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Dan Belnap

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## Joseph Smith's Plea as Communal Lament

To complement the premiere issue of *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*, which will be sent to our subscribers, we asked Dan Belnap, whose article appears in the first issue, to briefly expand part of his topic for *Insights*.

Though separated by millennia, there are similarities between the communal laments found in the Hebrew Psalter and Joseph Smith's plea in Liberty Jail as recorded in the first six verses of section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants. While many have noted the overall purpose of these laments is to represent Israel's predicament against the forces arrayed against them and their dismay that God has perhaps not been as quick to help as they would have liked, the communal laments demonstrate a striking similarity to the treaty-covenant formula found in Exodus and Deuteronomy,<sup>1</sup> both of which are provided below:

<i>Treaty-Covenant Formula</i>	<i>Communal Lament Formula</i>
I. Historical prologue	I. History of relationship
II. Stipulations	II. Description of curses
III. Invocation-adjudation	III. Refutation of curses
IV. Blessing and curses	IV. Appeal for deliverance based on covenantal obligations
V. Document clause	V. Vow of praise

Though similar, the two formulas differ in intent and voice. Whereas the treaty-covenant formula describes covenant-making and is in the voice of the senior member of the relationship, God, in the communal laments it is the patron, Israel, who is speaking, and the purpose is to maintain the covenant relationship, not create a new one.

Like the communal laments, Joseph's plea in section 121 is in response to calamity that has fallen on the church during his five-month incarceration at Liberty Jail. Because of the brevity of the plea, the specific elements of the formula are not as detailed as in the psalms and often overlap. Thus, the history of relationship includes terminology used to describe covenant relationships ("thy people," "thy servants," "thy suffering saints"), but does not include specific historical events in that relationship. With that said, Joseph's description of God's

power as "maker of heaven, earth, and seas . . . who controlllest and subjectest the devil and . . . Sheol" and who "with [his] sword" will avenge (vv. 4–5) is the image of God as Divine Warrior, one of the prominent images found in communal laments' historical sections and associated with the covenantal promises of God if Israel remained loyal.

Again, because of brevity, Joseph's plea does not detail the nature of the curses, but instead emphasizes the "wrongful" nature of the actions of the church's enemies ("the wrongs of thy people," "these wrongs," "unlawful oppressions," "our wrongs"). Moreover, Joseph's plea refutes the appropriateness or justice of the continuing suffering of the church from these "wrongs": "how long shall they [the church] suffer?" The appeal for deliverance can be found in verse 6: "Remember thy suffering saints." Not only is the noun found in the communal laments and is covenantal in nature, but also the plea for God to remember is found in a number of the communal laments, and the commandment to remember is an integral part of the original covenantal texts, as God commanded Israel to remember the covenant. Finally, Joseph ends the plea with the promise that "thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever" if God does respond, reminiscent of similar vows of praise found in the communal laments. Thus, like the communal laments found in the Psalter, Joseph's plea demonstrates the unique covenantal relationship that Israel has, and can rely on, with God. ♦

By Dan Belnap

Assistant Professor, Department of Ancient Scripture, BYU

### Note

1. For more on the formula's use in the Old Testament, see Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981). The formula has also been recognized in the Book of Mormon. See Stephen D. Ricks, "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin's Address (Mosiah 1–6)," *BYU Studies* 24/2 (1984): 151–62; and 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.