarthy's analysis of the biblical form: the document clause and the list of divine witnesses; Although it is interesting that in Deuteronomy 32:1, the heavens and earth are commanded to listen, perhaps acting as legal witnesses to the speech by Yahweh that follows. Psalm 89 describes the sun and moon as witnessing the eternal nature of the Davidic covenant. For a good discussion of this, see G. Ernest Wright, "The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter J. Harrelson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 44–49.

12. In fact, this is one of the primary criticisms of this approach. Still, most biblical scholarship agrees with the general premise.

13. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 169–70: "Now, just how does all this material [Deut 5–11], so largely admonition and exhortation, fit into the covenant pattern? Clearly it serves the same purpose as the historical prologue of the Hittite treaty, that is, it gives

law code that Israel was to keep, according to the covenant, represents the stipulations, while the invocation-adjuration section, like the Hittite documents clause, records Israel's commitment to keep the covenantal obligations, with God's promise of future protection and greatness (through the mediation of Moses).<sup>14</sup>

McCarthy does not mention the biblical equivalent of the document clause, but it can be found in Deuteronomy 31:9: "And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it to the priests . . . which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord." Moreover, in 31:10–13, Moses declares that the law should be read before Israel every seven years to renew the obligations Israel had made at Sinai. Thus the full biblical formula in Deuteronomy should be as follows:

- I. Historical prologue (chapters 5–11)
- II. Stipulations (12:1–26:15)
- III. Invocation-adjuration (26:16–19)
- IV. Blessing and curses (28:1–46)
- V. Document clause (31:9–13)

This formula in Deuteronomy recounts a covenant-making experience and is also attested in other biblical texts. For example, similar passages using the biblical covenant formula also appear in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The communal laments may not describe covenant-making events, but they do focus on the covenantal relationship that should exist between God and Israel. As such they provide a unique perspective on the biblical formula. Unlike both Hittite treaty-covenants and the earlier biblical texts found in the Pentateuch, which are both presented from the suzerain's perspective, the communal laments are primarily from the vassal's perspective. Ostensibly the lament psalms operate as covenant-continuing, or

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a ground and motive for obedience to the precepts which follow and to which end it is directed."

14. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 184: "The reciprocity of the actions in Dt 26 is not entirely alien to the treaty context. . . . None of this, the statement of covenant-making or mutuality is out of place in the treaty and covenant traditions. However expressed, or even left unexpressed, even in the more subordinating treaties the parties were tied together to mutual advantage. They had mutual obligations."

covenant-reminding, texts.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the communal lament psalms remind Israel of the covenant relationship that should already exist with God.

The covenant reminder in the psalms exhibits an important distinction that affects the presentation of the covenant formula. Like the biblical treaty-covenant formula, one section focuses on the history of the two parties, but unlike the biblical formula, the cursing-and-blessing unit describes the actual curses that have befallen Israel instead of listing potential curses, and then is followed by a refutation of the reasoning behind the curses. In addition, the biblical formula invokes the performance of oaths that should be accepted by both parties, but the laments refer to obligations related to oaths that had already been made. This was then followed by a recommitment to their relationship with God. Finally, the psalms possess the equivalent of a document clause with the inclusion of a section in which the author promises to give praise to God in the future, which also fulfills a prior covenant obligation of Israel. With this in mind, the following represents the communal lament formula as based on the biblical treaty-covenant:

- I. History of relationship
- II. Description of curses
- III. Refutation of curses
- IV. Appeal for deliverance based on  
covenantal obligations
- V. Vow of praise
  - a. Declaration of relationship  
("You are our King")

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15. Though this appears to be unique in the corpus of ancient Near Eastern literature, there may be a similar point of view in the Amarna letters; see Ellen F. Morris, "Bowing and Scraping in the Ancient Near East: An Investigation into Obsequiousness in the Amarna Letters," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 65/3 (2006): 179–85, as well as in the Hittite royal prayers; see Moshe Greenberg, "Hittite Royal Prayers and Biblical Petitionary Psalms," in *Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung für Walter Beyerlin*, ed. Klaus Seybold and Erich Zenger (Freiberg: Herder, 1995), 15–27; and Ph. H. J. Houwink Ten Cate, "Hittite Royal Prayers," *Numen* 16/1 (1969): 81–98. See also Emanuel Pfoh, "Some Remarks on Patronage in Syria-Palestine during the Later Bronze Age," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 52 (2009): 363–81.

## History of Relationship

One part of the history section highlights the past relationship between the partners of the covenant, and, in particular, underscores how both parties had met their obligations. The description of God in Deuteronomy 28:7 emphasizes that his role as historical protector of Israel is one of his primary divine obligations. Thus the lament psalms frequently contain the imagery of a divine warrior and describe God as a warrior who fights on behalf of Israel.<sup>16</sup> For example, Psalm 44 begins with a historical reference to God's protective interaction with the Israelites after they enter the land of Canaan:

1. We have heard, O God,  
our fathers have told us  
the deeds that you did in their days,  
in days of old.
2. You, your hand dispossessed the nations  
and you planted them [the fathers].  
You caused injury to the peoples/nations  
and you sent them [the fathers].
3. For not with their sword did they take the earth,  
and their arm did not bring deliverance/victory to them,  
but your right hand and your arm  
and the light of your face,  
because you favored them.<sup>17</sup>

One can immediately see the warrior terminology and imagery in the above example as well as the representation of God's hand as a warrior and as a planter. The latter image will be discussed in greater depth below. The martial imagery continues in verses 5–7, emphasizing the unity that should exist between Israel and God:

5. With you we will gore our enemies,  
in your name we will trample those who rise against us.

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16. See Richard J. Clifford, "Psalm 89: A Lament over the Davidic Ruler's Continued Failure," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 1/2 (1980): 35–47.

17. Unless otherwise noted, the translations throughout are by the author.

6. For in my bow I will not trust  
and my sword will not deliver me.
7. You give deliverance to us from our enemies  
and you thwart our enemies.

Psalms 60 and 83 also use similar martial imagery. Psalm 60:6–8 lists territories adjacent to Jerusalem that the Lord had promised to Israel following his victorious conquest over the enemy:

6. God spoke in his sanctuary:  
I will exultingly divide Shechem  
and I will measure the valley of Sukkoth.
7. Gilead is for me and Manasseh is for me.  
And Ephraim is the place of my strength,  
Judah is my scepter.
8. Moab is my washbasin,  
against Edom I throw my shoe.  
Philistia, I will have victory over you.

Psalm 83 provides a specific history that shows God as a warrior on behalf of Israel:

9. Do to them as Midian,  
as against Sisera,  
as against Jabin at the stream Kishon.
10. They were destroyed at En-dor,  
they were dung in the land.
11. Treat their great men like Oreb and Zeeb,  
all their leaders like Zebah and Zalmunna,
12. who said: “Let us take the fields of God.”

Some texts address localized conflicts such as the conflict with Hazor recounted in Judges 4–5 and the repeated aggression from Midian found in Judges 7–8. The former is described in the song of Deborah and employs the imagery of a divine warrior.

However, Psalm 80 does not use martial imagery but displays the imagery of God as a planter in order to recount history:

8. You brought a vine out of Egypt,  
you drove out the heathen, then you planted it.
9. You made room for it  
and caused that it took deep root  
and it filled the land.
10. The hills were shadowed by it  
and limbs like healthy cedars.
11. Her branches reached the sea;  
her boughs to the river.
- ...
15. the vineyard which your hand planted;  
the branch which you made powerful for yourself.

The image of God as planter and as warrior relates to another of his covenantal obligations: to provide a land of inheritance. In the Song of Moses, which follows the Red Sea miracle, Exodus 15:17 promises that the Lord “shal[l] bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance.” Later, following the Sinai covenantal experience, the camp of Israel is compared to an orchard of trees planted by God (Numbers 24:6). Finally, according to 2 Samuel 7:10, God provides the justification for the building of the temple, informing David that “I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them anymore, as beforetime.”

Psalm 74 contains a history unit composed of two sections: a true historical section and a mythical section, but both are woven together to make one complete unit. The historical section begins in verse 2 with the Psalmist commanding Yahweh to

Remember your congregation  
which you bought in olden times,

the tribe of your inheritance you redeemed  
towards whom you acted as a kinsman.

After the injunction to remember the original covenant-making event,<sup>18</sup> the Psalmist takes the narrative further back in time and describes the creation in martial terms, tying that great event to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and their subsequent travels in the wilderness as shown in verses 12–17:

12. God is king (my king) from olden times,  
who works salvation in the midst of the earth.
13. You did divide the sea with your strength,  
you shattered the heads of the monsters on the waters.
14. You crushed the heads of Leviathan,  
you gave them as food to the people in the desert.
15. You cleaved the spring and the torrent,  
you dried up the ever-flowing rivers.
16. The day is yours, also the night;  
you established the moon and the sun.
17. You fixed the borders of the earth;  
Summer and Autumn, you fashioned them.

Verses 14 and 15 bring together the mythical and historical elements in a chiasmic structure:

- 14 a. You crushed the heads of Leviathan  
[a mythical reference to the destruction  
of the chaotic sea monster]
- b. You gave them as food to the people in the desert  
[a historical reference to God’s interaction with  
Israel in the desert]

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18. H. Eising, “זָכַר *zākhār*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 4:70: “By calling the people → the עֵדָה *‘ēdhāh*, ‘congregation,’ and → הַנַּחֲלָה *nach<sup>l</sup>lāh*, ‘heritage,’ of God, Ps. 74:2 alludes clearly enough to the covenant that God is called on to remember.”

- 15      b'. You cleaved the spring and the torrent  
           [a historical reference to provision  
           of water in the desert for Israel]
- a'. You dried up the ever-flowing rivers  
           [a mythical reference to God's control  
           over the water]

Verse 14 describes God's victory over the primeval chaos monster that guarantees the survival of Israel in the desert wilderness. Then verse 15 reiterates God's power over the waters, reminding Israel of both his power over the primal sea and his power to miraculously provide water in the wilderness. This chiasmic pattern suggests that the Psalmist wanted the reader or listener to connect the two time periods in order to emphasize God as protector. Moreover, the imagery of providing a meal also suggests a common ritual meal associated with covenant making: the communal meal with the suzerain, God, providing the meal for his vassals. Exodus 24:11 relates such a meal wherein the leaders of the camp share a meal in the presence of Yahweh.<sup>19</sup> A communal meal is also attested in the giving of the manna to the Israelites in the wilderness.<sup>20</sup> The mythical provision of the meal reflects the actual, historical events and reiterates the covenantal relationship between Israel and God.

Psalm 89, like Psalm 74, combines the mythical with the historical, thus showing God's sovereignty over the chaotic element. This becomes a foreshadowing event to the rise of the Davidic dynasty:

5. And the heavens recount/praise your wonder, O Yahweh,  
     also your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.

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19. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 253–56. See also E. W. Nicholson, "The Covenant Ritual in Exodus XXIV," *Vetus Testamentum* 32/1 (1982): 74–86.

20. The presence of the manna may have some covenantal significance. In Exodus 16:32–33, Moses tells Aaron to put an omer of manna in a pot, which will then be put in the ark of the covenant as a reminder for later generations. Its placement in the ark, along with Aaron's rod and the stone tablets, both items associated with the covenant, suggests that the manna too was symbolic of the covenant, perhaps representative of a covenant meal God provided during the entire wilderness period.

6. For who in the clouds (heaven) is  
comparable to Yahweh?  
(Who) is like Yahweh among the sons of God (gods?)
7. God (is) awe-inspiring among the council  
of the great holy ones  
and revered by all surrounding him.
8. Yahweh, God of the hosts,  
who, like you, is mighty, O Yah?  
And your faithfulness surrounds you.
9. You rule over (in?) the swelling of the sea;  
in the surging of the waves you still them.
10. You crushed Rahab like the slain,  
with the arm of your strength you  
scattered your enemies.
11. To you are the heavens,  
also to you is the earth,  
the world and everything in it.  
You established them.
12. North and South  
you organized/created them.  
Tabor and Hermon exult in your name.
13. To you is an arm with might;  
your hand is strong,  
your right hand is lifted up.
14. Righteousness and justice are the base of your throne;  
*hesed* and truth stand before your face.  
  
...
19. Then you spoke in a vision to those of yours  
who are practicing *hesed*

and you said, “I set power on a strong one;  
I exalted a chosen one from the people.”

20. I found David my servant;  
with my holy oil I anointed him.
21. My hand will always be with him,  
also my arm will strengthen him.
22. No enemy will go out against him  
and no son of injustice will afflict him.
23. I will crush before him his enemies  
and those who hate him I will strike down.
24. My faithfulness and *hesed* are with him  
and in my name his horn will be exalted.
25. I will place among the sea his hand  
and among the rivers his right hand.
26. He will call to me,  
“You are my father, My God and  
the rock of my deliverance.”
27. I will also appoint him firstborn,  
highest of the kings of the earth.
28. For eternity I will maintain my *hesed* to him  
and my faithful covenant to him.
29. And I will establish his seed forever  
and his throne as the days of heaven.
30. If his sons forsake my law  
and do not walk in my judgments;
31. If they breach my statutes  
and do not maintain my rules,
32. I will punish with a rod their transgression  
and with plagues their sin.

33. But my *hesed* I will not take from him;  
I will not deal falsely in my faithfulness.
34. I will not violate my covenant  
and the going out of my lips I will not change.
35. Once I have sworn by my holiness  
I will not lie to David.
36. His seed will be forever  
and his throne, like the sun, before me,
37. Like the moon, set up for eternity  
and a witness in the sky, enduring.

As recounted in 2 Samuel 7, the Davidic dynasty was established through a personal covenantal experience that took place between God and David. Yet, as the Psalmist makes clear above, that experience benefited God's righteous, who were promised "a strong one" to act in their interests on God's behalf. Thus the Lord's promises to David concerning dynastic continuity and protection reinforce his earlier promise to protect Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the covenantal history in Psalm 79 differs from the other communal lament psalms in both size and tenor: "Do not remember the iniquities of the former ones against us!" (v. 8). Unlike the other examples above, this brief line alludes to Israel's sinful past and specifically asks that God not remember that part of its history.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the above also seems to stress that the covenantal relationship still exists between the people of Israel and God with their implicit plea that God forgive their sinful state and protect them according to the covenant.

Thus it can be seen that all seven communal laments provide some type of covenantal history. Also, most contain specific imagery

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21. Interestingly, many of the characteristics present in the covenant formula are also present within this history, further strengthening the overall covenantal history unit in the psalm.

22. See Isaiah 5:2, 7; Jeremiah 2:21; and Ezekiel 19:10, 13 for negative planting imagery. Interestingly, the historical allusions to God as warrior and God as planter found in these texts include God's explanations as to why he is not going to defend Israel.

that alludes to covenant-making language used in earlier biblical history and that emphasizes the obligations God himself was to keep, specifically to provide a land of promise and to protect them from their adversaries. Even the negative history of Psalm 79 highlights the relationship between God and Israel that existed in years past. Yet these histories contrast with the Psalmist's depiction of his contemporary Israel, which, as we shall see, suffers from some of the covenantal curses established at Sinai.

### Description of Curses/Refutation of Curses

Owing to the unique nature that the communal lament psalms share as covenant-reminding texts, as opposed to covenant-establishing texts, the psalms include historical descriptions detailing perceived curses that had fallen on the community in the past. This departs from the list of potential curses provided in the traditional treaty-covenant texts of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.<sup>23</sup> With that in mind, there seems to be a clear relationship between the potential curses described in Deuteronomy (and elsewhere) and the description of events found in the communal lament psalms. For the most part, the curses describe the social disruption and disintegration of Israel that result from foreign invasion. Yet the communal laments also include a refutation of these curses. In other words, these psalms express that the community's curse is not justified, because they have kept their covenantal obligations. These refutations contain a plea for deliverance based on the covenantal obligations both parties had already entered into.

Among the seven communal lament psalms studied here, the primary curse takes place when God abandons Israel on the field of battle and Israel's enemies prevail. Deuteronomy 28:25 refers to this curse as Moses warns Israel about the consequences of covenantal infidelity:

He will cause you to be smitten by your enemies.  
In one way you will go out against him

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23. For a general discussion concerning the curse unit found in the Hebrew Bible, see Delbert R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964).

and in seven ways you will flee before him  
and you will be an object of trembling  
before all the nations of the earth.

Psalm 44 describes this precise situation in its curse unit (vv. 9–10):

9. Yet you have repudiated us and you have humiliated us.  
You do not go out with our armies.

10. You cause us to retreat backwards from our foe;  
those who hate us plunder us.

Psalm 60:10 uses similar language in stating: “But you, O God, have rejected us and you do not march among our armies, O God.” In Psalm 80:6, the Psalmist declares: “You set us at strife with our neighbors.” Psalm 89 presents a similar scenario, but adds that God abandons the king, who represents all of Israel:

40. You breached all his defenses,  
shattered all his fortresses.

...

42. You have raised up the right hand of his adversaries,  
you caused all his enemies to rejoice.

43. Also you turned back his sword,  
you did not keep him up in battle.

Although the above references suggest that Israel viewed its relationship with God as an antagonistic, adversarial one, other communal laments make explicit that what befalls them, befalls God. In other words, because of the covenantal relationship that exists between the two, action against one should be understood as hostility against the other as well.

Psalm 74:4–8 recounts how the enemy has overtaken the land and in particular defiled the temple, a symbol of Israel’s relationship with God:

4. Your adversaries roar in the midst of the sanctuary,  
they set up their banners as standards.

5. One was known who brought up  
an axe against the thicket of trees.
6. And now the engraven works, all together,  
the axes and hatchets strike them down.
7. They cast fire into your sanctuary.  
To the earth they defiled (brought low)  
the dwelling place of your name.
8. They said in their hearts,  
“We will oppress them together.”  
They put to flame every sacred site in the land.

Psalm 79:1–3 relates a similar scenario in which God has again abandoned the community, leaving Israel and the temple to the ravages of the enemy:

1. O God, the nations have entered into your possession,  
they polluted the temple of your holiness,  
they have put Jerusalem to ruins.
2. They gave the corpses of your servants  
as food to the fowl of the air,  
the flesh of your covenant keepers to the wild beasts.
3. They poured out their blood like water  
around Jerusalem.  
There is no burying.

Both examples stress that the enemy who is ravaging Israel is God’s enemy as well. Psalm 74:4 declares that the enemy is “your” enemy, meaning God’s adversary. Similarly Psalm 79 notes that the land is “your possession,” the temple is “your holiness,” and Israel is designated as “your servants” and “your covenant keepers.” This designation is most explicit in Psalm 83 where the author sees no distinction between God and Israel:

2. Your enemies make a tumult,  
they that hate you have lifted up the head.

3. Against your people they plot secrets  
and consulted against your treasured ones.
4. They have said: “Come, let us cut them off as a nation,  
that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance.”
5. Unanimous in their counsel,  
they are allied against you.

A number of the curses described in the communal lament deal with the effects of military defeat such as being scattered or sold into slavery. Deuteronomy 28:63–64 details these consequences if Israel does not keep the covenantal obligations:

You will be plucked from off the land which you will go to possess. And he will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth unto the other end of the earth, and there you will serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known, even of wood and stone.

At least two more communal lament psalms mention this as part of their curse unit—44:11–12:

11. You scatter us among the nations.
12. You sell your people for no price  
and you do not set high their price.

and 60:1, where the lament begins:

1. O God, thou hast cast us off,  
thou hast scattered us,  
thou hast been displeased.

More graphic curses were pronounced when dealing with the lack of a proper burial or disrespect for the dead. The Lord warns in Leviticus 26:22 and Deuteronomy 28:25–26 that if Israel does not adhere to the covenant, he would cause Israel to be smitten before its enemies seven ways and that its “carcass will be food for the fowl of

the air and for the beasts of the earth.”<sup>24</sup> This communal lament and curse reflect the imagery of Israel as a beast designated for slaughter, as a wild enemy, as a ferocious beast, and, in the description of the community’s dead, as an actual feast for wild animals. This idea of slaughter first appears in Psalm 44:11, which reads: “You give us out as a sheep carcass.” The Psalmist uses this same imagery later in a poem that describes Israel as “sheep raised for slaughter” (v. 22). Psalm 74:19 describes the enemy as a wild beast: “Don’t give your turtledove<sup>25</sup> to the multitude/wild beast!” and implicitly in verses 4 and 23 in their references to the enemy’s roaring.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Psalm 79:2 explicitly states a curse that is also found almost word for word in Deuteronomy 28:26:

They gave the corpses of your servants as food to the fowl of the air, the flesh of your covenant keepers to the wild beasts. (Psalm 79:2)

And your carcass shall be meat unto all the fowl of the air, and unto the beasts of the earth, and no man shall chase them away. (Deuteronomy 28:26)<sup>27</sup>

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24. This appears to be a common type of curse found in the Assyrian treaty-covenant texts. See the Aramaic Sefire Inscription I A, lines 30–32 and Inscription II A, 9. Discussed in Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995), 162–66. See also Hillers, *Treaty-Curses*, 54–56.

25. The use of the word for turtledove is problematic, though it may have covenantal allusions. See Christopher T. Begg, “The Covenantal Dove in Psalm LXXIV 19–20,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37/1 (1987): 78–80.

26. Though not exactly the same thing, Psalm 44:19 records an interesting curse description: “Thus, you crushed us in the place of the sea monsters and clothed us over with the deepest darkness (shadow of death?).” Though this curse finds no parallel in Deuteronomy, extrabiblical treaties record curses of overwhelming floods, which will cover the treaty breaker. In the Esarhaddon treaty this curse is mentioned twice. The first is in lines 488–89, “May a flood, an irresistible deluge, come up from the earth and devastate you!” The second is line 442, “[May] the gods [ . . . ] your land with a mighty flood!” For the translation of the Esarhaddon treaty, see D. J. Wiseman, “The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon,” *Iraq* 20 (1958): 1–99, quotations on pp. 66 and 62.

27. This curse also contains imagery and language suggesting lack of a proper burial for the dead. Similar curses are found in the extrabiblical material. Three times in the Esarhaddon treaty (lines 426–27) it is mentioned that the body of the treaty breaker will not receive a burial, instead providing a meal for wild animals, which was discussed earlier. For a discussion of this curse, see Hillers, *Treaty-Curses*, 68–69. In another text,

The final two references above suggest that the image of a feast, while normally positive, could also connote a curse. Similarly, Psalm 60:3 states that God caused Israel to “drink the wine of astonishment,” and Psalm 80:5 informs us that Israel eats “the bread of tears” and drinks “tears . . . in great measure.” These psalms may reflect the image of feasting as a way to symbolize the establishing of covenantal relationships. As noted above, Exodus 24 shows the feast as a covenant-establishing ritual, and Psalm 74 describes God’s covenantal history. In addition, Deuteronomy 32:13–14 depicts God’s relationship with the people of Israel as one in which he miraculously provided for them food and drink while they were in the wilderness. The feast was meant to be a positive, communal experience, and the use of the imagery of a negative feast in the communal laments suggests that the communal, joyful covenant relationship between God and Israel was broken.

In the final curse Israel is mocked, scorned, and derided.<sup>28</sup> Again, Deuteronomy 28:37 anticipates this curse in warning the Israelites that if they do not keep their covenant obligations they “will be an appalling waste, a proverb and an object of taunting among all the nations where God will place you.” In the modern view, this curse may seem the least destructive, but its prominence in the communal laments suggests just the opposite. One scholar suggests that a strong honor/shame continuum governed much of ancient Israel’s cultural and social behavior, which became fundamental in defining its cultural identity.<sup>29</sup> The prominence of this curse, as opposed to curses attached to the lack of proper burial or military loss, likely defined the destructive nature of curses since it stripped Israel of its self-identity. This appears to be a good reason for its prominence in the communal lament psalms.<sup>30</sup> Psalm 44 illustrates this curse in great detail:

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the curse is explicit, “May his corpse drop and have no one to bury it!” L. W. King, *Babylonian Boundary-Stones and Memorial-Tablets in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1912), 47, iv 19–20.

28. It is also mentioned in 80:6, “You set us at strife with our neighbors / our enemies mock us at will.”

29. See Saul M. Olyan, “Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115/2 (1996): 201–18.

30. Lyn M. Bechtel, “The Perception of Shame within the Divine-Human Relationship in Biblical Israel,” in *Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson*,

13. You make us an object of taunting to our neighbors,  
mocking and derision to those who surround us.
14. You make us a proverb to the nations,  
an object of head-shaking among the peoples.
15. Every day, I am aware of my humiliation,  
and I am clothed with the shame of my face,
16. From the sound of the taunter and the blasphemer  
before the enemy, the avenging ones.

Psalm 74 contains the curse in verses 22–23:

22. Arise, O God, contend your dispute!  
Remember your taunting from the godless all/every day!
23. Do not forget the cry of your adversaries,  
the roar of your adversaries ascending continually.

Psalm 79 includes the curse in verse 4:

We have become an object of taunting to our neighbors  
an object of derision and mocking to those who surround us.

Psalm 80:6 relates that Israel's enemies "mock" them and 89:41 says that the king, who represented all of Israel, "has become an object of taunting to his neighbors" (v. 39) because God had "made void the covenant" with the Davidic dynasty.

### Refutation of Curses

As shown above, the communal laments are associated with the treaty-covenant formula in Deuteronomy. Uniquely, these laments not only include a description of the curses, but they also contain a refutation of the reasoning as to why they would have experienced the curses in the first place. In other words, the laments explain that these

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ed. Lewis M. Hopfe (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 84: "YHWH's obligation to protect the people from shaming is never stated directly in any of the covenants but it is assumed, particularly in deuteronomic theology."

curse were unjust since the community had, in fact, been faithful in keeping its covenantal obligations. Only one psalm explicitly states Israel's innocence, but all the laments imply that the community was faithful to its covenants.

Psalm 44:17–18, 20–21 contains the only explicit declaration of Israel's innocence:

17. All this came on us and we did not forget you  
and we did not deal falsely with your covenant.
18. Our hearts did not retreat backwards  
and our steps did not turn away from your path.
- ...
20. If we forgot the name of our God  
and spread our hands to a strange god,<sup>31</sup>
21. Will not God search this?  
For he knows the secrets of the heart.

Verse 17 begins with the protestation that Israel did not deal falsely with God's covenant, which sets up the rest of the refutation in the verses that follow. This was a litmus or loyalty test of sorts, in which God is challenged to expose any duplicity or insincerity that may lie behind the community's words. Moreover, the people of Israel demonstrated their fidelity by remaining true to the covenant and remembering their responsibilities, even as "all this came upon us."<sup>32</sup>

Like the community of Psalm 44, the community of Psalm 80 also proclaims its innocence by stressing its righteous habits. Verse 4

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31. In Jeremiah 19:4–8 it is the worshipping of other gods that is expressed as a breach of the covenant. Interestingly, the consequences are that Israel will be made food for animals and that they will become a "hissing" (שריקה) to the nations.

32. See Gert Kwakkel, "According to My Righteousness": *Upright Behaviour as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26, and 44* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). Also, Adele Berlin's treatment on this theme in Psalm 44, "Psalms and the Literature of Exile: Psalms 137, 44, 69, 78," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 65–84, specifically pages 71–74. See also Mark S. Smith, "Remembering God: Collective Memory in Israelite Religion," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002): 631–51.

expresses the following plea: “How long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people?” Though not as explicit as in Psalm 44, this passage suggests the community is keeping the covenant and is continuing to seek God through prayer in spite of his anger against them. These concepts are reinforced through imagery found later in Psalm 80, which characterizes Israel as a tree planted by God. According to the text, the tree has grown and flourished, becoming a mighty tree, suggesting that the tree has done exactly what it should be doing, which again leads to the question: “Why hast thou [God] broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her?” (Psalm 80:12).

Psalm 74 takes the theme of remembering and forgetting and applies it to God in order to demonstrate the community’s innocence. Verse 2 reminds God that they are his people, his inheritance, and his tribe that he had bought or redeemed in the past.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, 79:8 asks God to forget their past behavior and remember them instead as his “servants” and “saints” (v. 2). This last example demonstrates that one way the communal laments refute the consequences is through emphasizing the community’s relationship to God by designation terminology. Thus, Psalm 79:2 designates Israel as “[God’s] servants” or “[God’s] saints.” Similarly, Psalm 74:19, 21 refers to the community as the “poor” and the “needy,” and 60:5 designates the community as God’s “beloved.” These kinds of designations appear in some treaty-covenant texts that describe the vassal explicitly and in others that refer to those who have rights to the suzerain’s patronage.<sup>34</sup> However,

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33. Psalm 83:3 also makes explicit that the community is God’s people: “They [the enemies] make shrewd counsel against your people / they take counsel against your treasures.” Psalm 60:3 also uses “your people” to describe the community. Psalm 80:17 describes the community as “the man of your right hand” and “the one you have taken as your own.”

34. For the treaty-covenant usage of the designation “servant,” see Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant*, 92–99, 117–19; for the usage of “poor” and “needy” see Steven J. L. Croft, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1987), 50: “עניים [poor] thus emerges as a group term for the faithful in Israel, parallel to צדיקים [righteous] and חסידים [faithful]”; see also W. Dennis Tucker Jr., “A Polysemiotic Approach to the Poor in the Psalms,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31 (2004): 425–39. For the usage of the term *beloved* and associated *love*, see William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 77–87. For the obligation of the suzerain over lesser

one particular designation is found in some of the communal laments and has particularly strong covenantal connotations.

The Hebrew term for *saints* in 79:2 is *ḥasidim* (pronounced *kha-seedeem*), which is the plural, adjectival form of *ḥesed* (pronounced *khesed*). This term is not found in any other Semitic language but is repeated approximately 250 times in the Hebrew Bible and has been the subject of intense interest because it is used to describe the unique relationship between Israel and God. The term *ḥesed*, and variations of it, is found in three communal laments (44:26; 79:2; 89:2, 3, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49) and is the primary element of refutation in Psalm 89. It can be used outside of covenantal contexts, but when it is used within the framework of a covenant it likely refers to the obligations of the suzerain to the vassal.<sup>35</sup> Katherine D. Sakenfeld points out that when God's *ḥesed* is claimed or sought for in the communal laments, it often prefaced or followed up with "a statement indicating that the suppliant's relationship to God is in good repair."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the term *ḥasid* refers to one who "practices *ḥesed*" or "one who deserves *ḥesed*," which demonstrates that Israel has not avoided its covenantal obligations.<sup>37</sup>

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members of society, see F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21/2 (1962): 129–39; see also W. Dennis Tucker Jr., "Is Shame a Matter of Patronage in the Communal Laments?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31/4 (2007): 465–80.

35. Katherine D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Ḥesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 132: "Within the theological covenant analogy, *ḥesed* provided a concise way of expressing the action of Yahweh as suzerain on behalf of his vassal Israel." In light of this, it is not surprising to find usage of the word in Deuteronomy 7:9: "Know that Yahweh is your God, He is the God, the faithful God who keeps the covenant and the *ḥesed* to those loving him."

36. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Ḥesed*, 228. She goes on to say, "It may even be suggested that these statements of the 'deserving' behavior of the suppliant form the backdrop for the . . . assurance of deliverance which often conclude[s] the lament form."

37. Nelson Glueck, *Ḥesed in the Bible*, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), 68–69: "The relationship between God and people was one of mutual rights and duties with *ḥesed* as the norm of conduct. It was a covenant alliance based on *ḥesed* and existing because of *ḥesed*. . . . The *Ḥasidim* fulfill their covenantal obligations in that they practice *ḥesed*. . . . They can be, and remain, *Ḥasidim* only as long as they comport themselves according to the sacred covenant concluded at Sinai and as long as they practice *ḥesed*."

### Appeal for Deliverance Based on Covenantal Obligations

Refutations are often accompanied by the query of “how long” the calamities are to continue. To some extent, this is a rhetorical question because the refutation itself answers that it should be “no longer.” The questioning plea is usually followed by a series of imperatives and jussives exhorting God to act and defend the community according to his covenant obligations, which were conditioned upon Israel’s covenantal integrity. Of course, Israel, as the junior partner of the covenant, cannot enforce its request upon God, but Israel’s expectation for aid is not in vain, for God has covenanted with Israel.

The first example of this type of appeal is found in Psalm 44:23–24, 26:

23. Rouse yourself! why do you sleep, O Lord?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject (us) forever!
24. Why do you hide your face  
and forget our affliction and our oppression?
- ...
26. Arise! Deliver us and redeem us  
for the sake of your *hesed*!

Here the Psalmist clearly states the concern that God may deliberately be unaware of Israel’s predicament, thus necessitating his “waking up” and “remembering” Israel.<sup>38</sup> If God remembered Israel it would demonstrate that he had not rejected Israel. Other communal lament pleas reveal similar sentiments. Psalm 74:1 asks the question “Why, O God, have you rejected us forever,” and verse 10 reads:

Until when? How long, O God?  
will the enemy taunt,  
will the adversary spurn your name forever?

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38. Eising, “זָכַר zākhar,” 70: “The fundamental bond of mutual remembrance that unites God and man leads further to the observation that the covenant idea is obviously also important in this context.” See also Dalit Rom-Shiloni, “Psalm 44: The Powers of Protest,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 70/4 (2008): 683–98.

The plea above is followed by the injunction to “remember” in the next verse, which is also repeated later in verse 18: “Remember that the enemy has reproached and that the fools have blasphemed your name!” Verse 18 begins a structural sequence for the last five verses with each verse alternating between a positive imperative and a negative exhortation, stressing the desire for remembrance:

19. Do not give your turtledove to the multitude/wild beasts!  
Do not forget your poor ever!
20. Look to the covenant! . . .
21. Let not the oppressed return in shame!  
Let the poor and needy praise thy name!
22. Arise, O God, plead your cause!  
Remember how the fool reproaches you daily!
23. Forget not the voice of your enemies!  
The tumult of those that rise up against you grows always.

Psalm 89 also expresses the desire that God “remember” the covenant in two appeals:

46. O Lord, how long?  
Will you hide yourself forever?  
Will your anger burn like fire?
47. Remember how short my time is;  
did you make man in vain?  
...
49. Lord, where are your acts of *hesed* as of old,  
which you swore to your servant David in your truth?
50. Remember, O Lord, the reproach of your servants!  
I bear in my bosom the reproach of all the mighty people.

That the communal lament appeals are concerned with remembrance is not surprising in light of the role it plays in the covenantal texts of the

Pentateuch. Throughout the stipulations recorded in Deuteronomy, Israel is instructed to remember “these things” and obey the law. Deuteronomy 8:1–2 characterizes remembering as a part of the covenantal obligations of Israel:

All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers. And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee. (KJV)

Similarly, Deuteronomy 4:23 declares: “Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord, thy God.”

Yet the covenant text in Leviticus 26 also records God’s obligation to remember Israel, particularly after the community has experienced hardship:

Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land; . . . when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God. (Leviticus 26:42, 44–45 KJV)

In light of this passage, the appeals of the communal laments fit within the covenantal context, which means that the Israelites have become worthy of God’s intervening power in two ways: (1) they are innocent of any wrongdoing (demonstrated through their refutation), and (2) they rely on and trust in God’s covenantal integrity to fulfill his obligations. This last point also employs the term *hesed* in its appeals.<sup>39</sup> Psalm 44 ends with the request that God deliver the community by

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39. Tucker, “Is Shame a Matter of Patronage?” 475: “In the communal laments, especially Psalms 44, 74, and 79, the Psalmists recount the failure of Yahweh as patron to act

virtue of his *hesed*, and in 89:50, one plea queries where God's "*hesed* of old" has gone. In the refutations *hesed* defined Israel's innocence, but here it shows the performance of God's obligations as promised in the covenant.<sup>40</sup>

Other appeals ask God to curse the unnamed adversaries, which is also one of his covenantal obligations. Deuteronomy 30:1–7 contains the Lord's promise that if Israel repents and performs again its covenantal obligations he would "put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee" (v. 7). This promise appears to be at the heart of the appeal in Psalm 79, which begins in verse 5 with the following plea:

5. Until when, O Yahweh?  
Will you be angry forever?  
Will your jealousy burn like fire?

A series of exhortations that follow include:

6. Pour out your anger on the nations who know not You  
and on the nations that do not call on your name!"

...

8. O remember not our former iniquities!  
Let thy tender mercies come quickly to us!

9. Help us, O God of our salvation,  
for the glory of thy name!  
Deliver us, and purge away our sins, for thy name's sake!

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in a manner that reflects the reciprocal nature of the relationship, and further, in a manner that engenders solidarity."

40. See Sung-Hun Lee, "Lament and the Joy of Salvation in the Lament Psalms," in *Book of Psalms*, 224–47, who explores the role of *hesed* in the individual laments and recognizes both that the Psalmist is concerned with an apparent lack of acts of divine *hesed* as well as an assurance that God will perform them in the future: "The petitioner's confidence in God's *hesed* is ultimately based on the unconditional aspect of his *hesed* in the covenant relationship" (p. 246). See also Loren D. Crow, "The Rhetoric of Psalm 44," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (1992): 400. "The supplicant appeals to the actions resulting from God's steadfast love . . . , that is, those things which the Divine does because of the relationship that exists between God and Israel."

10. Why should the heathen say, “Where is their God?”  
 let it be known among the nations in our sight,  
 the vengeance for your servants’ blood  
 that was poured out.
11. Let the moaning of the prisoner come before thee;  
 according to your mighty power  
 preserve those who are to die.
12. Turn on our neighbors seven times the mocking  
 with which they mocked you!

This appeal is interesting because of its reciprocal nature. Verse 6 exhorts God to pour out his anger, suggesting a response in kind to Israel’s blood being poured out like water as described in verse 3. Verse 6 also uses covenantal terminology asking that the Lord punish those who do not “know” him. The term *know*, as used here, has covenantal significance in treaty-covenants.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the exhortation recorded in verse 12, citing the multiplication of the curse by seven, is found throughout the curse unit in Leviticus 26, which records warnings to the Israelites that God would punish them seven times more if they did not keep their covenant obligations.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, Deuteronomy 28:7 records God’s promise that if Israel keeps its covenantal obligations, “the Lord shall cause thine enemies that rise up against thee to be smitten before thy face: they shall come out against thee one

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41. Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Treaty Background of Hebrew *YĀDAʿ*,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 181 (February 1966): 31, 33: “The most obvious technical usage of ‘know’ is that with reference to mutual legal recognition on the part of the suzerain and vassal. . . . ‘Know’ is also used as a technical term for recognition of the treaty stipulations as binding.” In Exodus 2:24–25, God is found “remembering the covenant” he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and then “knowing” Israel.

42. “And if ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins” (Leviticus 26:18 KJV); “And if ye walk contrary unto me, and will not hearken unto me, I will bring seven times more plagues upon you according to your sins” (Leviticus 26:21 KJV); “Then will I also walk contrary unto you, and will punish you yet seven times for your sins” (Leviticus 26:24 KJV). One reference in particular, Leviticus 26:28, appears to be reflected in many of the pleas: “Then I will walk contrary unto you also in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins.” Psalms 74:1; 79:6; 80:4; and 89:46 all are pleas asking how long God will be angry with his people. See also Deuteronomy 29:19–28, where the explanation of God’s wrath is given.

way, and flee before thee seven ways.” Thus, the Psalmist’s request that God smite the enemy seven times includes a reciprocal curse for the community and, at the same time, a reliance on the covenantal promise made by God himself.

Like Psalm 79, the appeal in Psalm 83 provides a series of curses that God can use against his enemy:

1. Keep not your silence, O God!  
Hold not your peace and be not still, O God!

...

9. Do unto them as you did to the Midianites  
as to Sisera, to Jabin, at the Kidron stream.

...

11. Make their nobles like Oreb, and like Zeeb  
all their princes as Zebah and as Zalmunna.

...

13. O my God, make them as thistledown,  
as stubble before the wind.

14. As the fire burns the woods,  
as the flame lights the mountains afire,

15. Persecute them with your whirlwind  
and terrify them with your storm.

16. Fill their faces with shame . . .

17. Let them be confused and troubled forever  
yea, let them be put to shame and die.

The final curse, to shame and to confuse the enemy, is a prominent curse Israel experienced, and therefore it is not surprising that the community, after proclaiming its innocence, requests that the enemy experience the same. Like the other communal laments, those that request the curses rely on the covenantal relationship for their

fulfillment. This demonstrates an inherent trust in one's ability to have a personal relationship with Deity, which is one of the unique features of Israelite theology.

### Vow of Praise

A promise or declaration represents the final element of the communal lament psalms. In this sense Israel vows to continue to praise God in the future. This may seem unrelated to the treaty-covenant formula, but it reflects the document clause with its declaration of future praise and serves the same purpose, which is to continue to remember the covenant. Often this declaration includes a proclamation of God's kingship that recognizes him as suzerain and emphasizes both the community's historical acceptance and their current acceptance of the covenantal arrangement.

Sometimes the vow is found near the end of a psalm and at other times it may open a psalm or act as a divider between the various sections of a psalm. For example, Psalm 44:8 contains a promise that the community will "sing praises to God every day and . . . praise your name forever." This vow of praise separates the historical unit from the curse/refutation unit. As such, it functions as a bridge between the two units and also highlights that Israel will continue to recognize the covenant.<sup>43</sup> Earlier, the Psalmist declared in verse 4: "You are my king, O God, (thus) command the deliverance of Jacob." As with the vow of praise, this declaration follows a historical section and emphasizes the continuity between the covenantal history and the current, Israelite community. Hence, the covenantal integrity of Israel is acknowledged and confirmed through both the proclamation and the declaration.

Similar to Psalm 44, Psalm 74 possesses both a reference to future praise and a declaration of God's kingship. The kingly declaration

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43. Crow, "Rhetoric of Psalm 44," 396: "As the poet reminds God, the community both finds its worth in God and gives God perpetual praise (v. 9). Not only is the community faithful in its trust in God, it also faithfully represents the traditions of its ancestors. . . . In this way the poet artfully alludes to the earlier section in order to fortify the assertion that the present community is behaving faithfully. . . . Furthermore, it argues that, since the present community's action is equivalent to that of the ancestors, God's behavior ought to be (and, so far as we know yet, *is*) like that narrated in vv. 2-4."

in verse 12 says, “God is my king from olden times, working salvation in the midst of the earth.” Unlike some of the lament psalms, this declaration precedes the historical passage, instead of following it. But the purpose is the same as that of Psalm 44 in stressing that the kingship of God has been established “from olden times.” This refutation acts as a warning that Israel will always remember its covenantal relationship with God and that God will always perform acts commensurate with his covenantal obligations. The promise of future praise is implied in verse 21:

Let not the oppressed return in shame!  
Let the poor and the needy praise your name!

Here the Psalmist suggests that because of a calamity, Israel cannot perform praise unless God fulfills his obligations. In other words, this verse emphasizes a conditional vow of the Israelites to praise God and to recount their history only after their deliverance from the enemy.<sup>44</sup>

Psalm 79:13 contains an appeal for God to enact curses against the enemy:

Then we—your people and sheep of your pasture—  
will give you thanks forever.  
For all time we shall tell Your praises.

Like the vow in Psalm 74, this one is conditioned upon the placement of the curses. The *waw* conjunction (ו in the Hebrew) that begins the bicolon connects the imperatives of verses 11 and 12 to the vow, creating an if/then clause: if God responds to the cries of the prisoners avenging them seven times more than the mocking of their enemies, then the covenant people will praise God and recount their history. Psalm 80:18 contains a similar conditional promise:

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44. Tony W. Cartledge, “Conditional Vows in the Psalms of Lament: A New Approach to an Old Problem,” in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy*, ed. Kenneth G. Hoglund, Elizabeth F. Huwiler, Jonathan T. Glass, and Roger W. Lee (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 77–94. Though the psalms presented in the paper are not the communal lament psalms of this study, the conclusions are the same.

We will not turn away from You.  
 Preserve our life that we may invoke Your name.

Unlike 79, the promise of praise in 89 appears in the first two verses but is performed at the end of the psalm:

1. I will sing of the Lord's *hesed* forever;  
 to all generations I will proclaim  
 your faithfulness with my mouth.
2. For I declare, "Your *hesed* is confirmed forever;  
 there in the heavens You establish Your faithfulness."

...

52. Blessed is the Lord forever, amen and amen.

In both the beginning and the end of this psalm, the vow of praise encompasses its main purpose, which is to show that the covenantal obligations of Israel have been and will be kept, even when God does not seem to meet his obligations. This is reinforced with the declaration of kingship in Psalm 89:18: "For indeed, Yahweh is our shield, the Holy One of Israel is indeed, our king." Like the other declarations of kingship found elsewhere, this declaration also separates historical units. Psalm 89:6–15 describes the mythical imagery of God as the warrior of creation who is praised by the divine assembly and whose kingship over all is made clear. Another section follows and describes the blessed state of those on earth who recognize the "joyful shout," or the outward proclamation of God's sovereign power. This declaration of praise precedes the historical unit that describes the covenant given to David. Here the declaration makes the description of the past community in 89:16–18 apply to contemporary Israel. Thus, just as in the other lament psalms, the vow of praise demonstrates the valid covenantal relationship that should exist in the community.

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that elements of Israelite culture, society, and even poetry were affected by outside influences, but it is also true

that the Bible depicts a people who held a unique relationship with their Deity. So while the treaty-covenant formula can be found elsewhere, only in the Bible does it describe the affiliation between a community and the divine. The communal laments represent a unique window into the minds of those who valued their covenant relationship with God as they sought to engage with and comprehend him.<sup>45</sup> Israel may have experienced tribulation, but the laments portray a community bound to God with a covenant, which ultimately provided security and peace.

For the Latter-day Saint, this unique perspective is actually a familiar one since the ancient Israelite hope that God would keep his word is reflected in the Doctrine and Covenants principle, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed; . . . when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21), and then actually practiced as demonstrated in Doctrine and Covenants 121.<sup>46</sup> We, like Israel of old, also find security in our covenant relationship with God, finding answers to the trials placed upon us, and therefore find our place in the world. Moreover, thanks to the covenant, we understand that anyone can have the same understanding and the same relationship, a concept not lost on the Psalmist, for in Psalm 83:18 the vow, while similar in form, differs in context: “May they [the enemy] know that your name, Yours alone, is the Yahweh, supreme over all the earth” (v. 19). Thus, the relationship between God and Israel expressed in the communal laments is now understood to be one that all, even the enemy, can experience. In this verse, then, is encapsulated the message and meaning of the covenant, a message that resonates in us today.

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45. William M. Soll, “The Israelite Lament: Faith Seeking Understanding,” *Quarterly Review* 8/3 (1988): 79: “The lament is not merely an articulation of unhappiness; it seeks, in the midst of unhappiness, to recover communion with God.”

46. It is interesting to find many, if not all, of the communal lament characteristics in the first six verses of D&C 121, Joseph Smith’s plea to the Lord while in Liberty Jail.