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Tears of Anger:

The Compositional Function and Theology of Imprecation in the Book of Lamentations

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APPROVAL SHEET

Tears of Anger:
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This dissertation is the result of the outpouring of many into my life, and I wish to dedicate this work to a number of beloved individuals:

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And to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Word of God, of whom this work is but a dark reflection in a glass, but who provides all meaning to the inspired Scriptures.

Soli Deo gloria.

Contents

ABSTRACT

Since the rise of redaction criticism as an area of scriptural exploration, much scholarship has centered on the composition of discrete biblical texts. Recently, research has expanded into treatments of canonical composition, determining how individual books unite into the larger Old Testament, New Testament, or biblical corpus. Given the lacuna surrounding these areas of research into the Old Testament Writings, this dissertation will explore compositional strategy and theology in the book of Lamentations. The thesis of this dissertation proposes that the imprecations of the book of Lamentations function textually as compositional seams to unite the poems into a cohesive whole while also functioning theologically to encapsulate the core message of the book, the binding and ongoing nature of Israel's covenant with Yahweh.

To determine the validity of this thesis, multiple avenues of research are required. First, a survey of contemporary scholarship concerning Lamentations as a whole will establish parameters for the subsequent work in this dissertation. Curse texts were common in the ancient world, and, given that Lamentations is a product of its environment, it is both helpful and necessary to determine the form and function of ancient Near Eastern (ANE) imprecatory texts for comparative purposes. Following an analysis of the nature and theology of ANE imprecations, grammatical-historical exegesis will combine with biblical-theological and canonical-theological methodologies to examine canonical imprecations of both Testaments.

With literary, cultural, and canonical context firmly established, the study turns to an exegetical treatment of the imprecations within Lamentations specifically. The discussion is bipartite, focusing first on the exposition of the imprecatory texts themselves (1:21–22; 3:64–66; 4:21–22) before moving on to an exploration of their compositional value in the book as a whole. Other canonical works are examined for indications of canonical seams before demonstrating the

usage of imprecation as compositional strategy in Lamentations to unite the five poems into a cohesive whole. Moreover, as will be demonstrated, the imprecations contain the larger theology of Lamentations in microcosm, and they serve as a potential theological key to the book as a whole, providing in brief the major themes of the poems.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABR	*Australian Biblical Review*
AcT	*Acta Theologica*
AcT Supplementum	*Acta Theologica Supplementum*
ALCBH	Tawil, Hayim ben Josef. *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic.* Brooklyn: Ktav Publishing, 2009.
ANE	Ancient Near East
ANET	Pritchard, James B., ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
AOS	American Oriental Series
ARAB	Luckenbill, Daniel David. *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*. 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926–1927.
ASV	American Standard Version
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BC	Before Christ
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1907. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007.
BEATAJ	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentum
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BH	Biblical Hebrew
Bib	*Biblica*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
CAD	Gelb, Ignace J., et al., eds. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. 21 vols. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010.
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CC	Continental Commentaries
Chm	*Churchman*
COS	*The Context of Scripture*. Edited by William W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997‑2002.
CTQ	*Concordia Theological Quarterly*
CurBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
D	Damascus Document
DCH	Clines, David J. A., ed. *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 1993–2016.
DSD	*Dead Sea Discoveries*
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls

DSSSE	García Martínez, Florentino, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
DtrH	Deuteronomistic History
EBTC	Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary
EuroJTh	European Journal of Theology
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FBBS	Facet Books, Biblical Series
FIOTL	Formation and Interpretation of Old Testament Literature
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
HALOT	Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
HAR	*Hebrew Annual Review*
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HdO	Handbuch der Orientalistik
HHBS	History of Biblical Studies
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Int	*Interpretation*
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JANER	*Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*
JANES	*Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBQ	*Jewish Bible Quarterly*
JEA	*Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JHebS	*Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
LANE	*Languages of the Ancient Near East*
LE	*Lament over Eridu*
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LN	*Lament over Nippur*
LSAWS	*Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic*
LSUr	*Lament over Sumer and Ur*
LU	*Lament over Ur*

LW	*Lament over Uruk*
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	VanGemeren, Willem A., ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.* 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTL	New Testament Library
NWL	Northwest Semitic language group
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
Or	*Orientalia (NS)*
OTE	*Old Testament Essays*
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
Proof	*Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*
RB	*Revue biblique*
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
RC	*Religion Compass*
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RTR	*Reformed Theological Review*
SAOC	Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SCL	Sumerian City Laments
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SO	*Symbolae Osloenses*
SOTSMS	Society for Old Testament Studies Monograph Series
StBibLit	Studies in Biblical Literature
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
SubBi	Subsidia Biblica
TDOT	Botterweck, G. Johannes, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Translated by John T. Willis, et al. 17 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2021.
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	*Vetus Testamentum* Supplement

WAW	Writings from the Ancient World
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The Problem

The book of Lamentations, though it enjoyed a brief revival among academics in the twentieth century, remains an oft-neglected text in the larger world of biblical scholarship. To be sure, the lacuna in research is an understandable one. As a recent book by Tod Linafelt asserts, the best one can do is "survive" Lamentations; to enjoy it, to plumb the depths of its poems of pain, is a difficult undertaking not for the faint of heart.[1] Still, the songs of grief offer an intricate tapestry of theology, popular religion, and ancient Near Eastern (ANE) culture which, when woven together expertly by the author, comprise a book which is both unique in the canon and continuous with the canonical books in its approach to Yahweh.

Since at least the nineteenth century, studies of Lamentations have primarily focused on the structure of the book. Carl Budde, in his seminal article, blazed the trail which scholars of Lamentations have trod ever since: the close analysis of meter and metrical patterns within the discrete poems of the book.[2] Budde concluded the book was composed in a limping 3+2 metrical pattern he dubbed *qinah*, and a variety of studies have followed his work—frequently with varying conclusions.[3] Subsequent research has focused on the acrostic nature of the poems as

[1] Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000). Consider also the observation of Alan Cooper that there are few truly new commentaries and little original exegesis of Lamentations. See Alan Cooper, "The Message of Lamentations," *JANES* 28, no. 1 (2001): 9–10.

[2] C. Budde, "Das hebräische Klagelied," *ZAW* 2 (1882): 1–52.

[3] For the acrostic chapters 1–3, each bicolon/strophe is comprised of three stressed syllables in one line followed by two stressed syllables in the next. See ibid., 24. This follows an earlier conclusion by Robert Lowth. See Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (London: Chadwick, 1847), 189–90.

well, and no small amount of work has vivisected the alphabetical structure of each chapter and colon of Lamentations.[4]

This emphasis on microstructure has regrettably been poorly balanced by consideration of the macrostructure of the book. Indeed, a majority of Lamentations scholars find nothing to be gained by such research, seeing the book as a compilation of disconnected poems without any major unifying compositional strategy or structural technique.[5] Not all scholars, of course, hold this opinion, and David Marcus, in his analysis of doublets in Lamentations, rightly observes, "Of all the books of the Bible perhaps none displays such intentional artificial compositional structure as the Book of Lamentations."[6] This structure is observable on a variety of levels, but few have posited a convincing overall compositional strategy for the book.

Within this consideration of structure, the role of the imprecatory texts has been overlooked entirely (Lam 1:21–22; 3:64–66). The imprecations feature a rich theology as well—another neglected area in Lamentations scholarship.[7] This dissertation seeks to fill this gap in research by careful consideration of the structural and theological roles of the imprecations of Lamentations. The imprecations of the book of Lamentations function textually as compositional seams to unite the poems into a cohesive whole while also functioning theologically to encapsulate the core message of the book, the binding and ongoing nature of Israel's covenant

[4] For an overview of contemporary research on these microstructural concerns, see C. W. Miller, "The Book of Lamentations in Recent Research," *CurBR* 1, no. 1 (2002): 9–29.

[5] Ibid., 13.

[6] David Marcus, "Non-Recurring Doublets in the Book of Lamentations," *HAR* 10 (1986): 177.

[7] Indeed, many recent critics decry the very concept of a biblical theology of Lamentations, believing instead the book is simply an outworking of grief and trauma without intended theological content. Claus Westermann, for example, writes that "Lamentations is not literature–not even theological literature," but instead is simply the history of Israel's trauma, pain, and suffering. See Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 86.

relationship with Yahweh. To demonstrate this thesis, the dissertation will treat both landmark and recent scholarship, ANE parallels, and canonical imprecations of both Testaments before exegeting Lamentations itself and synthesizing a biblical theology for the book.

Current State of Research

As Bo Johnson states, recent research on Lamentations has focused primarily on two areas: textual criticism and theological purpose.[8] This dissertation seeks to use the former to illumine the latter, and, as such, it is necessary to begin with a brief treatment of major issues in contemporary Lamentations scholarship.

Structure of Lamentations

Overview of the Poems

Lamentations is a collection of five poems bewailing the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 587 BC.[9] It is likely—"almost unanimously accepted," per Westermann—that the poems were composed in Jerusalem immediately after the fall, although it is possible they originated later in the exile; the range of possible composition dates spans from the destruction of the city in 587 until the issuance of the edict of Cyrus in 538 BC, dates which encompass the whole of the Babylonian exile.[10] The poems are not narrative, but they nevertheless function

[8] Bo Johnson, "Form and Message in Lamentations," *ZAW* 97, no. 1 (1985): 58.

[9] The details of the historical background of Lamentations are some of the few data concerning the book which receive no dispute. As Westermann states, "There is no serious challenge to the view that the songs represent a reaction to the disaster of 587 BCE." See idem, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 55. Likewise, for Elie Assis, "Lamentations is a rational reflection on the horrifying situation." See Elie Assis, "The Alphabetic Acrostic in the Book of Lamentations," *CBQ* 69, no. 4 (2007): 717.

[10] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 53–56. See also Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 161.

narratively to recount the pain and loss of the destruction which led to the exile. As such, the poems are bound in a specific time and place while emphasizing the narrative dimension of space: the horror of the destruction is paused in time, ever-present to the poet, and the concerns of the place itself are paramount. From this basis, the poet then generates speakers, phrases, and concepts which delineate the experience of trauma and his understanding of Yahweh in an almost narratival fashion while remaining bound in the forms and conventions of Hebrew poetry.[11] This exilic provenance, like the historical background of the poems themselves, is similarly accepted by almost all scholars, and it is possible the book found life in use in liturgical rites prior to the post-exilic period.[12] That the individual songs and perhaps the entire collection were used in cultic ways is (again) widely accepted, and debates of authorship have often postulated a cultic origin for the book, with the poems being composed by cult prophets, priests, or temple singers whose heirs later compiled them into a liturgical anthology.[13]

Regardless of authorship, the poems represent sophisticated—and beautiful—Hebrew poetry, and their composer was an artisan of the first order. Few deny the craftsmanship of these

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[11] For a full discussion of the necessities of time and space in biblical narrative forms and how they may be utilized in other genres, see Simon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989; repr., New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 141–96. Bar-Efrat explains the compositional needs of narratives as follows: "In every narrative it is possible to discern three strata: 1. the stratum of language–the words and sentences of which the narrative is composed; 2. the stratum of what is represented by those words, namely the 'world' described in the narrative: the characters, events and settings; 3. the stratum of meanings, that is the concepts, views and values embodied in the narrative, which are expressed principally through the speech and actions of the characters, their fate and the general course of events." See idem, *Narrative Art*, 197.

[12] Siegfried Bergler writes that the present pain of the loss of Jerusalem and temple worship required an immediate liturgical response, and the poems of Lamentations filled that purpose: "Die Threni sind eine zu kultischen Verwendungszwecken zusammengestellte Sammlung von fünf aus der konkraten Not des Augenblicks heraus geschaffenen Gedichten." See Siegfried Bergler, "Threni V – nu rein alphabetisierendes Lied? Versuch einer Deutung," *VT* 27, no. 3 (1977): 308.

[13] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 24, 61–62; Robert B. Salters, "Searching for Pattern in Lamentations," *OTE* 11, no. 1 (1998): 102. Bertil Albrektson, for his part, laments that questions of authorship have so dominated research in Lamentations. See Bertil Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology of the Book of Lamentations, with a Critical Edition of the Peshitta Text*, Studia Theologica Lundensia 21 (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1963), 214–15.

poems: "Wenn ich davon ausgehe, daß in dem Buche der Klagelieder die Kunst der poetischen Form sich in besonders hoher Steigerung darstellt, so stehe ich wohl auf dem Boden einer allgemein zugestandenen Thatsache."[14] Such is the compositional skill exhibited by the poetry of Lamentations that poetic devices, features, and structure have become a primary point of entry for studies of the book. In the words of Amy Erickson and Andrew R. Davis, however, "poetry generates excess," and the scholar must be wary of focusing on the poetic particulars at the expense of the larger theological message contained within the various cantos, subcantos, and strophes of the songs.[15]

One such excess is the focus of many researchers on the various *Gattungen* attributed to sundry sections of the songs. While Lamentations is, at base, ANE lament, the poems also exhibit features of dirge, prayer, and other genres. Most scholars classify Lamentations 5 as a communal lament, but the *Gattung* of the other chapters remains disputed. Dirge or individual lament are perhaps the most popular designations for portions of chapters 1, 2, and 4, and chapter 3 is commonly viewed as a blend of both individual and communal laments with some dirge elements.[16] With that said, the lament features, whether individual or communal, of the songs are unusual, and they vary from those of the lament psalms without falling completely into the style of the inherently mournful dirge.[17] While a full treatment of genres within Lamentations is

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[14] Budde, "Das hebräische Klagelied," 2.

[15] Amy Erickson and Andrew R. Davis, "Recent Research on the Megilloth (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther)," *CurBR* 14, no. 3 (2016): 311. For the terminology of biblical poetry, see Marjo C. A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, "Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry," in *Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, LHBOTS 74, ed. Willem van der Meer and Johannes C. de Moor (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 1–61.

[16] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 7–10. For his part, Westermann believes that dirge, which he does not consider a distinct OT genre, is used very sparingly within Lamentations.

[17] Salters, "Searching for Pattern," 101-2.

beyond the scope of this dissertation, it will be assumed that Lamentations is indeed primarily lament, both individual and communal, and its affinities with both canonical and other extant ANE laments, particularly as they concern imprecation, will be explored in later chapters.[18] Here it is sufficient to note the poems have been thought to swing almost haphazardly between *Gattungen*, and this observation has hampered attempts to find a unified structure or compositional strategy in the book.

Acrostic Structure

The most obvious feature of the poetry of Lamentations is its alphabetical acrostic form. Each of the first four chapters forms a discrete twenty-two-line alphabetical acrostic (tripled into sixty-six lines in chapter 3); only chapter 5 lacks this organizational structure. The sequence acrostic, wherein each line of poetry begins with either the next letter of the alphabet or the next number in sequence, is a common ANE poetic form.[19] Indeed, such is the prevalence of acrostics in ANE literature that, according to John F. Brug, "Aside from parallelism…the acrostic form is one of the few significant techniques of biblical poetry which can be compared with the contemporary poetic techniques of other nations."[20] Interestingly for the acrostics of Lamentations, however,

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[18] *Gattungen* pertinent to the interpretation of imprecations in both Lamentations and its larger ANE context will be discussed more fully in chapter 2.

[19] Other poems also utilize message acrostics, wherein the initial letters of each line or strophe spell out a sentence to reveal a hidden message. See John F. Brug, "Biblical Acrostics and Their Relationship to Other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics," in *The Bible in Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8, ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 283.

[20] Ibid., 283. Brug notes a variety of acrostics across major ANE civilizations. While there are no true Ugaritic acrostics, seven may be found in Akkadian literature: the *Babylonian Theodicy*, *Prayer of Nabu-ushebshi*, two prayers to Marduk (one of which is extant only in two fragments), a hymn of Nebuchadnezzar, and a prayer dedicated to Nabu. Each of these, in contrast to Lamentations, is a message, not alphabetical/sequence acrostic, and, in another contrast, each is magical in nature instead of musical, a distinction observed by Norman K. Gottwald. See Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, SBT 14 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1954), 25–26. William Michael Soll further observes that each of the Babylonian acrostics beyond the *Babylonian Theodicy* are prayers, and so contain direct appeals to the deity. According to Soll, the *Babylonian Theodicy* is the longest extant

the alphabetical pattern is not fixed; chapters 2, 3, and 4 invert the order of ע and פ, perhaps indicating the alphabet itself had not yet reached a universal or fixed order.[21] More likely, however, is that the inversions were made for stylistic or poetic purposes; the acrostic form is hardly one given to chance or accident, and given that the first chapter is in the correct order, the variation found in subsequent chapters is more likely attributable to the intentional work of the poet than an un-ordered alphabet.

Scripture outside of Lamentations contains a number of acrostics, all confined to the OT: Psalms 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Proverbs 31:10–31; and Nahum 1:2–8.[22] While

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ANE acrostic with 297 lines comprised of twenty-seven strophes of eleven lines each. Moreover, the Babylonian poems display a high degree of intentionality unseen in poems of other forms. See William Michael Soll, "Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics," *Bib* 69, no. 3 (1988): 305–16.

Among the Egyptian acrostics, Brug notes a hymn to Amon (contained in Leiden Papyrus I) and a compilation of seven love songs collectively termed "The Stroll" along with a few minor message acrostics. Unlike the Babylonian acrostics, the major Egyptian texts are sequence acrostics (with the hymn to Amon being numerical, not alphabetical), and thus more directly connected in form and structure to the biblical poems. Interestingly, "The Stroll" alternates speaking voices between lovers in the same style as Song of Songs and, more generally, the opening chapters of Lamentations. Given the relative dating of the Egyptian texts and the biblical poems, it is possible, in Brug's view, that the biblical texts derived their inspiration from the Egyptian acrostics. See idem, "Biblical Acrostics," 292–99.

[21] Two archaeological finds support such a hypothesis. The first, an ostracon from Kuntillet ʿAjrud dating to the eighth century BC, contains a partial alphabet with the inverted ע and פ. The second is another ostracon from Izbet Sartah (12th–10th-centuries BC) which served as a practice tablet for scribes learning the Hebrew alphabet. The same inversion of ע and פ is observed in their practice lines. See Brug, "Biblical Acrostics," 287–88. With that said, however, it should be noted that both the fragment from Kuntillet ʿAjrud and the abecedary from Izbet Sartah antedate the poems of Lamentations by a minimum of three hundred years, so they cannot be taken as conclusive proof of the fluidity of the alphabetic order by the time of the fall of Jerusalem. Interestingly, the inversion of ע and פ is found in all four acrostic chapters of DSS 4QLam[a]. See Miller, "Recent Research," 10.

Moreover, other alphabetical irregularities exist in additional acrostic texts. MT Ps. 145, for example, is missing the נ section, but it appears in the Septuagint (LXX) as well as 11QPs[a]. See Brug, "Biblical Acrostics," 284. It is therefore even more likely that the inverted order is a scribal choice rather than reflective of competing alphabetical orders. Still, it must be said that a variety of other ANE languages exhibit a remarkable fluidity to their order, and it possible one order for Hebrew existed prior to the exile and another adopted due to the exilic influences of Aramaic and East Semitic languages encountered in Babylonia. See Mitchell First, "Using the *Pe–Ayin* Order of the Abecedaries of Ancient Israel to Date the Book of Psalms," *JSOT* 38, no. 4 (2014): 471–85.

[22] Hanan Eshel and John Strugnell, "Alphabetical Acrostics in Pre-Tannaitic Hebrew," *CBQ* 62 (2000): 443–444. Eshel and Strugnell also note the alphabetical acrostics present in Sirach 51:13–30 and Syriac Psalm 155 as well as *Apostrophe to Zion* (11QPs[a], 11QPs[b], 4QPs[f]) and the Eschatological Hymn of 4QPs[f] among DSS. See idem, "Alphabetical Acrostics," 445–49. Brug, in his own study, also finds message acrostics in Pss. 25–34 which spell out אלף. See idem, "Biblical Acrostics," 289.

acrostics in the ANE were used to convey hidden information, this does not seem to be the case for the biblical poems, and this lack of general ANE correspondence raises a glaring question: what is the function of the alphabetical acrostic form in the Bible? Again, the use of the device is a deliberate stylistic choice of the poet; as Hanan Eshel and John Strugnell note, no acrostic the length of the biblical examples can possibly be accomplished on accident.[23] That there is some larger purpose at play, therefore, is almost certain, but scholars fiercely debate exactly what that purpose may be. A common opinion is that the acrostics are designed as mnemonics in order to aid memorization, facilitating their recitation in liturgical contexts.[24] More frequently held, however, is the Midrashic explanation that the acrostics simply signify completeness; for Lamentations, this means the poet mourns from א to ת, unifying each poem into a discrete outworking of grief and sorrow.[25] The pain of the poet of Lamentations is thus expressed in logical order, which may be indicative of later redaction of originally oral laments.[26]

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[23] Eshel and Strugnell, "Alphabetical Acrostics," 442.

[24] This is one opinion espoused by Assis and Bergler, among others. See Assis, "Alphabetic Acrostic," 712; Bergler, "Threni V," 305–7. Bergler goes on to state that the acrostic pattern is a proper basis for denying Jeremian authorship of Lamentations, but his argument is sparse and unconvincing.

[25] Assis additionally offers this view as a possibility. See Assis, "Alphabetic Acrostic," 712–13. This position is also shared by Brug ("Biblical Acrostics," 291–92), Gottwald (*Studies*, 26–27), Victoria Hoffer (Victoria Hoffer, "The Poetic Beauty of Grief in Lamentations," in *Why?...How Long? Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, LHBOTS 552, ed. LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda [New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014], 174–75), and Soll ("Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics," 320–21), among others.

Soll rightly observes that alphabetical acrostics were only useful as memory aids to the literate, for only they would have already known the order of the alphabet; acrostics would have been useless to anyone without an existing knowledge of writing. See idem, "Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics," 321. For the unifying nature of the acrostic, see Miller, "Recent Research," 16.

[26] Assis, "Alphabetic Acrostic," 717–19; Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 63–64, 100–103. The original orality of Lamentations is contested by Soll, who believes the acrostic forms are original to both Babylonian and Hebrew acrostics, which were scribal in origin. See idem, "Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics," 312.

That the message of Lamentations is presented in acrostic form connects its intent with that of the wisdom literature and the Psalter, and the link between form and meaning cannot be avoided in one's interpretation of the book.[27] While the acrostic pattern itself may hold no inherent meaning beyond a simple organizational principle, it nevertheless points the astute reader to the poet's intentional use of form and structure in the book. As scholars continue to research the nature of the acrostics and their links to other canonical and ANE texts, their own work should draw attention to the absence of research into other structural elements of Lamentations and their attendant exegetical and theological implications.

Qinah Meter

Perhaps no area of research in Lamentations has drawn more attention—and recent debate—than the metrical patterns of both the individual poems and the book as a whole. Since Budde's assertion in the late nineteenth-century that Lamentations displays the limping 3+2 *qinah* meter, no small amount of ink has been spilled to both prove and disprove his claim.[28] A variety of analytical techniques have been brought to bear on the relatively short book of Lamentations, often with wildly differing results, so that, while the existence of *qinah* meter is generally accepted, it is by no means incontrovertible.[29]

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[27] Assis, "Alphabetic Acrostic," 715–16, 719–21. As Elaine Theresa James correctly states, "Form is the poem itself, not merely its container." See Elaine Theresa James, "The Aesthetics of Biblical Acrostics," *JSOT* 46, no. 3 (2022): 370.

[28] Budde, "Das hebräische Klagelied," 24. Miller lists no fewer than eight major studies on *qinah* in Lamentations between 1972 and 1999, and that number has undoubtedly more than doubled in the years since. See idem, "Recent Research," 15.

[29] Even the same author seems to arrive at differing conclusions across his own work. David Noel Freedman has published a series of articles on the biblical acrostics, and while he observes metrical variations in the text of Lamentations in an earlier study, he confirms the use of *qinah* in two later articles. See David Noel Freedman, "Acrostics and Metrics in Hebrew Poetry," *HTR* 65, no. 3 (1972): 367–92; David Noel Freedman, "Acrostic Poems in the Hebrew Bible: Alphabetic and Otherwise," *CBQ* 48, no. 3 (1986): 408–31; and David Noel

Among the more significant studies to focus exclusively on meter is that of William H. Shea.[30] Throughout both major and minor structural units of Lamentations, Shea finds evidence of the 3+2 pattern. Bicola are formed of one line of three stresses and one line of two stresses; chapters 1–3 feature canticles formed by triplets of bicola; and even the book as a whole is composed of three standard acrostic chapters and two differently-formed chapters.[31] Still, Shea notes that the 3+2 meter is not limited in the biblical literature to laments, and other metrical patterns, most notably 2+2, 3+3, and 2+3, are present both in Lamentations and other biblical laments.[32] Budde's pattern cannot be considered definite for Lamentations in particular nor lament in general, despite his designation of it as *qinah* (קִנָה).

W. Randall Garr agrees, seeing *qinah* as both a significant feature of biblical poetry but one which is difficult to properly define. The 3+2 pattern itself is not limited to *qinah*, and *qinah* seems to demonstrate no formal parallelism in the style of other biblical poetry, instead featuring echoes across cola in lieu of the hallmark Hebrew poetic device.[33] Lamentations in particular varies from the *qinoth* of other biblical poetry in terms of overall syntax: generally, *qinoth* follow narrative prose syntactic conventions, particularly the verb + direct object + prepositional phrase word order, but those of Lamentations do so with far less regularity, in part due to the use of other sound devices which necessitate changes in syntax.[34] James L. Kugel, writing two years

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Freedman and Erich A. von Fange, "Metrics in Hebrew Poetry: The Book of Lamentations Revisited," *CTQ* 60 (1996): 279–305.

[30] William H. Shea, "The *qinah* Structure of the Book of Lamentations," *Bib* 60, no. 1 (1979): 103–7.

[31] Ibid., 105–6.

[32] Ibid., 103.

[33] W. Randall Garr, "The Qinah: A Study of Poetic Meter, Syntax and Style," *ZAW* 95 (1983): 62–63.

[34] Ibid., 55–63. Lamentations uses the given V+DO+PrPh order only 57% of the time, whereas other biblical laments follow that syntax 70% of the time. This has led Garr to question the status of Lamentations as a formal Hebrew lament, classifying it more generally as a different (unnamed) musical form; see ibid., 60–61.

before Garr, arrives at a similar conclusion, preferring to evaluate the poems of Lamentations based on any parallelism or other definite Hebraic conventions as opposed to meter. Such is his distaste for the importance placed on Budde's alleged *qinah* pattern that he decries the "metrical hypothesis" altogether:

> The songs and psalms of the Bible were not written in quantitative meters, as were the songs of ancient Greeks, nor do they have regular rhyme or alliterative patterns, as do the songs of many other peoples. Rather, the basic feature of biblical songs—and, for that matter, of most of the sayings, proverbs, laws, laments, blessings, curses, prayers, and speeches found in the Bible—is the recurrent use of a relatively short sentence-form that consists of two brief [parallel] clauses . . .[35]

For Kugel, unlike Garr, Lamentations is decidedly a lament in form as well as content, and the inconsistent use of *qinah* by the poet as well as its presence in poems "that are not the least bit dirgelike" can only mean that the *qinah* meter itself is not a necessity of lament or dirge but simply another meter common to the poetry of the ANE.[36]

Yet Shea's overall assertion of a 3+2 pattern in Lamentations beyond the clause level remains an attractive one. The lack of acrostic in chapter 5 as well as the truncated lines of chapter 4 certainly speak to a different structural pattern in the final chapters, creating a grouping of chapters 1, 2, and 3 over against chapters 4 and 5, a 3+2 pattern. Conversely, Johann Renkema prefers to group chapters 1 and 2 together in opposition to chapters 3–5 due to the number of cola present in each group and the reversal of the *qinah* patterns in chapters 2 and 3.[37] Renkema himself thus reverses the *qinah* pattern to make it 2+3, in contrast to Shea's 3+2 structure for the

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[35] James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1981), 1. For his take on metrical variation in poetry, see ibid., 59–95.

[36] Ibid., 293. Salters, in agreement with Kugel, states, "In short, Shea's ingenious theory is wishful thinking." See idem, "Searching for Pattern," 96–97.

[37] Johann Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations (I-IV)," in *Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, LHBOTS 74, ed. Willem van der Meer and Johannes C. de Moor (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 388.

book. Of the two, Shea's is the more convincing. With the lack of acrostic in chapter 5 and its slow trailing off into hope and uncertainty, the book begins strongly and finishes weakly, a fact which fits the 3+2 pattern better than the 2+3.[38]

The overall presence or absence of *qinah* within Lamentations remains contested, as do its implications for the larger organization and structure of the book as a whole. This will undoubtedly continue to be an area of research and discussion in future Lamentations studies.

Speaking Voices

A final major area of study in Lamentations is the number and identity of the speaking voices within the poems. This, like the presence of *qinah* meter, has become a rather disputed topic in Lamentations studies, and consensus has yet to be reached on the number of voices in the poems; the identities of the speakers, therefore, remains even more fiercely contested. Such is the disparity across scholars that C. W. Miller, noting the abundance of work in this area, simply declares the lack of consensus on the number of speakers and moves on to other issues.[39] The discrepancies are indeed wide: Elizabeth Boase, for example, finds only four voices across the five poems; Jill Middlemas offers a range of five to seven speakers; and William F. Lanahan identifies five *personae*.[40]

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[38] As Shea notes, "Thus the book of Lamentations was written in two smaller cycles and one larger cycle of the *qinah* or lament pattern which 'dies away,' because it was written in remembrance of Jerusalem, the city that died away." See idem, "*qinah* Structure," 107.

[39] Miller, "Recent Research," 15.

[40] Elizabeth Boase, "The Characterisation of God in Lamentations," *ABR* 56 (2008): 33; Jill Middlemas, "War, Comfort, and Compassion in Lamentations," *ExpTim* 130, no. 8 (2019): 347; William F. Lanahan, "The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations," *JBL* 93, no. 1 (1974): 41.

It is Lanahan's conclusion of five speakers, however, which dominates the literature. He classifies the speakers as follows:

- The "Objective Reporter" (chapters 1 and 2)
- Personified Jerusalem, contrasting with the Objective Reporter (chapters 1 and 2)
- The Defeated Soldier (הַגֶּבֶר of chapter 3)
- The Bourgeois, an inversion of the Objective Reporter (chapter 4)
- The Choral Voice of the exiled Jerusalemites (chapter 5)[41]

Lanahan's proposal for the number and identity of speakers is preferable for a number of reasons. First, it is evident that the first two chapters of Lamentations alternate between a third-person narrator and the first-person account of the personified city, a common rhetorical strategy in ANE city laments.[42] Second, the גבר of chapter 3 is a distinct voice, speaking in first-person but not identified with the personified city. While Lanahan generally equates the גבר with a veteran of the siege, such an identification is not necessary, despite the military terminology used in chapter 3. Recognizing this, Lanahan later tempers his own assertion, stating that, regardless of military service, the גבר adopts a martial vocabulary to explain his plight.[43] Third, the voice of chapter 4, whom Lanahan describes as "the bourgeois," is again distinct from the speaker of chapter 3. The motifs and thematic concerns of chapter 4 vary greatly from those of the previous chapter, and they better suit one who was accustomed to wealth and a higher social status.[44] Finally, the first-person plural voice of chapter 5 lends itself to a choral identity as those from all walks of life and social stations now cry out for restoration and mercy.

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[41] Lanahan, "Speaking Voice," 41–49.

[42] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, BibOr 44 (Rome: Editrice Pontifico Istituto Biblico, 1993), 77–90.

[43] "The speaker in ch. 3 may or may not have been a veteran of the siege of Jerusalem; the fact is that the poet perceived his spiritual downfall through the eyes of the defeated soldier." See Lanahan, "Speaking Voice," 45.

[44] As Lanahan states, "The speaker is describing the total collapse of the state as a nation, as people, and as a culture." See ibid., 47.

As previously noted, Lanahan's system is not perfect. The identification of the גבר with a veteran of the siege is unnecessary. While the bourgeois speaker of chapter 4 expresses concerns which are associated with that particular social class, there is nothing in the text which makes such an identification explicit; it is therefore possible chapter 4 is a return to the third-person narrator of chapters 1 and 2 in a chiasm. Moreover, chapter 4 features a number of first-person plural verbs more in line with the choral voice of chapter 5 (Lam 4:17–20). Some overlap in speakers is therefore possible and accounts for the difficulty in determining an accurate number of voices in the book. Regardless, Lanahan's reading remains preferable to inevitably more convoluted analyses. This dissertation will therefore assume the existence of the five speaking voices identified by Lanahan.

Proposed Theological Keys

Throughout the history of the interpretation of Lamentations, a number of keys have been proposed which seek to unlock the biblical theology of the book, and the search for such keys continues in current scholarship. Most of these build on the initial work of Gottwald's Deuteronomistic reading of Lamentations, either accepting or rejecting the dependence of Lamentations on Deuteronomistic theology while supplementing or supplanting Gottwald's thesis.[45] That a singular theological key to the book exists is debated, but it is necessary to treat the most commonly-proposed keys in order to later build a biblical theology for Lamentations.[46]

[45] Gottwald, *Studies*, 52–53. For a treatment of other prominent proposed keys, see the robust literature review in Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 24–53.

[46] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 222; Bertil Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 238.

The Deuteronomic Covenant

Gottwald's initial offering of the Deuteronomic covenant as the key to unlock the theology of Lamentations was the first such proposal to be widely accepted and commented upon by other scholars. He based his theory in part on the ideas of election and retributive justice espoused in Deuteronomy and finds their origin and locus within that book: "The Book of Deuteronomy may thus be understood as a deliberate restatement of the naïve theory of retribution and reward long presupposed among the Hebrews."[47] The Deuteronomistic notions of judgment, blessing, and curse are also found in Lamentations, and, for Gottwald, this means that Lamentations is a book which cries out to Yahweh to remind him of the special status of Israel under the covenant and calls for Yahweh to once again exercise his control of history and restore the nation.[48] The tension between election and catastrophe becomes the lynchpin of the theology of Lamentations.

In brief, the Deuteronomistic argument for Lamentations runs as follows: the covenant between Yahweh and Israel established parameters for their relationship which include curses for disobedience (in the style of Hittite suzerainty treaties). The most extreme of these curses is exile (Deut 28:58–68). Lamentations, in turn, blames the prophets and priests for not holding the people accountable for maintaining the covenant (Lam 1:20; 2:14; 4:13–16). Covenant infidelity thus becomes the impetus for the destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent exile, a cause in line with the retributive aspects of the covenant contained in Deuteronomy. Yahweh blessed Israel for their faithfulness, and now he has destroyed them for their disobedience. For Gottwald, the tension between Deuteronomy and history lies in the fact that the people were chosen by

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[47] Gottwald, *Studies*, 50.

[48] Ibid., 92–118. Concerning the need to appeal to Yahweh for relief, Gottwald writes, "We have, then, in Lamentations with its insistent appeals for Yahweh to intervene, that peculiar mark of Biblical prayer which naively seems to believe that God does not see atrocity or misfortune unless his special attention is called to it." See ibid., 94.

Yahweh and still suffered destruction—completely disproportionate to their sin, in their eyes—and it is this tension which finds voice in the poems of Lamentations.[49] This line of reasoning is also used by Johnson, who see Lamentations as "a tension between the Deuteronomic doctrine of retribution and reward and the historical reality" of 587 BC.[50]

Albrektson offers an insightful rebuttal to Gottwald's take on the relationship between Deuteronomy and Lamentations. It is only possible, he concludes, to see in Lamentations the Deuteronomistic tenet of retributive justice and covenant infidelity if it can be proven that there is in fact a tension between history and the terms of the covenant. However, no such tension exists: "Defiance and desertion have earned their punishment—in complete accord with the retribution pattern. One cannot very well speak of any 'tension' at this point."[51] The people, he argues, were never truly righteous under covenant terms, and thus they could not lament the catastrophe which befell them, having never earned the continued protection of the covenant in the first place.[52] Regardless of the presence or absence of a tension between the terms of the covenant and the perceived experience of Jerusalem, one cannot deny the influence of Deuteronomistic theology on the thought of Lamentations. Rebellion against Yahweh has brought destruction, just as he said, and it is only his mercy which can bring relief.

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[49] Gottwald, *Studies*, 70, 82.

[50] Johnson, "Form and Message," 59.

[51] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 219.

[52] For Albrektson, "only if you think that the people have really trodden the paths of righteousness can you see a contradiction between the retribution pattern and the fact that the people have been stricken by the catastrophe. But this view of the people's relationship with God cannot be established in the Book of Lamentations…" See ibid., 218.

Davidic/Zionist Traditions

The lens of Deuteronomistic thought is not the only one through which one may view the weeping of Lamentations. Indeed, it is not even the only covenant which appears within the book, so a second theological key prevalent in the literature is that of the Davidic covenant and its accompanying Zionist traditions. This key was first posited by Albrektson, offered as a corrective to Gottwald's proposed Deuteronomistic lens.[53] While the retributive patterns of Deuteronomy are certainly found in Lamentations, they are not the only, nor even the primary, theological background. Instead, according to Albrektson, "The leading themes here are the election of David and of his house, and the idea of Zion and its temple as the abode of God."[54]

Zion psalms and Zion traditions in the Latter Prophets find parallels in Lamentations, so the poet of the laments based his work on the destruction of the dwelling of Yahweh more than the devastation of the home of his chosen people.[55] Moreover, the end of the Davidic monarchy is of utmost concern for the poet, as Lamentations 4:20 states that the king himself was the source of life for the people, a role reserved in Genesis and Psalm 104 for Yahweh himself.[56] Westermann agrees, writing that it is precisely this covenant, with its concern for king and temple, which Lamentations mourns: "the Davidic monarchy and the Temple with its cult" have

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[53] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 219–30. Albrektson's thesis is (ironically) confirmed by the later work of Gottwald as well as Westermann. See Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible in Its Social World and in Ours*, SemeiaSt (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 171–72; Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 95.

[54] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 219.

[55] Albrektson specifically notes Pss. 9, 46, 48, 50, 58, 76, and 99 as well as Isaiah 29 and, more generally, Ezekiel and the whole of Deutero-Isaiah. See ibid., 223.

[56] Lam 4:20: רוּחַ אַפֵּינוּ מְשִׁיחַ יְהוָה; see Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 229–30. The Amarna Letters, however, reference the king as the "breath of [my] life" three times, in EA 141, EA 143, and EA 144. See Anson F. Rainey, *The El-Amarna Correspondence: A New Edition of the Cuneiform Letters from the Site of El-Amarna based on Collations of all Extant Tablets, Volume 1*, HdO 110 (Boston: Brill, 2015), 718–33.

been destroyed, and this is the true cause of the great sorrow of the poems.[57] Thus Albrektson confidently declares, "'The key to the theology of Lamentations' is in fact found in the tension between specific religious conceptions and historical realities: between the confident belief of the Zion traditions in the inviolability of the temple and city, and the actual brute facts."[58]

Just as Gottwald captured only a portion of the whole, however, so, too, have Albrektson and Westermann taken a portion of the theology of Lamentations and made it out to be the thought of the book in toto. The emphasis on the Davidic covenant downplays that of the Mosaic, and both are evident in the text of Lamentations. Just as the poet weeps for the loss of the king and the temple, so, too, does he weep because of the sin which has incurred the divine wrath which executed the lamented judgment. Moreover, if chapter 3 truly contains the theological core of the book—something which remains contested but has wide support from recent scholars—then its hope for restoration and the faithfulness of Yahweh are dependent upon both Deuteronomistic concern for election and Davidic/Zionist elevation of the king and temple, for a nation can only be restored by Yahweh and can only truly exist as a nation with a functioning monarchy and cult.[59] The thought of the Prophets and the Pentateuch thus combine in Lamentations.

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[57] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 95.

[58] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 230.

[59] Westermann believes the new belief that chapter 3 forms the climax, both structurally and theologically, of Lamentations to be "the most important [shift] in the whole history of research upon the Book of Lamentations" while he himself rejects such a view. See idem, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 66, 222.

Suffering and Trauma

As noted by Heath A. Thomas, contemporary research into Lamentations abandons historical-critical methodologies in favor of psychological, feminist, literary, social-scientific, and reception theories.[60] The theological keys posited by Gottwald, Johnson, Albrektson, and Westermann are based in both grammatical-historical exegesis and intertextuality; studies which follow them are not, opting instead to bring to bear a number of outside critical methodologies upon the text of Lamentations. Of these, the use of trauma theory has gained the most traction in studies of Lamentations, and for obvious reasons: the book is, if nothing else, a record of the lived trauma and experience of suffering on the part of its author.

Elaine Theresa James is one such recent commentator who combines textual analysis of Lamentations with trauma theory. For her, even the acrostic form itself is a result of the poet's trauma, a careful outworking of poetic grief and sorrow: "Here [Lam 2:13], the poet acknowledged the impossibility of writing poetry that could serve a meaningful purpose amid the incoherence of lived trauma….The alphabetic acrostic, a long form, requires thinking forward, with, through, and beyond the immediacy of trauma."[61] In her analysis, the poet of Lamentations chose a form which would enable him to slowly, carefully, and logically process his grief at the loss he sustained as a result of the siege and the initial stages of the exile. As noted previously, the poet thus works out his suffering from א to ת, and, for James, such careful expression of trauma is made comprehensible only when viewed first and foremost as precisely that: a record

[60] Heath A. Thomas, "A Survey of Research on Lamentations (2002–2012)," *CurBR* 12, no. 1 (2012): 8–10.

[61] James, "Aesthetics," 325.

of pain and sorrow. Westermann encapsulates such a view in a few short words: "Lamentations is the language of suffering."[62]

Paul Joyce, though writing before James, goes beyond her view in his own conclusions regarding grief and theology. For him, Lamentations offers "no coherent theological message"; it is an expression of grief and grief alone.[63] Joyce directly pits his own views against those of Gottwald and Albrektson, concluding they largely missed the point by focusing on intertextuality instead of psychology. There is no deeper theological meaning to Lamentations, he claims, because the people themselves had lost grasp of any and all meaning in the aftermath of the destruction of 587.[64] It is in this vacuum of meaning and purpose that Lamentations was written, so to look for meaning beyond the outpouring of grief is to misunderstand the explicit purpose of the text.[65] As F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp states, ethics take a backseat to tragedy.[66]

Viewing a book about suffering through the lens of trauma is instructive and may yield fruitful results in the field of literary criticism. However, it is a dangerous practice to divorce text and historical context in the way proponents of trauma studies do.[67] Joyce rightly declares that

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[62] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 89.

[63] Paul Joyce, "Lamentations and the Grief Process: A Psychological Reading," *BibInt* 1, no. 3 (1993): 305.

[64] To use his own words: "In short, Israel's entire symbol system had been torn away, and the people had experienced a complete loss of meaning." See ibid., 310.

[65] Joyce goes so far as to align portions of Lamentations with Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief—a move not only unwarranted but anachronistic. Interestingly, he attributes the anger stage to Lam 4:21–22 but no other imprecatory text, and, as will be seen in chapter 5, this text itself fails to meet the standard forms of ANE imprecations. See ibid., 309–11.

[66] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology in the Book of Lamentations," *JSOT* 74 (1997): 47.

[67] Gottwald, writing in 1954, recognized the danger well: "If the past century and a half of critical study teaches us anything, it is that efforts to escape the historical milieu of the Old Testament or to renounce the historical method in Biblical [*sic*] study, lead not only to false literary-historical conclusions but also involve the very theology in inevitable perversion." See idem, *Studies*, 47.

"This is an immensely powerful little book, but one full of puzzles and contradictions," but his preferred lens of trauma theory fails to account for all the "puzzles and contradictions" contained therein precisely because he fails to take the remainder of the canon into consideration.[68] In order to build a truly biblical theology, one must consider the full sweep of canonical theology, and Joyce and James fail to produce either, ruling out a theology of the book a priori. In so doing, they limit the meaning and function of Lamentations to an all-too-human grief which knows (and says) little about God.

The Hope of Restoration

It is necessary to consider a final proposed theological key to Lamentations: the hope of restoration. This hope is present in two main segments of the book: Lamentations 3 (especially vv. 19–39, 58–66) and Lamentations 5:19–22. The latter expresses an uncertain hope for restoration which nevertheless demonstrates faith in Yahweh's sovereignty and the election of Israel. The call for restoration becomes explicit in the penultimate verse: הֲשִׁיבֵנוּ יְהוָה אֵלֶיךָ וְנָשׁוּבָה חַדֵּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם (v. 21). The poet knows Yahweh has the ability to restore and renew his people if he so chooses—and it is precisely this uncertainty as to Yahweh's ultimate choice that concludes the book in 5:22.

Chapter 3, as has been previously noted, is viewed by many as the theological core of the book. There the poet expresses a series of beliefs in future restoration while reiterating his faith in Yahweh to be faithful in turn. Hope is explicit in vv. 19–24, and the remainder of the central section of the chapter likewise expresses hope that Yahweh, a God of justice, will see the suffering of his people at the hands of their enemies and deliver them because of his own divine

[68] Joyce, "Grief Process," 304.

character.[69] Justice will be done, if not now, then later, and the poet looks forward to the day when Yahweh's wrath is turned against his foes. Indeed, as Westermann notes, the concept of the future restoration is inextricably intertwined with the יום יהוה motif running throughout Lamentations.[70] This in turn is connected to the idea of imprecation in Lamentations: at the final Day of Yahweh, the enemies will be judged according to what they have done to Israel, and the wrath of Yahweh will be poured out on them instead of on his rebellious covenant people.[71]

However, the idea of eschatological judgment and justice is not at the forefront of Lamentations. The poet cries out for justice in the present moment; a future punishment of the wicked does nothing to dry his tears. Furthermore, the hope for restoration is lacking in the majority of Lamentations, occurring only in the aforementioned segments and in the imprecatory texts. The poet can do little to soothe himself, and there is no comfort beyond the angry expectation of present (and, to a lesser extent, eschatological) judgment. The imprecations of chapters 1 and 3 call upon Yahweh to enact this justice in the here and now, and the curse of 4:21–22 alone looks to an undefined judgment on the יום יהוה. Thus, while the desire for restoration and the hope and expectation of the same is present in the book, to see the hope for a future restoration as the central theological key to the thought of Lamentations is to overstate both one's case and the textual evidence dramatically.

[69] It should be noted that, as will be demonstrated in chapter 3 of this dissertation, the enemies of Israel are synonymous with the enemies of Yahweh.

[70] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 60.

[71] Ibid., 61–62.

Focused Literature Review

With major trends in current research identified, it is now necessary to consider specific scholars who have treated the structure and biblical theology of Lamentations. While these scholars have different emphases (either structure/*Formgeschichte* or theology), they all to some degree blend both concerns and are therefore highly pertinent to the current study. Each has been briefly treated in various sections above, but it remains beneficial to review their work in more depth here. While a more thorough discussion of each scholar will be presented, material treated in previous sections will be mentioned only briefly and where it is most relevant.

Budde

Carl Budde's work earns pride of place in Lamentations studies. Much of the work in the 150 years after his seminal article "Das hebräische Klagelied," including this dissertation, has followed both his method and his conclusions. Budde's analysis of the colometry, scansion, and meter of the poems of Lamentations gave rise to the notion of *qinah* meter, a 3+2 limping pattern he saw as unique to lament.[72] The pattern, to Budde, is present not only in Lamentations, but also in the vast majority of the laments of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the remainder of the Latter Prophets.[73] In addition, the true lament psalms were composed in *qinah*, and those psalms which fit the 3+2 pattern but are not laments simply borrowed the rhythm after it became a popular poetic style.[74] The absence of *qinah* meter in Lamentations 5 led him to write that the concluding

[72] For a fuller treatment of *qinah* meter, see the corresponding section above.

[73] Budde, "Das hebräische Klagelied," 12–37.

[74] Ibid., 43.

chapter of the book fails to properly and formally lament, and thus could be classified as more of a prayer or petition instead of a communal lament.[75]

Budde's emphasis on colometry and structure set the stage for future work in these areas. Until his article, much Lamentations scholarship failed to engage in structural study; now, scores, if not hundreds, of articles have been written on the meter, structure, and organization of the book. For Budde, the structure of Lamentations in *qinah* was a deliberate authorial choice, and his proposal saw scholars begin to take seriously the notion of compositional strategies in various poetic texts.[76] The work of the other authors to be discussed in this dissertation would have been impossible without the earlier analysis of Budde.

As noted above, his work is not without its detractors, however, and one other need be mentioned here. In the analysis of Raymond de Hoop, Budde is guilty of adding or ignoring words, essentially emending the text, in order to consistently achieve his posited *qinah* meter throughout Lamentations.[77] de Hoop's study finds that only 53.4% of Lamentations occurs in *qinah*, and this is in part due to his prioritization of parallelism and the Masoretic accents in his colometry.[78] Moreover, the *qinah* pattern is found in a variety of other genres, including love songs and judgment oracles, while only appearing in ~50% of other canonical laments.[79] Because

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[75] Budde, "Das hebräische Klagelied," 45.

[76] In Budde's words, "daß einst sämmtliche Verse aus des Dichters Hand dieser Absicht entsprechend hervorgingen, ist mehr als wahrscheinlich." See ibid., 8.

[77] Raymond de Hoop, "Lamentations: The Qinah-Metre Questioned," in *Delimitation Criticism: A New Tool in Biblical Scholarship, Pericope* 1, ed. Marjo C. A. Korpel and Josef M. Oesch (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 2000), 81–82.

[78] Ibid., 84–104. de Hoop lists Lam 1:2, 6, 7, 19; 3:5, 19–21, 25–27 as lacking *qinah* when the cola are reconstructed based on the accents.

[79] Ibid., 83–84. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, however, disagrees with de Hoop's analysis, believing the poet of Lamentations to have artificially structured the cola of the poems in order to create Budde's observed *qinah* meter; the deliberate alterations of lines are thus the emendations of the poet, not the critic. See F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "The Enjambing Line in Lamentations: A Taxonomy (Part I)," *ZAW* 113, no. 2 (2001): 230–32.

of this, de Hoop and others reject the central tenet of Budde's study: the existence of a specific, unique lament meter which dominates and governs the poems of Lamentations. Still, without this initial foray into the structure of the book on a micro-level, subsequent structural studies on both micro- and macro-levels would have been impossible, and all Lamentations scholars are indebted to the work of Budde.

Gottwald

If Budde began the conversation concerning the structure of Lamentations, then Norman K. Gottwald initiated discussion of the biblical theology of the book. Previously, debates surrounding the theology of Lamentation had been minimal, with studies focusing on authorship, and Lamentations was "often regarded as a relatively inconsequential supplement to Jeremiah" by scholars.[80] Gottwald's work sought to change that perception and establish Lamentations as an important biblical text in its own right.

Gottwald initially focuses on the structure of Lamentations, following in the footsteps of Budde, and, like Budde, concludes the acrostic pattern is evidence of the "intricate construction" of the book which was done "more thoroughly and elaborately than perhaps any other Old Testament book."[81] For Gottwald, this construction was achieved by a number of authors, as each poem was composed individually for "successive annual days of mourning over the fall of

[80] Gottwald, *Studies*, 21.

[81] Ibid., 23. Gottwald softens this statement almost immediately, however, declaring that the repetition of initial acrostic words in the various poems provide evidence the book is not "a calculated unity." See ibid., 27. He gives no evidence why this should be the case, however, and the repetition of words can be attributed to stylistic choice on the part of the poet, for only certain words and phrases are appropriate in the vocabulary of lament.

Jerusalem and later compiled."[82] As such, the poems have multiple authors plus a later redactor, and the book as a whole features no signs of intentional compositional unity; composition spanned from the fall of 587 until 545.[83] Gottwald seemingly contradicts himself, however, and writes four pages later that "A completeness is achieved by the five poems together which no one alone could begin to approach" and "the results of compilation have greatly enhanced the total effect of the work."[84] It is possible to hold both beliefs in tension—that the poems are independent and later compiled and still maintain a unity and completeness of thought—but it is simpler to assume an intentional compositional unity; Occam's razor remains sharp.

On the subject of the biblical theology of Lamentations, however, Gottwald remains univocal in his early work. The book's beliefs stem from the Deuteronomistic covenant, and Lamentations thus becomes about a return to covenant faith in the face of utter disaster.[85] This reliance on Deuteronomistic theology necessarily includes the prophetic conception of sin and judgment, and Lamentations identifies the cause of the destruction of 587 as the willful rebellion of the people against their covenant Lord who now pours out his wrath against his own sinful

[82] Gottwald, *Studies*, 27. While the ritual use of Lamentations is not disputed, that its original compositional purpose was liturgical is less certain. See Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, NSBT 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 59–60.

[83] Gottwald, *Studies*, 45.

[84] Ibid., 31.

[85] Ibid., 65.

people.[86] These beliefs answer the primary concerns of theodicy found in the book: the people suffer precisely because they have turned from covenant fidelity.[87]

The question of the dependence of Lamentations upon Deuteronomy has already been treated and need not be repeated here. Interestingly, however, Gottwald expands his own theory in a later work. Noting the differences between each chapter, Gottwald declares they depend on a variety of theological traditions, including Deuteronomistic theology (still the primary source), wisdom traditions, political thought, and Davidic/Zionist traditions: "In sum, anyone holding rigidly to the conventions of a single theological tradition could hardly have woven the sophisticated web of poetic argument in Lamentations."[88] Each strain was added by a different author, so each chapter exhibits a unique theology.[89] This was precisely the area in which Gottwald received the most critique (particularly from Albrektson, as noted above), and he thus emends his biblical theology of Lamentations to accommodate the wider array of source materials present in the book.

As with the authorship and compilation dissent above, this dissertation believes Gottwald once again needlessly overcomplicates his approach. It is possible—indeed, plausible—that the poet of Lamentations was aware of the various theological traditions of ancient Israel and

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[86] Gottwald, *Studies*, 67–75. Gottwald concludes his volume with a similar assertion: "They [the poems] could only have been produced by a man who had taken to heart the prophets' messages." See ibid., 115. This is, of course, understandable if one accepts Jeremian authorship, but such attribution of the book to Jeremiah is generally rejected by recent scholarship. See Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 58.

[87] Gottwald, *Studies*, 48. As Barry G. Webb writes, Lamentations "is a parade example of applied theology." See idem, *Festal Garments*, 78.

[88] Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 172. Webb agrees with the addition of Zion theology to the Deuteronomistic background, but still believes Gottwald does not go far enough in seeking potential theological foundations for Lamentations. See Webb, *Festal Garments*, 78.

[89] "Lamentations in its final form exhibits a striking and innovative amalgam of prophetic, Deuteronomistic, and wisdom motifs that subordinates and neutralizes the acknowledged Davidic-Zion traditions without rejecting them outright." See Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 173.

believed all of them. There is no need to posit discrete authorship based on theology stance à lá Julius Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis for the composition of the Pentateuch. It is far simpler to conceive of a single author, living in ancient Jerusalem at the time of the fall, who, in his lived experience, encountered citizens, prophets, kings, and priests (or their representatives) who espoused the theological traditions identified by Gottwald; these encounters gave rise to a more robust, diverse faith in Yahweh than Gottwald believes possible for a single individual. The compositional unity of Lamentations can be maintained on this basis.

Albrektson

Bertil Albrektson became the first major scholar to challenge the earlier conclusions of Gottwald vis-à-vis the biblical theology of Lamentations. As noted previously, instead of simply attributing the theology of the book to Deuteronomistic concerns, he expanded the work of Gottwald to include thought from the Davidic covenant and Zionist traditions in the foundational beliefs of the poet of Lamentations.[90] Indeed, the "theological tradition of inviolability of Zion" forms "the background to the theology of the Book of Lamentations, to the intense struggle with the problem of how one should make sense of the catastrophe and find the key to it."[91] He bases this conclusion on the inclusion of snippets from Zion psalms in chapters 2, 4, and 5 of Lamentations. It is worth quoting Albrektson at length here:

> Such passages in the Book of Lamentations are also interesting: though they do not directly pick up themes from this specific tradition, they are nevertheless evidence that the author is at home in and familiar with the traditions of the temple of Jerusalem. Even if what is here called the Zion traditions is a clearly definable unit characterized by specific motifs, they have been combined and linked with other motifs and traditions (e.g. the election of David and of his house and the kingship of Yhwh), and together with them

[90] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 219–30.

[91] Ibid., 223.

> have formed a living unit, a Jerusalemite tradition complex. Features of these traditions too, which turn up in the Book of Lamentations, thus help to connect its author with the temple in Jerusalem and its theological milieu, and thereby give support to the thesis of the Zion traditions as the theological background of the work.[92]

The role of the temple and the importance of Jerusalem to Yahweh emerge front-and-center in Lamentations, and Albrektson rightly realizes their significance to the theology of the poems.

Still, it must be emphasized that Albrektson sought to expand and supplement the work of Gottwald, not replace it; operating on the assumption that Deuteronomy 28 antedates Lamentations, Albrektson found evidence of clear reliance of the latter upon the former.[93] This dependency is not limited to language or to a single chapter; Lamentations 2:17, in Albrektson's view, is reliant upon the whole warp and weft of the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH).[94] Thus Albrektson concludes that both DtrH and Davidic/Zionist traditions form the full background of the theology of Lamentations.

The sources are used by the poet in different ways, however, and so the material from DtrH and the other traditions appear in varying contexts throughout the poems. If the primary problem of Lamentations is "the tension between faith and historic reality," then it is a problem for the Zionist traditions.[95] The inviolability of Jerusalem as the holy city of Yahweh with its temple dedicated to his worship was a standard tenet of Zionist faith; Yahweh would do nothing to destroy his own seat of power—yet this is exactly what had happened. Zionist traditions thus create the problem of Lamentations: how could Yahweh have done this? The solution comes in

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[92] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 228–29.

[93] Specifically, Lam 1:2–5, 9; 2:20; 3:45; 4:16; and 5:12 all borrow language from Deut. 28, and Lam 1:20 borrows from Deut. 32:25. See Albrektson, *Studies*, 231–36.

[94] Ibid., 236–37.

[95] Ibid., 239. It would seem that despite his protestations, Albrektson follows the earlier path of Gottwald in seeing the primary theology of Lamentations as one of a tension between belief and lived experience.

the form of "the possibility of finding a meaning also in defeat…[via] the Deuteronomic view of the catastrophe as divine judgment."[96] Together, then, both Deuteronomistic theology and Zionist traditions form problem and solution in Lamentations, the core of the book's theology.

The remainder of Albrektson's contributions to the study of Lamentations come in the form of text criticism. He carefully engages in a comparison of the text of LXX Lamentations, Peshitta Lamentations, and the Masoretic Text (MT), arriving at the conclusion the LXX is an incredibly literal rendering of the MT. With that said, however, Albrektson believes the translator of LXX Lamentations lacked a sufficient knowledge of Hebrew, and this explains the literalism of the Greek text.[97] It is not necessary to agree with Albrektson on this point, and his own comments on the LXX text are insufficient to warrant his conclusion.[98] Albrektson's primary contribution, then, remains his addition of Davidic and Zionist traditions to the DtrH influence noted by Gottwald in crafting the biblical theology of Lamentations.

Johnson

Bo Johnson became the next major scholar of the structure of Lamentations, writing over two decades after Albrektson published his study of the text and theology of the book. Unlike Gottwald and Albrektson before him, Johnson published no volume concerning the biblical

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[96] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 239.

[97] "The reason why the translator of Lam. [*sic*] is often so slavish seems to be simply that he is not a very good Hebraist and often does not quite understand the constructions or idioms." See ibid., 209.

[98] Ibid., 55–213. On this point, the remarks of Ellis R. Brotzman and Eric J. Tully are instructive. While noting the apparent differences in education and training of the various LXX translators, they nevertheless assert each book was translated according to principles best fitted to the task at hand. If the text of LXX Lam is woodenly literal, then it reflects, not an inherent lack of skill on the part of the translator, but, rather, his philosophy of translation, believing the pain of the poems of Lam require literal glosses in order to maintain their depth of meaning. See Ellis R. Brotzman and Eric J. Tully, *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 72–73.

theology of the book; rather, in the style of Budde, Johnson composed a now-foundational article on the structure of Lamentations, focusing specifically on *qinah* meter, the acrostic form, and the internal structures of the discrete poems. His sole theological comment appears at the beginning of his article, wherein he declares that "The main theological question of Lamentations is how the historical events in and around 587 could be associated with a continued faith in the Lord as the God of Israel" and that Israel suffers in order to be rehabilitated into returning to Yahweh.[99]

With theology summarily dismissed, Johnson then turns to his careful structural analysis. First is his endorsement of Budde's posited *qinah* meter, terming Lamentations an heir of the OT dirge form, followed by a brief assertion that the acrostic form was artificially imposed upon previously completed poems in order to symbolize the totality of the poet's grief and his treatment of it.[100] From there, Johnson engages in analysis of the poems individually, identifying a bipartite structure for each. The poems consist of what he terms a "fact half" and an "interpretation half," with the crux coming generally after the eleventh verse in chapters 1, 2, and 4. The "fact half" consists of a depiction of the calamities of Jerusalem in 587, and the "interpretation half" offers a rationale for the devastation.[101] The switch corresponds to a change in speaker, with alternations occurring between first- and third-person perspectives. Chapter 5 is wholly different and unrelated to the remainder of the book, and Johnson ascribes it to the hand of Jeremiah (seeing a connection to Jer 31:18), making it the oldest chapter of the text.[102]

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[99] Johnson, "Form and Message," 59; see also 59–60.

[100] Ibid., 60–61.

[101] Ibid., 62–65.

[102] Ibid., 71–72. Johnson also finds in the initial letters of the verses of chapter 5 a message acrostic condemning the apostates responsible for the fall. See ibid.,70. James A. Durlesser offers tentative support for Johnson's thesis, believing Lam 5 to be far closer to classical Hebrew laments in style and language and thus potentially earlier than the other poems. See James A. Durlesser, "The Book of Lamentations and the Mesopotamian Laments: Experiential or Literary Ties," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 3 (1983): 79–80.

Chapter 3 is again altogether different, although it features similar shifts in perspective and speaker as the other chapters. For Johnson, the important segment is vv. 21–42, what he dubs the theological core of the book. Here are found statements of rehabilitation and hope, and these form the primary theological statements of Lamentations. Johnson treats these only briefly, however, and quickly returns to structural concerns.[103] He notes that chapter 3 ends in an individual lament containing an imprecation (vv. 64–66) and sees within the curse the real hope of justice and restoration of the book: "The punishment of the enemy is not only asked for, it is stated as a matter of fact, that God is certainly going to carry out. His anger will now be directed against the enemies, no longer against His own people."[104]

Johnson's analysis is insightful. He correctly notes the bipartite structure of the individual poems as well as a portion of the theological significance of the imprecation of Lamentations 3:64–66. He falls short, however, in fully treating the theology of the text as it intersects with structure, and he similarly fails to consider any schema for the overall compositional unity of the book as a whole, tacitly inferring there is none to be found.

Renkema

If Johnson began the look into the structure of the poems of Lamentations, it is Johann Renkema who completed and perfected it. In a series of four essays, Renkema performs minute analysis of colometry, organization, structure, and vocabulary of every chapter of the book—and presents

[103] Johnson, "Form and Message," 65–67.

[104] Ibid., 68.

his findings in excruciating detail. In the words of Robert B. Salters, "Renkema's work, complete with diagrams, has to be seen to be believed (or disbelieved)."[105]

Renkema bases his work on a simple methodological principle: "From an objective point of view it can be stated: knowing the structure of these songs will be of great value for their exegesis."[106] In order to truly grasp the meaning of the poems, it is necessary to first consider their structure, and, while Renkema does not delve into theology in this series of essays, he lays extensive groundwork for any subsequent consideration of the structure of Lamentations. To identify individual strophes, Renkema employs three criteria: the acrostic pattern; the setumah; and external parallelism. On these bases, he groups approximately every three strophes into a canticle, then combines (generally) every two canticles into a subcanto, and finally clusters a fluctuating number of subcantos into cantos proper, with each chapter featuring two cantos consisting of approximately eleven verses each (with the exception of chapter 3).[107]

While this subdivision of the poems is both overwhelming and highly useful, it is not Renkema's primary contribution to the study of the structure of Lamentations. Renkema's masterstroke comes in his view of the book as the product of concentric design. Lamentations is not an example of linear writing in which the poetry flows naturally from beginning to end; instead, each poem features a unique central focus, and the remainder of the poem flows outward from these focal points, making each roughly chiastic (or concentric). The foci of the poems function as their theological core, which, for Renkema, is the misery of the poet; all else seeks to

[105] Salters, "Searching for Pattern," 98.

[106] Renkema, "Literary Structure (I–IV)," 346.

[107] See his extensive analysis in ibid., 298–357.

draw the attention of the reader to the sorrow, pain, and suffering of the author.[108] The concentric design thus highlights the crux of each chapter, usually located in vv. 11–12; the only exception is the third chapter which demonstrates little concentricity and thus no true theological core.[109] Chapter 5, for all its differences with the rest of the book, is structured similarly and forms an inclusio with chapter 1, thus giving the entire book a chiastic/concentric structure placing chapter 3 at the center.[110] The theology espoused in this whole-book crux is not that of DtrH; however, Renkema does not offer an alternative theological key or background for the poems.

Renkema's primary critic has been Robert B. Salters, and he quite correctly says of Renkema that "He finds things which are not there; and he ignores things which are."[111] Like earlier criticisms of Budde, Salters accuses Renkema of overstating his case, twisting the text to make it conform to his theory. Initially, Salters accepts the notion of concentric design for the individual poems, but he ultimately rejects it as the basis for the entire book, stating that Renkema "stretched credulity too far here."[112] The lack of concentricity in chapter 3 is problematic for Renkema's theory, and Salters further accuses him of ignoring the basic fact that Lamentations is first and foremost a lament, so it cannot be treated as simply another psalm. Instead, Salters points to the necessary elements of the lament for the basis of his own analysis, focusing on the interactions and relationships between "God, the lamenter and the adversary."[113]

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[108] Renkema, "Literary Structure (I–IV)," 294–98.

[109] Ibid., 308, 331-33. In order to give Lam 3 a central theological message, Renkema combines vv. 17 and 50 for seemingly arbitrary reasons. The belief that Lam 3 forms the theological core of the book originated with Edward Naegelsbach in 1868, and Renkema is not the only critic forced into exegetical gymnastics to align his/her exposition with Naegelsbach. See Michael S. Moore, "Human Suffering in Lamentations," *RB* 90, no. 4 (1983): 541.

[110] Renkema, "Literary Structure (I–IV)," 361–65.

[111] Salters, "Searching for Pattern," 98.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid., 100.

Salters here misses his mark, however. Renkema did not intend to produce a theological analysis of Lamentations, but, rather, a structural one. While his concentric design theory is imperfect when applied to the book as a whole, it is nevertheless a helpful way to view the individual poems, and his analysis of shared vocabulary is highly useful in establishing links between the poems.

Westermann

Renkema performed intense analysis of the microstructure of Lamentations; Claus Westermann did the same with the macrostructure of the poems and, to a lesser extent, with Lamentations and intertextuality, comparing the poems with both the OT canon and ANE literature. He begins with a brief comparison of Lamentations and OT dirges, noting the affinity of the laments of Isaiah and Zechariah with those of Lamentations, then quickly moves into an analysis of Lamentations in the light of the Sumerian City Laments (SCL), specifically the *Lament over Ur* (*LU*).[114] From there, Westermann engages in a lengthy literature review, beginning with Budde and ending with Johnson.[115]

The bulk of his work focuses on the structure of the poems, but he analyzes them in light of the structure and conventions of the Psalter. For Westermann, the patterns of the individual psalms are the key to unlocking the poems of Lamentations: "The sequence of clauses and sections in Lamentations must correspond to that exhibited by the Psalms."[116] Before any questions can be asked of the macrostructure of the book, Westermann declares that the

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[114] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 4–22, 62. The relationship between Lam and the SCL will be explored in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[115] Ibid., 24–53.

[116] Ibid., 64.

interpreter must first consider the poems as psalms and make comparisons with various *Gattungen* found there. With this accomplished, however, Westermann rejects the unity of the book, seeing Lamentations as another anthology of collected songs and poems like the Psalter, so no major structural patterns can be found across the book.[117]

Westermann's structural analysis then focuses on shared vocabulary across the poems as well as Deutero-Isaiah. The theology of the book is contained in these motifs, and they center around the desire and hope for justice and retribution. Clarion calls for relief appear in the imprecations of chapters 1, 2, and 4, but Westermann relegates them to a simple cry for vengeance apart from any hope for or faith in restoration.[118] Instead, the hope for justice is most present, in Westermann's analysis, in the accusations against God which appear some thirty times across all five chapters. These accusations, in essence, call on God to be God, to remember his people, and remind him of his nature, character, and covenant. Westermann does not specify the theological bases for these accusations, simply noting their prevalence as a literary device across laments in both the Psalter and Lamentations.[119] After all, "The Bible speaks of God as One who is moved to compassion by the laments of those who suffer," and the poems rely on this compassionate Yahweh to save Israel.[120]

These shared themes—hope, justice, retribution, and accusation—form the theological core of the book for Westermann. As such, the core of the book is found in chapters 1, 2, and 4,

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[117] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 63–87. Here Westermann deviates from earlier scholars, but he himself is followed by later critics, notably those engaging in psychological readings. See Joyce, "Grief Process," 307–8.

[118] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 105–207. Jan Assmann, however, sees hope as the core of the imprecations—and often the only hope of the chapters in which they appear. See Jan Assmann, "When Justice Fails: Jurisdiction and Imprecation in Ancient Egypt and the Near East," *JEA* 78 (1992): 721.

[119] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 107–47.

[120] Ibid., 235.

with chapter 5 a continuation of the theme at a distance, as it were, and chapter 3 a later composite to be treated independently.[121] The theology of Lamentations is thus one of lament, and this is the sole purpose of the book:

> In sum, Lamentations did not arise in order to answer certain questions or to resolve some problems or conflict. These songs arose as an immediate reaction on the part of those affected by the collapse. Those so affected then expressed themselves in lamentation. The "meaning" of these laments is to be found in their very expression. Questions of a reflective sort arose out of these laments only secondarily; such questions are of subordinate importance to the phenomenon of lamentation itself.[122]

There is no need for DtrH, the Davidic covenant, or Zionist traditions for Westermann; all that is necessary is the cry of the people expressed in lament, as in the Psalter.

While it is refreshing to see a renewed emphasis on lament in the study of Lamentations, Westermann incorrectly assumes a truncated view of intertextuality. If the Psalter alone influenced Lamentations, then the Psalter exists in a vacuum. This clearly is not the case, and the various *Gattungen* of psalms are testament to that fact. The poems and songs of the Psalter speak to a variety of theological traditions, including the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the messianic. To fail to see these strains in Lamentations for the sake of structural concerns is a misstep. It is true that Lamentations could only influence those prophets writing in the exilic and postexilic eras, but the bulk of Israelite history came before the exile, and the sum of that history influences the composition and thought of Lamentations just as much as the forms and genres of individual psalms. Still, Westermann is to be commended for his approach to Lamentations which prioritizes similarities with the Psalter and takes note of comparative studies with the SCL, and

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[121] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 88. So Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 169.

[122] Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 81.

his work therefore remains invaluable in future studies of the structure and theology of Lamentations.

Linafelt

Of the most recent critics of Lamentations, Tod Linafelt stands at the forefront in terms of work on the theology of the book. Linafelt's research considers Lamentations as part of the literature of survival, seeing that it is, at base, a collection of poems written by survivors of a tragedy on a national scale. Perhaps ironically, Lamentations is not just a way for survivors to process grief, but, according to Linafelt, also a way to memorialize the devastation: "the literature of survival works to keep *alive* the memory of *death*."[123] Lamentations does this in brutal ways, and, as Linafelt bluntly declares, "the reader is not so much engaged by the book of Lamentations as assaulted by it."[124]

Linafelt's emphasis on Lamentations as lament and memorial is commendable. Throughout his work, his focus remains on trauma and suffering, and he believes any approach which centers on hope and restoration de-values the lived experiences of the poet(s) who survived the fall of 587.[125] Linafelt couples this trauma lens with a feminist perspective and concludes that the key to interpreting Lamentations is the Zion figure of chapters 1–2, alongside her children. Any approach which focuses on the third chapter at the expense of the first two, he writes, is guilty of patriarchal bias; male interpreters focus on male figures instead of the (to Linafelt) obviously gynocentric speakers present in the earlier chapters. Other modern

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[123] Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 21 (emphasis original).

[124] Ibid., 2.

[125] Ibid., 2–4.

interpreters seeking to use guilt and restoration are wrongheaded, he claims, and only a focus on the trauma, specifically female trauma, in the book can yield fruitful results in exegesis.[126]

Aside from this potential theological key, Linafelt's major contribution comes in the comparison between the MT and Targum Lamentations. The latter exists in two forms, the Western Text and the Yemenite Text. The Western Text, Linafelt claims, is better for its aggadic content, whereas the Yemenite Text is better linguistically. With that said, he admits the aggadic additions of the Western Text are found solely in chapters 1 and 2 as well as a single later verse, Lam 3:28.[127] Regardless of specific text, the targumim expand primarily upon the nature of the people's sin and their plight during the fall, and the added material attributes the latter to the former far more explicitly than the root text of Lamentations. These later additions were necessary, Linafelt claims, in order to bring Lamentations into line with the rest of the OT metanarrative, the story of Yahweh and his will for his covenant people Israel. Without them, Lamentations is only tenuously linked to the rest of the OT corpus, both theologically and narratively.[128] Even so, the targumic additions are not a monolith of orthodoxy, and they struggle to properly account for the suffering of the people even given the stronger link between sin and destruction.

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[126] Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 5–15. Linafelt specifically notes the focus on the גבר of chapter 3 and objects to the androcentric nature of commentaries which emphasize that speaker above all others. He attributes the patriarchal/androcentric bias of interpreters to both their maleness and their Christianity, which he designates an androcentric religion that predisposes its adherents to look primarily at male figures in sacred texts. Moreover, the Zion figure, being female, is also incapable of being viewed typologically, and therefore it doubly escapes the attentions of Christian interpreters seeking male Christ antitypes throughout the OT. Nancy Lee disagrees, seeing the aggadic material of the targumim as inherently typological in nature. See Nancy Lee, "Exposing a Buried Subtext in Jeremiah and Lamentations: Going after Baal and…Abel," in *Troubling Jeremiah*, JSOTSup 260, ed. A. R. Pete, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Louis Stuhlman (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 92.

[127] Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 87–88.

[128] Ibid., 88–110.

It is not necessary to assume Linafelt's feminist/trauma theory methodology in order to see the value of his work. Throughout his analysis of Lamentations as the literature of survival, he rightly keeps his exegesis focused on the human experiences of the speakers in the poems, and, like Westermann before him, sees similarities between Deutero-Isaiah's focus on suffering and the words of the poems of Lamentations.[129] As such, Linafelt believes the primary human experience in Lamentations to be one of death, not necessarily the destruction of an inanimate temple or city. Indeed, death is more prevalent in Lamentations than even the exilic motif, for the poetry served as the way the people processed their bereavement and loss.[130] By focusing on the interplay between sin and death in Lamentations, Linafelt makes a solid contribution to the understanding of the theology of the book in the literature.

Methodology

Biblical-Theological Method

Of primary significance to this dissertation is the biblical theology of Lamentations. As Albrektson states, "the question of the theology of Lamentations has been treated in rather a cavalier fashion by scholars," and this dissertation seeks to address that gap.[131] As noted above, the imprecations of Lamentations have been given short shrift, and commentators either omit them entirely or simply comment on them as expressions of anger. This dissertation, however, sees great theological and structural value in the imprecations of Lamentations and offers them as summary statements and theological and structural keys to the text. Therefore, the imprecatory

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[129] Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 44–65. See Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 230–31.

[130] Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 76.

[131] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 214.

texts will be analyzed for their compositional and theological value, and, as such, it is necessary to employ a biblical-theological methodology in the treatment of those texts.

Ben Witherington, III makes a helpful distinction between biblical theologies, plural, and biblical theology, singular. The former treats the theologies of individual books, taken as a subset of the latter, which seeks a unified work across Scripture.[132] This dissertation assumes that a biblical theology of Lamentations is possible and works to produce that theology. As such, it will offer one of the biblical theologies, to use Witherington's distinction, in service to the larger biblical theology (which will be treated separately as canonical theology below). In this endeavor, it is necessary to allow Lamentations to speak on its own terms; as Michael Anthony Abril states, "the task of theology is not to say *better* what Scripture already says, but to allow Scripture to speak in a new way and to new situations."[133]

In order to allow Scripture to speak with its own voice, it is necessary to situate it in its historical context. This is easier for Lamentations than perhaps any other biblical book, dominated as it is by its *Sitz im Leben* in the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The catastrophe of 587 is not the only historical context pertinent to interpretation, however, and this dissertation will also use comparative studies with other ANE literature in order to assess *Gattungen* in the poems, the theology of the poems vis-à-vis cursing, and lament and curse elements and structure common in the ANE world. With historical context established, exegesis using inductive methods may begin. This sort of historical and structural analysis is a necessary prerequisite to

[132] Ben Witherington, III, *Biblical Theology: The Convergence of the Canon* (New York: Cambridge, 2019), 10.

[133] Michael Anthony Abril, "Lamentations 5:21 within the Development of Thomas Aquinas' Theology of the Grace of Conversion," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 3 (2014): 272.

theological study, for theological unity requires a structural unity.[134] To demonstrate such structural unity which will lead to theological unity requires following the principles of *Formgeschichte* delineated by Klaus Koch: the consideration of genre and form, historical context, and redaction history.[135]

Brevard S. Childs rightly warns of the dangers of eisegesis in the task of biblical theology. In his landmark work *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament*, Childs lays out a series of possible models and methodologies for biblical theology, including typological, thematic, *Heilsgeschichte*, literary, sociological, and others.[136] Thematic approaches, to Childs, are the most concerning: "By making a topical selection one runs the danger of distorting the whole by dividing material which belongs together or joining elements which do not organically cohere."[137] This dissertation seeks to steer clear of thematic approaches, instead using inductive methodologies and principles of *Formgeschichte* to determine literary structure as well as basic cultural-linguistic/grammatical-historical exegetical methods to locate the primary theological emphases exhibited by the text.

Canonical-Theological Method

No book exists in isolation, and the message of each part of Scripture illumines that of the whole. To determine the full theology of Lamentations, then, it is necessary to consider its place within the canon. To that end, canonical-theological methodology will be used to supplement biblical-

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[134] So Moore, "Human Suffering in Lamentations," 536.

[135] Klaus Koch, *Was ist Formgeschichte? Neue Wege der Bibelexegese* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1971), 3–80. Of these, *Redaktionsgeschichte* is the least significant for the present study.

[136] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 11–26.

[137] Ibid., 15.

theological methodology in this dissertation. Intertextuality is a key component of such a study. As Childs rightly observes, "The meaning of a text does not depend upon an outside referential verification, but scriptural meaning is understood only within a self-related whole."[138] Therefore, Lamentations will be considered as a dialogue partner with the Psalter and other sources of canonical imprecations in order to create a canonical theology of cursing which may be seen within Lamentations.

To engage in the endeavor of OT theology, Paul R. House writes that five foundations are necessary. First, an OT theology must be historical; second, inductive; third, canonical and explicitly related to the NT; fourth, systematic; and fifth, prescriptive, not merely descriptive.[139] The end product of this dissertation must take into account each of these factors. The first and second are the work of biblical theology; the remainder are the work of canonical theology. They require the analysis of canonical data following an inductive reading and the systematization of the resulting model to be tried and refined across the canon.[140] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to create a fully canonical theology of imprecation; however, one aim of the present work is to model a theology of imprecation in Lamentations situated within its canonical context, and this naturally produces some generalizable results. Regardless, the focus of this dissertation is on the text, structure, and theology of Lamentations and how the imprecations function in each of these ways, so while canonical theological methods are useful, they are not the primary tools for this study.

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[138] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 21.

[139] Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 53.

[140] For a full treatment of the methodology of canonical theology, see John C. Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon,* Sola Scriptura*, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

Chapter Overviews

This dissertation will be organized into seven chapters. The first, now reaching its conclusion, has set forth the research problem and the thesis before conducting a targeted review of both current trends in Lamentations research and major scholars who have focused in the areas of structure and biblical theology of the book. Next, it has addressed the question of methodology, setting out parameters for the use of inductive methods, principles of *Formgeschichte*, comparative studies, and grammatical-historical exegesis in the service of biblical theology, which in turn will be used with supplementary canonical-theological methods.

The second chapter of the dissertation will engage in comparative studies, seeking to better understand the imprecations of Lamentations by first analyzing those of its cognitive environment. The chapter will begin by defining imprecation in terms of both content and grammar. Imprecations of the ANE share key features in both areas, with content focusing on the notion of divine retributive justice and grammar using set constructions (the subjunctive use of the imperfect, for example) and shared vocabulary.[141] With definitions established, the chapter will begin comparative studies proper. It is necessary to treat first the generalities of imprecation in the ANE as it relates to ANE theology. Next, curse texts from Mesopotamia, particularly the SCL, as well as those from Hatti, Egypt, and others will be considered, as will imprecations in

[141] The second chapter of this dissertation will also make a case for the precative tense in the biblical Hebrew of Lamentations, following the work of Iain Provan; see Iain Provan, "Past, Present and Future in Lamentations III 52–66: The Case for a Precative Perfect Re-Examined," *VT* 41, no. 2 (1991): 164–75. An array of studies in Semitic languages and iconography have observed the use of the precative case in Akkadian, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Phoenician inscriptions and literature, and its use in Lamentations is in keeping with the optative mood expressed by the Semitic precative. The precative perfect will be shown to be used in Lamentations to express wish and prayer, both of which are necessary elements in imprecation. For a brief overview of the precative mood/tense and the use of the Hebrew perfect to express irreal moods more generally, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 493–95. See also Alexander Andrason, "An Optative Indicative? A Real Factual Past? Toward a Cognitive-Typological Approach to the Precative Qatal," *JHebS* 13 (2013): 1–41.

DSS and Jewish ossuary texts. The curses will then be synthesized to produce an ANE theology and grammar of imprecation.

The third chapter of the dissertation will continue the comparative work of the previous chapter but instead begin the focus on canonical imprecations with a treatment of the Psalter. After constructing a working definition of an imprecatory psalm, Psalms 7, 12, 35, 58, 59, 69, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137, and 139 will be analyzed for both form and theological content in order to compare them with that of the poems of Lamentations. Specifically, theological concerns to be treated will focus on the overall message of the psalm, the use/place of imprecation within that message, and the place of imprecatory psalms in the theology of the Psalter as a whole. Following this, standalone imprecations in other (non-imprecatory) psalms will be considered for the same information.

Chapter 4 will build upon the comparative work of the previous two chapters with an emphasis on canonical imprecations outside of Lamentations and the Psalter. First will be the Pentateuch, followed by the Former and Latter Prophets and a brief survey of the NT (with the Gospels, NT history, Pauline epistles, and apocalypse more fully treated in an appendix). It will be seen that imprecation appears on the lips of a wide variety of speakers, including Jesus Christ himself. It is necessary to consider the full canonical scope and shape of imprecation to better understand those of Lamentations, so implications of other canonical curses will be addressed, particularly their theological content, common vocabulary, and shared style and composition. In short, the dissertation will develop an abbreviated canonical theology of imprecation, explore its similarities with standard ANE curse elements, and place it in dialogue with Lamentations.

Next, chapter 5 will address the compositional function of imprecations and their theology within Lamentations itself. After briefly considering pertinent background material—

authorship, *Sitz im Leben*, etc., the chapter will then move into exegesis of the imprecations themselves: Lamentations 1:21–22 and 3:58–66, with particular emphasis on the *tav* sections of each chapter (Lam. 1:22; 3:64–66). The form and theology of each unconditional imprecation will comprise the bulk of chapter 5 of the dissertation, relating it to both the theology of Lamentations and the larger covenantal framework of the OT canon. A brief excursus will be necessary at this juncture to treat the curse contained in Lamentations 4:21–22 (*tav* segment in v. 22). Following this, chapter 5 will conduct a survey of biblical texts to identify compositional seams and establish necessary conceptual information, then categorize the imprecations of Lamentations as compositional seams alongside them.

The next chapter, chapter 6, will continue the work of its immediate predecessor in the discussion of the imprecations of Lamentations. Whereas chapter 5 will present exegesis and compositional conclusions concerning the curse texts, chapter 6 will engage in a theological discussion of the imprecations in the context of the biblical theology of Lamentations. Adopting a biblical-theological lens will enable the dissertation to identify theological motifs of the book, assess their prevalence, and ultimately locate those motifs within the content of the imprecations. The imprecations will thus be shown to be summary statements of the theology of Lamentations and the key to understanding its biblical theology.

The seventh and final chapter will draw necessary conclusions from the preceding work, synthesizing it into a working biblical-theological and structural model for the book of Lamentations. Finally, areas for future research will be identified.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS: IMPRECATION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Defining "Imprecation"

Before analyzing the theology and compositional function of imprecations within the book of Lamentations, it is first necessary to create a definition of imprecation which considers both the content of the curses (e.g., what the curse is to do, whom it affects, and similar elements) and the grammatical and syntactic features of the curse (e.g., tense, mood, and vocabulary).[1] This chapter will construct such a definition before treating curses of various civilizations of the ANE in order to arrive at a functional theology of imprecation extant in the cognitive environment surrounding the book of Lamentations.

Content Features

Retributive Justice and Conditionality

According to David Frankfurter, "Cursing, we imagine now, is simply a form of insult, of passing verbal assault."[2] Taken in its ANE setting, however, nothing could be farther from the truth. At base, an imprecation or curse is the expressed desire of an individual for justice to be enacted on his/her behalf. The notion of justice involved in imprecation is inherently retributive in nature, adhering to the principle of *lex talionis* prevalent in ANE cultures and legal systems.[3] Retributive justice becomes the dominant form of justice following the failure of connective

[1] For the purposes of this dissertation, the terms "curse" and "imprecation" will be used synonymously.

[2] David Frankfurter, "Curses, Blessings, and Ritual Authority: Egyptian Magic in Comparative Perspective," *JANER* 5, no. 1 (2005): 157.

[3] Anne Marie Kitz, "Curses and Cursing in the Ancient Near East," *RC* 1, no. 6 (2007): 618.

justice; if the crime cannot be punished due to a lack of an accuser or the law is not enforced, then the basic connection of jurisdiction (i.e., crime results in penalty) breaks down, leaving the plaintiff no other recourse than a petition for retribution.[4] While this plea for retributive justice was prevalent in daily life (i.e., personal imprecations against another individual), it reached its zenith in the various treaty curses of the ANE.[5] The covenant curses of Hittite suzerainty treaties are perhaps the most pertinent to those of the Bible, given the affinity of the suzerainty treaty and the covenant form in Deuteronomy, but treaty curses similar to those of the Mosaic covenant also appear in Ugaritic, Assyrian, and Babylonian treaties.[6] It may be safely assumed, therefore, that the principle of retributive justice/*lex talionis* is in view in biblical curses modeled after the pattern of the covenant curses in Deuteronomy—a pattern which appears in the imprecations of Lamentations.[7]

The second major principle governing ANE curses and imprecations is the concept of conditionality. Two types of curses are recorded in ANE texts: conditional and unconditional. Conditional curses are passive, future-oriented threats of eschatological judgment based on the future actions of the one being cursed, whereas unconditional curses call for an active response to suffering to achieve a present end to a stated harm (generally malevolent oppression). The conditions of conditional curses take the form of casuistic if/then statements as seen in vassal treaty curses in Akkadian, Hebrew, and other ANE covenants. On the other hand, unconditional

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[4] Jan Assmann, "When Justice Fails: Jurisdiction and Imprecation in Ancient Egypt and the Near East," *JEA* 78 (1992): 150–51.

[5] Ibid., 159–61.

[6] Delbert R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets*, BibOr 16 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964), 76–80.

[7] This will be fully explored in chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation.

curses are typically more associated with magical rites and take the form of a petition for retribution for a presently-experienced harm regardless of any future action on the part of the one being cursed. While there are only occasionally explicit calls for judgment *qua* judgment contained in extant unconditional curses, the typical unconditional curse nevertheless petitions for divine wrath irrespective of criteria or preconditions; indeed, according to Kitz, "One common feature typifies unconditional maledictions: they solicit a god or goddess to harm another without any prerequisite affixed to the solicitation that will trigger the injury."[8]

Thus, the first two content features of ANE imprecations are the concept of retributive justice and conditionality. While a curse may be conditional or unconditional, contingent upon future wrongs/actions or a plea for an end to a wrong being actively endured in the present, all such curses are retributive in nature. Because an individual or nation has been wronged in some way, the one proclaiming the curse petitions for the offender to be treated in like fashion. The justice system has failed or was perhaps never invoked, as in the case of wars or other national tragedies, and all that is left to the sufferer is the hope and desire the offending party may suffer equal calamity.[9]

Inability of the Petitioner to Enact Justice

A crime has been committed, a wrong endured, yet the justice system has failed—or was never an option. This renders the offended party powerless to enact justice on his/her/their own. Such

[8] Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 621–24. For a discussion of calls for judgment in Hebrew, Assyrian, and Babylonian curses, see ibid., 618–19; J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *BSac* 138, no. 549 (1981): 35.

[9] The idea of equal calamity befalling the offender is an explicit feature of the simile curse. Simile curses are composed in parallel terms, often using vocabulary such as "just as…so." These terms would be stated and then accompanied by a ritual action which sought to mimic the petitioner's desires. See Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 624.

impotence is another primary content feature of ANE imprecations. Syro-Palestinian covenant curses in particular emphasized this point, and such a belief is expressed throughout the covenant of Deuteronomy: "Curses also reflect the acknowledgement that immediate physical power was not always available to deter or punish a breach. Thus curses could hopefully 'reach' and 'overtake' violators (see Deuteronomy 28:15) even when the lord of the aggrieved party is not immediately present to enforce the stipulations."[10] Covenant curses therefore rely upon a power beyond that of the petitioner in order to accomplish their purpose. The inability of the "aggrieved party" to enforce the curse is presupposed.

The same impotence is present in curses outside of formal covenant agreements. Oftentimes, particularly in tomb curses and ossuary curses, the one seeking to enact the curse is already dead and consequently (and obviously) powerless to act in the mortal realm. Such curses must then rely on an outside power which retains agency in the human world in order to come to fruition. Whether the person petitioning for the curse remains alive or not, however, the true power of the curse must come from an outside entity, and that is the next major feature of ANE curses.

Invocation of Deity/Divinity

Because of the inability of the offended party to enact justice on his/her/their own, ANE imprecations necessarily involve the invocation of a deity or other divinity which had authority and power to enact the curse and ensure justice on his/her/their behalf. Indeed, such is the significance of this feature of ANE curses that J. Carl Laney makes it the sum of his working

[10] Hector Avalos, "Legal and Social Institutions in Canaan and Ancient Israel," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1:618.

definition: "An 'imprecation' is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God…. Crucial to the definition of an imprecation is that it (a) must be an invocation—a prayer or address to God, and (b) must contain a request that one's enemies or the enemies of Yahweh be judged and justly punished."[11] Curses and imprecations were considered to be "righteous response[s]" on the part of the offended, and thus the petitioners could rely on divine powers of justice to carry out their wishes and ensure retribution was accomplished.[12] Most often, these invocations were explicit; in some recorded oaths, however, the call for divine aid is implied.[13] As such, in agreement with Laney, Kitz defines imprecations based almost solely on this criterion: "Simply put, maledictions solicit a deity or deities to do harm to a person, place or thing. Since curses are wishes, they are, therefore, petitionary prayers to the deities."[14]

In essence, ANE imprecations were effective because of the power of the deity or other divine agent which stood behind it. The words themselves were significant, and the petitioner had to choose his or her phrasing with great care in order to arouse the attention of the divine agent, but it was ultimately the power of that agent which enacted that curse, for the petitioner was impotent to curse on his/her own.[15] Initially, such imprecations thus necessitated the use of

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[11] Laney, "A Fresh Look," 35–36.

[12] Kit Barker, *Imprecation as Divine Discourse: Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Theological Interpretation, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement* 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 132. Laney, also noting this particular impression of cursing, notes that OT curses in particular reflect Yahweh's "abhorrence of sin and evil." See idem, "A Fresh Look," 43.

[13] In these implicit cases, "the absence of explicit reference to a deity may stem from the scribe's taking divine orchestration for granted." See Yitzhaq Feder, "The Mechanics of Retribution in Hittite, Mesopotamian and Ancient Israelite Sources," *JANER* 10, no. 2 (2010): 120.

[14] Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 616.

[15] The idea of self-fulfilling curses, efficacious in and of themselves without appeal to a divine agent, was not unknown in the ANE, and some curses derived their power simply from being spoken. This was the exception to the rule, however, and the OT makes little-to-no use of this magical view of cursing. See Frederick L. Moriarty,

an intermediary. Priests, shamans, magicians, etc. were required to enact a curse, for only they possessed the requisite expertise which would move the divine agent to action. Anyone could utter a curse, but it required the power of an intermediary to truly make it effective.[16] Over time, imprecations were viewed as efficacious on their own as direct appeals to deity, and the necessity of a priest or other functionary was lost.[17]

The array of powers which could be drawn upon by the intermediary or the lay citizen was vast. Gods and goddesses were, for obvious reason, the powers of choice for most imprecations. Curses found in Egypt, particularly in the First Intermediate period (2130–1980 BC) and early Middle Kingdom (1980–1630 BC), call upon Isis, Horus, Set, and Re, among others, with those four becoming the primary authorities to give power to curses.[18] Some Egyptian tomb curses from the same periods call upon the spirits of the deceased within the tomb or other important dead to punish transgressors in the current life, and those spirits, once summoned by the curse, could take the form of animals or even the deceased petitioner.[19] By the

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"Word as Power in the Ancient Near East," in *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, Gettysburg Theological Studies IV, ed. Howard N. Bream, Ralph D. Heim, and Carey A. Moore (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974), 345–62.

[16] "By thus *appealing* to a supernatural authority—some god or priest whose powers of mediation or efficacy might be credited with the power of wreaking vengeance through words—anyone could presumably issue a curse…. But its ultimate performative efficacy revolves around someone with the power to issue 'words that work,' like a priest, a local ritual expert, or some spirit or god through her recognized or self-declared mediator. Authority is the *sine qua non* of the effective curse, whether this authority is embodied or called upon." See Frankfurter, "Curses, Blessings, and Ritual Authority," 180. According to Frankfurter, the same intermediaries were required to enact blessings as well, so blessing and cursing were inextricably linked early on with divine agency and priestly intermediaries. See ibid., 162–67.

[17] This was particularly true of later Greco-Roman curses, but the transition had begun earlier at various places within the ANE. Some psalms, like Psalm 68, also seem to feature imprecations enacted solely by the power of the speaker without recourse to the authority of Yahweh. See ibid., 160–76; Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 617.

[18] Frankfurter, "Curses, Blessings, and Ritual Authority," 162–63.

[19] Assmann, "When Justice Fails," 151–53. Animal imagery in particular is further featured in both Akkadian and biblical curses (e.g., Deut 32:24). See Hillers, *Treaty-Curses*, 56.

time of the New Kingdom a century later (1539–1075 BC), Egyptian monumental imprecations called on as many as three deities simultaneously to lend their power to the curse.[20]

Hittite curses follow the Egyptian pattern of calling upon deities *en masse* to accomplish their ends.[21] In contrast to Egyptian and Hittite curses which called upon a stock set of deities or other avengers, however, Mesopotamian curses typically invoke the deity who had domain over the area of life being cursed. If one was to be cursed to wander in darkness, for example, Shamash would be petitioned; if the petitioner wished the offender to suffer discord in marriage, then Ningal could be asked to enact the imprecation.[22] By the Greco-Roman period, the available powers had expanded to include martyrs and corpses, reflecting a return to earlier Egyptian conceptions of curse authority.[23]

Thus, as Assmann rightly observes, curses and imprecations see metaphysical agents issue consequences for crimes, and the invocation of a deity or other divine agent is a staple feature of ANE imprecations.[24] Whether the invocation is made to a specific deity who had authority over a specific life domain, to a constellation of deities, or to other divine agents such as spirits of the deceased, the power to enact a curse remains solely in the realm of those outside of the current human world. Human intermediaries may be necessary to call upon the divine

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[20] Assmann, "When Justice Fails," 155.

[21] Foy D. Scalf, "Magic," in *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity*, ed. Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016), 3.212.

[22] Assmann, "When Justice Fails," 158. Robert Kriech Ritner, however, observes a similar assignation of deity and domain in some early Egyptian curses, particularly in regards of the invocation of Isis, who was seen as able to curse precisely because she had to power to heal and thus repel curses such as animal wounds and poisons. See Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, SAOC 54 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), 45. This leads to the natural conclusion for the biblical authors that since Yahweh is Lord of all, he alone possesses authority and power to enact any curse or imprecation over any area of life.

[23] Frankfurter, "Curses, Blessings, and Ritual Authority," 175–76.

[24] Assmann, "When Justice Fails," 151.

agent, but the human functionary can only say the requisite words; all power to curse (and to bless) resides outside the mortal realm squarely in the hands of the gods and their agents.

Grammatical and Syntactic Features

As has been seen, ANE curses contain a number of stock content features: the concepts of retribution and conditionality; the inability of the petitioner to enact justice; and an invocation of a deity or other divinity to perform the work of the curse itself. With these features firmly in mind, it is now necessary to consider the precise mechanics of their expression in ANE curse texts. A variety of grammatical and syntactic features are used by those petitioning divinity to enact a curse, and this section will provide an overview and analysis of those features in order to provide a necessary grammatical definition of imprecation.[25]

Subjunctive Use of the Imperfect Tense

In ANE imprecations, the petition to deity to enact the curse is typically expressed in a non-indicative mood. Luwian and Phoenician blessing and curse texts, for example, use differing types of volitional moods to convey a sense of the subjunctive. Phoenician employs a jussive form accompanied by an infinitive construct, which Luwian transforms into simple imperatives.[26]

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[25] Of primary interest is verbal morphology, with nominal morphology included as relevant. Secondary emphases will include concerns from semantics and pragmatics as they pertain to vocabulary usage. Treatment of any pertinent syntagms appearing in the imprecations of Lamentations will be reserved for chapter 5. See James Clackson, *Indo-European Linguistics: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90–186; Matthew H. Patton and Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Basics of Hebrew Discourse: A Guide to Working with Hebrew Prose and Poetry*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

[26] Aaron Schade, "Blessing in the Phoenician and Luwian Inscriptions of Azatiwada," *JSS* 64, no. 2 (2019): 335–44. The subjunctive mood is used to express probability when the action of the verb is uncertain but likely to occur. In this way, it can be said to be the mood of desire or wishes, generally in conjunction with some sort of modal ("should," "would," etc.). Within Hieroglyphic Luwian, inscriptions make use of a wide range of nominal and verbal constructions, but the imperative remains a staple of imprecation. See Anna Bauer, *Morphosyntax of the Noun Phrase in Hieroglyphic Luwian* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 315.

The Phoenician form is thus slightly softer, so to speak, than the Luwian: it entreats, whereas the Luwian commands.[27] Likewise, Hittite curses employ the imperative, and Sumerian and Akkadian imprecations use a precative tense (see below), again making their petitions in non-indicative (or irreal) moods.[28]

Even though BH features its own volitional moods used in imprecation (e.g., the jussive and imperative), an analogous usage of the Hebrew imperfect tense to the Luwian and Phoenician constructions has been documented by grammarians.[29] Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi list several uses of the imperfect which may fall under the category of subjunctive, which they term the various contingent functions of the imperfect, including uses to express

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Phoenician verbal clauses containing an infinitive absolute are often almost parenthetical commentaries on the main perfective clause. In other instances, infinitive clauses which follow a finite verbal clause function as discourse markers indicating a change in discourse type; this is prevalent in blessings and prayers. Moreover, the infinitive used in imperatival phrases, such as some imprecatory texts, appears primarily in hortatory discourse, again common in Phoenician inscriptions. It is therefore difficult at times to distinguish the imperative from both the infinitive and the jussive imperfect in blessing/curse/magical texts. See Andrés Piquer Otero, "The 'Narrative Infinitive' in Phoenician and Its Background: A Discourse Analysis Approach," in *Linguistic Studies in Phoenician: In Memory of J. Brian Peckham*, ed. Robert D. Holmstedt and Aaron Schade (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 138–69; Hélène M. Dallaire, *The Syntax of Volitives in Biblical Hebrew and Amarna Canaanite Prose*, *LSAWS* 9 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 216–23; Zellig S. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language*, AOS 8 (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1936), 40–41.

The subjunctive does not appear as a specific verbal form in biblical Hebrew (BH), as noted by Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, but subjunctive ideas can be expressed through the modal and volitional uses of the imperfect conjugation. The imperfect, with or without an accompanying infinitive or particle, may be used to convey irreal moods such as the subjunctive. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 506–14. Moreover, the modal imperfect in BH may replace the expected jussive or cohortative forms as well as the imperative in statements of desire or will. See Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. by E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley (Garden City, NY: Dover, 2006), 316–18.

[27] Schade notes that such usage cannot align with simple preterite tenses in the indicative mood, despite any similarities in morphology. The verbal forms used to express curses are non-indicative by default, for they express a desire for a future state, not things as they are presently or were in the past. See idem, "Blessing," 335–36.

[28] Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 616. The Akkadian precative may expresses a wish, request, injunction, promise, exhortation, or indirect command and is therefore akin to the imperative, even as it appears in forms based on the preterite. See John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, HSS 45, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 144–47; N. J. C. Kouwenberg, *The Akkadian Verb and Its Semitic Background*, *LANE* 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 212–17.

[29] In contrast, for the use of the jussive and imperative as subjunctive/optative modals, see Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 616.

conditionality, permission, obligation, and command.[30] Any of these, per Arnold and Choi, could align with the *yaqtula* subjunctive sense of the imperfect.[31] Similarly, Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor describe what they term "modal uses of the non-perfective."[32] Pertinent to the discussion are the non-perfective of obligation and the non-perfective of desire. Similarly, Waltke and O'Connor describe the "volitional uses of the non-perfective," and the "non-perfective of injunction" seeks to convey requests or commands in a manner analogous to the subjunctive.[33] Like the contingent functions of the imperfect outlined by Arnold and Choi, Waltke and O'Connor's modal and volitional uses see the imperfect tense used in non-indicative ways to express irreal moods, including the subjunctive.[34] Significantly, Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka observe that the imperfect used in prayers and other petitions "is equivalent to an imperative," particularly in the context of other imperatives. This again places the imperfect forms in the realm of the subjunctive mood.[35]

As curses are petitions for future action, they are best expressed in irreal mood. Throughout the languages of the ANE, as has been seen, this sometimes takes the form of

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[30] Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 71–72.

[31] Ibid., 70.

[32] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 506–509.

[33] Ibid., 509. Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka similarly identify various modal uses of the imperfect, terming them "can/may," "must," and "want," but state that the imperfect/yiqtol "is often used to express, albeit rather poorly, these nuances." See Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd edition, SubBi 27 (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2022), 342–45; here at 342.

[34] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 506–14. Such uses of the imperfect appear throughout the main segments of the imprecations of Lamentations (Lam 1:22; 3:64–66) to express commands and desires. A full grammatical analysis of the verses will be presented in chapter 5 of this dissertation, but it is important to note here that the imprecations of Lam follow conventional ANE grammatical patterns as well as recognized uses of Hebrew syntax to express hope for a possible outcome.

[35] Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 344.

imperatives and jussive, but it may also be articulated through a subjunctive usage of verbs which are in the indicative morphologically. For BH, this occurs with various subjunctive uses of the imperfect conjugation observed in imprecations.

The Case for the Precative Tense/Optative Mood in Biblical Hebrew

Not all curses or imprecations appear in an imperfect tense expressing irreal mood, however. Perfect-tense verbs occur both in the imprecations of Lamentations as well as other imprecations throughout Scripture, but, like the imperfects expressing a subjunctive sense, such perfects are also used in irreal ways to express a desire or command. There, rather than taking on a subjunctive sense as with the imperfects, the perfects, deemed precatives, assume the role of an optative. The precative/optative comes to the fore especially in prayers and petitions, but it is not typically recognized as a discrete mood of BH.[36] Its prevalence in the petitionary passages of the OT, however, raise the question if it should indeed be classified as a distinct grammatical construct and, if so, the nature of its relationship to the precative tenses/constructions in other languages of the Northwest Semitic language group (NWL) must be assessed.

[36] The precative perfect was recognized quite early in many Semitic languages, but discussions of its existence in BH were deeply contentious as soon as 1877. See Mark Preston Stone, "(More) On the Precative Qatal in Lamentations 3.56–61: Updating the Argument," *JSOT* 45, no. 4 (2021): 494. The modern case for the optative mood (and accompanying precative perfect) in BH was cogently restated by Moses Buttenwieser in his commentary on the Psalms. See Moses Buttenwieser, *The Psalms: Chronologically Treated with a New Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 18–25.

His thesis was revived by Waltke and O'Connor, who themselves note the lack of acceptance of Buttenwieser's view into the present day. See idem, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 493–95. An exception to this is the grammar of Joüon and Muraoka, who devote an entire section (vol. 3 §163) to optative clauses within BH. They do, however, define it merely as an expression of the volitional moods (jussive and cohortative) with two exceptions: exclamatory questions and the use of the perfect/qatal in poetry. This latter exception is the focus of the present study. See idem, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 578–80. A more recent study by John A. Cook similarly identifies the precative in BH but affords it no treatment. See John A. Cook, *Time and the Biblical Hebrew Verb: The Expression of Tense, Aspect, and Modality in Biblical Hebrew*, *LSAWS* 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 201.

The optative mood is documented in particular instances of the Hittite imperative and the Ugaritic, Sumerian, and Akkadian precative tenses used in blessings and curses.[37] Indeed, the use of the precative in Ugaritic and Akkadian is a staple feature of the perfect verb. Such use is widely recognized in the corpus of letters known as the Ras Shamra texts. Composed in Ugaritic and Akkadian, the tablets are correspondence to and from foreign courts, with over 500 recovered to date.[38] Concerning the linguistics of both text sets, H. L. Ginsberg writes, "the development of the perfect consecutive…was favoured by the fact that one of the original functions of the perfect was that of an optative and precative."[39] The Ras Shamra letters, then, trace the development of the perfect in both Akkadian and Ugaritic and demonstrate its optative and precative functions.

That precatives are used across the NWL and Mesopotamian languages should raise the possibility of the existence of the precative in BH as well. Iain Provan crafts a solid case for

[37] Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 616; Iain Provan, "Past, Present and Future in Lamentations III 52–66: The Case for a Precative Perfect Re-Examined," *VT* 41, no. 2 (1991): 165. Hittite oaths, however, use ergatival forms to express the idea the oaths are self-enforcing and thus distinct from the usual ANE conceptions of oaths which rely on enforcement by a deity. See Feder, "Mechanics of Retribution," 121–24. Hittite itself, it must be noted, is not itself part of the NWL, but, with Luwian, is an Anatolian language.

Aside from these languages, precative forms are also well-attested in Old South Arabic and Phoenician. See Michael L. Barré, "An Unrecognized Precative Construction in Phoenician and Hebrew," *Bib* 64, no. 3 (1983): 411–22. In addition, Alexander Andrason, in a masterful survey, finds evidence for the precative in Syriac, Mandaic, Punic, and Geʿez. It is his conclusion that the precative "is recognizable among virtually all members of the Semitic family." See Alexander Andrason, "An Optative Indicative? A Real Factual Past? Toward a Cognitive-Typological Approach to the Precative Qatal," *JHebS* 13 (2013): 15.

Finally, the precative is standard in Assyrian, where it is based on the preterite forms as in the case of Akkadian. See N. J. C. Kouwenberg, *Introduction to Old Assyrian* (Münster: Zaphon, 2019), 90–92; Archibald Henry Sayce, *An Assyrian Grammar: For Comparative Purposes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 56–57. The Assyrian precative was standard in informal oaths, a highly relevant contrast to Hittite. See Kouwenberg, *Introduction to Old Assyrian*, 115.

[38] Dennis Pardee, "Ugaritic Letters," *COS* 3.45:87–88.

[39] H. L. Ginsberg, "The Rebellion and Death of Baʿlu," *Or* 5 (1936): 177. For more on the Akkadian precative specifically, including its place in the Akkadian aspectual system, see Vit Bubenik, "Development of Aspect and Tense in Semitic Languages: Typological Considerations," *Lingua Posnaniensis* 53, no. 2 (2011): 10–12; David Testen, "The East Semitic Precative Paradigm," *JSS* 38, no. 1 (1993): 1–13.

precisely that, demonstrating the precative as a special use of the perfect, specifically "a verb in the perfect used as an optative to express a wish or a hope."[40] This places the precative alongside the prophetic perfect while remaining distinct from it. The prophetic perfect sees the petition as a guaranteed future, but the precative expresses hope for a specific, desired future, usually in the context of prayer or other petition.[41] If hope, then, is expressed in a perfect verb within a petition, then it is probable the verb is precative in nature. Indeed, considering such perfective-optative verbs as precatives is one way, per Provan, to make such clauses "coherent," allowing the petitions to be rightfully viewed as prayers instead of simply futuristic or prophetic statements, a reading which would render them unintelligible.[42] Provan's case is strengthened significantly by the work of Alexander Andrason, who meticulously treats suspected precatives in the OT and compares his findings with languages from its ANE context, ultimately agreeing with Provan for the existence of the precative in BH across various OT genres and corpora.[43]

The use of perfect verbs in imprecations in BH, then, should be viewed as a use of precative verbs in alignment with general NWL usage to express the optative mood. Indeed, Provan, Andrason, Mark Preston Stone, Michael L. Barré, and Kevin Grasso all concur on the existence of precative forms in the Psalter and Lamentations, including in the imprecatory texts, a finding in line with Joüon and Muraoka's statement that poetic perfects can convey the optative

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[40] Provan, "Past, Present and Future," 164.

[41] Ibid., 173–74. The prophetic perfect, in an additional contrast to the precative, may also see the future action as having already been completed, typically by Yahweh. For an overview of the prophetic perfect, see Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 335. For the use of the *niphal* perfect to express future events, a feature of some prophetic perfects with an accompanying sense of the divine passive, see George L. Klein, "The Meaning of the Niphal in Biblical Hebrew" (PhD diss., Annenberg Research Institute, 1992), 312.

[42] Provan, "Past, Present and Future," 168.

[43] Andrason, "Cognitive-Typological Approach," 1–41.

mood.[44] This conclusion is bolstered by a petition letter to Bagavahya from the Jewish community at Elephantine (~407 BC). The letter, composed in Aramaic, petitions Bagavahya, the Persian governor of Yehud, to avenge the destruction of the Elephantine temple at the hands of Vidranga (the Persian governor of the Egyptian satrapy containing Elephantine), uttering curses against Vidranga "grammatically speaking in the form of *precative perfects*."[45] Jewish communities were thus aware of precative usages a century after the exile, and the close correlation between Hebrew and Aramaic supports the thesis that nigh-contemporary Hebrew would have featured similar syntactical constructions.[46] That the letter from Elephantine uses precatives specifically in curses further reinforces the conclusion that biblical imprecations from the exilic and post-exilic periods can feature precative perfect verbs. Likewise, in a poetic inscription at Khirbet el-Qôm, the text features a perfect verb identified to be in a precative sense, taken as such in the context of other imperatival and infinitive forms.[47] Clearly the wider use of Hebrew in non-canonical texts took full advantage of the precative.

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[44] Provan, "Past, Present and Future," 167–72; Andrason, "Cognitive-Typological Approach," 10–14; Stone, "Precative Qatal," 498–506; Barré, "Unrecognized Precative Construction," 414–22; Kevin Grasso, "The Meaning of *Qatal*," *Journal for Semitics* 30, no. 2 (2021):11; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 336–37.

[45] Gard Granerød, "Temple Destruction, Mourning and Curse in Elephantine, with a View to Lamentations," *ZAW* 132, no. 1 (2020): 92, emphasis original. The letter further asks for Bagavahya to authorize the reconstruction and resupply of the Elephantine temple.

[46] While Granerød assumes the existence of a precative perfect in Aramaic, some biblical Aramaic grammars do not list the precative as a special use of the perfect, but, rather, simply observe that the perfect may be used in a futuristic sense. See Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Aramaic: Complete Grammar, Lexicon, and Annotated Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 82–86; Scott N. Callaham, *Biblical Aramaic for Biblical Interpreters: A Parallel Hebrew–Aramaic Handbook* (Wilmore, KY: GlossaHouse, 2021), 135. With that said, the argument here stands: the precative is common across NWL, and the observed optative uses of Aramaic and BH perfect verbs suffice to conclude the existence of the precative tense in both languages, particularly in curses/imprecations.

[47] M. O'Connor, "The Poetic Inscription from Khirbet el-Qôm," *VT* 37 (1987): 228.

Imprecations across both the canon and the wider ANE world, then, utilize a precative mood with perfect verbs in order to convey an optative sense of petition and expectation. The imprecations of Lamentations will be considered in chapter 5 of this dissertation as using either a subjunctive imperfect or a precative perfect in accordance with NWL linguistics as observed in ANE curse texts.

Common Imprecatory Vocabulary

Just as curses throughout the ANE feature common grammatical and syntactic elements, ANE imprecations often share the same vocabulary and verbal roots. The imprecatory vocabulary of BH is related to the semantic domain of vows and oaths, and the semantic field of curses is itself a subset of that larger domain.[48] The standard Hebrew verb for curse, אלה,

> is an adjuration of conditional curse addressed to another in the second or third person, for the purpose of evoking a desired action of precluding an anticipated action; or it is a conditional imprecation, basically a prayer-form, addressed to the deity, and asking for punishment of a malefactor whose guilt cannot be proved…. In a few instances, ʾālā stands for the material curse (misfortune) itself, or the person suffering a curse, by metonymy of cause for effect.[49]

Here, then, is the basic term denoting the act of petitioning for a conditional curse. In the LXX, אלה is glossed in a variety of ways, but most typically with a form of ἀράομαι (verb)/ἀρά (nominal/substantive) or ἐξορκίζω/ὁρκισμός.[50] Each of these terms, like אלה, belongs to the larger semantic domain of vows and oaths and act as referents for curses on that basis. The

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[48] Avigail Manekin-Bamberger, "The Vow-Curse in Ancient Jewish Texts," *HTR* 112, no. 3 (2019): 344; Herbert Chanan Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible*, SBLMS 13 (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 1963), 25–40, 70–71.

[49] Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse,"* 70–71.

[50] Compare MT/LXX: Gen 24:41; 26:28; Lev 5:1; Num 5:21, 23, 27; Deut 29:11, 13, 18, 19, 20; Judg 17:2; 1 Kgs 8:31; Isa 24:6; Jer 23:10; 29:18; 42:18; 44:12; Ezek 16:59; 17:13, 16, 18, 19; Hos 4:2, 10:4; Zech 5:3; Pss. 10:7; 59:13; Job 31:30; Prov 29:24; Dan 9:11; Neh 10:30; 2 Chr 6:22; 34:24.

alignment of curse and oaths vocabularies is thus confirmed. One pertinent exception requires noting, however. In LXX Lamentations 3:65, תַּאֲלָה (here sans 2ms suffix) is rendered with μόχθον. The noun in MT Lamentations is a hapax, and Herbert Chanan Brichto does not believe it should be rendered as a nominative/substantive form of אָלָה, but, rather, of יאל/אול. This reading would render the text unintelligible, however, so the current reading is to be preferred, thus creating another LXX term for curse and the first such word outside the domain of vows/oaths proper.[51]

By the Second Temple period, other vow/curse vocabulary began appearing in various locations, further cementing the relationship between the two semantic fields. Jewish ossuaries in the Kidron Valley dating from this period feature a great many curses declaring anyone disturbing the ossuary to be קרבן.[52] The word thus finds meaning in both vows and curses. If in the former, then it has the sense of something being a votive offering and correspondingly dedicated to Yahweh; if it appears in the latter, then it has the more sinister meaning of actively condemning the person to Yahweh's presence in death.[53] Similarly during the Second Temple period, both חֵרֶם/ἀνάθεμα are found in relation to curses and oaths, and a thing forbidden by an oath or similar vow was thus considered accursed; conversely, accursed things were prohibited by vow.[54] The connection between oaths and imprecations thus remained firm several centuries following the exile.

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[51] Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse,"* 69.

[52] Manekin-Bamberger, "The Vow-Curse," 344–45.

[53] Ibid., 345–6.

[54] Ibid., 344, 350–51. In Classical Greek, ἀνάθεμα was also synonymous with votive offerings, once again underscoring the deep connection between vows and curses.

The vocabulary of cursing has connections to other semantic fields as well. Kitz observes a strong connection between the language of blessing and cursing in terms of vocabulary in addition to their ties in form and syntax. The basic term for blessing, ברך, is used to stand in for curse at times, hence Kitz's statement that "curses may be properly viewed as indirect blessings"; if others are cursed, then the petitioner is blessed.[55] This occasional equivalency—and frequent association—pervades several of the DSS as well as some Hittite texts and will be explored in the relevant sections below. Here, it is sufficient to note the affinity between the two.

Kitz further notes the typical syntax of an explicit curse in BH. The traditional curse formula uses a *qal* passive participle of אָרוּר, although other passive participles and roots may be used.[56] That the participles are in passive voice may speak to the lack of expectation of direct involvement by Yahweh, but Kitz disputes this, linking it to similar uses of divine passives in Ezra-Nehemiah. As throughout other ANE imprecations, it is impossible to have a curse without some invocation of the divine; Kitz thus rightfully concludes that the *qal* passive participles implicitly, if not explicitly, maintain Yahweh as the agent behind the curse, with a rough English gloss being "may he be cursed (by Yahweh)."[57] The passive participle formulation remains in the optative/precative mood regardless of the specific verbal root employed.[58]

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[55] Michael L. Brown, "ברך," *NIDOTTE* 1:766; Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 616.

[56] Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 617.

[57] Ibid. Likewise, Brent A. Strawn asserts that while it is indeed rare for Yahweh to be invoked by name in canonical imprecations, OT curses derive their power from Yahweh and Yahweh alone. See Brent A. Strawn, "Imprecation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman, III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 315–16. Strawn also notes the connection between oaths and cursing, buttressing the conclusions drawn above. See ibid., 314. Still, the primary purpose of passive constructions is to remove reference to agency, and the use of divine passives in imprecation may be simply a matter of emphasis: the content of the curse itself, not the divine agent behind it, remains the focus of the imprecation. See Klein, "The Meaning of the Niphal," 39–42.

[58] Kitz, "Curses and Cursing," 616–17.

While standard curse vocabulary exists across both BH and the associated languages of the Second Temple period, such terms are used only when the curse is explicitly referenced as a curse. Often imprecations are more implicit, lacking any terminology for curse, but nevertheless featuring the precative sense in the verbs involved.[59]

Blessing and Cursing in the Ancient Near East

The Role of Imprecation in Ancient Near Eastern Religious Thought

In the ANE world, imprecation was a deeply theological utterance. As noted previously, a curse was only effective if backed by a deity or divine agent with the ability and authority to enact it, so any offended party was impotent on his/her own to work justice in the situations calling for curses. That divine agents were called upon reveals a fundamental ANE belief: the gods themselves were concerned with matters of justice. Moreover, that justice was not disconnected from the lived experience of their worshipers. It was not enough to say that a god cared about the consequences of human immorality; the dedication to those consequences had to extend to the people who were reliant upon the protection of that god. Uncaring deities are not moved to action on behalf of mere mortals. Devastation would occur when the gods became unfeeling and abandoned their people; as will be seen in the discussion of the SCL below, the cities of Sumer were only destroyed because their patron deities grew deaf to the cries of their citizens and left the cities. A conviction in the power of curses, then, reflects a belief that the gods, while

[59] Only those languages directly related to the biblical text have been considered in this section, but surveys of other ANE languages yield similar results: some stock vocabulary is common to refer to curses and cursing, and these terms are found within the semantic domains of oaths/vows and blessings/cursing. Moreover, many curses/imprecations do not explicitly employ those terms, instead opting for precative phrases and other implicit maledictions. A full study of ANE curse language is beyond the scope of this dissertation, focusing as it does on imprecations in Lamentations and the larger biblical corpora, but see Ritner, *Mechanics*, 29–67 for Egyptian and Coptic vocabulary; Feder, "Mechanics of Retribution," 121–38 for Hittite and Mesopotamian phrases; and Schade, "Blessing," 330–46 for Luwian and Phoenician terms and syntax.

remaining largely impersonal, were nevertheless able to act in history and could be moved to do so by their worshipers.

This is further demonstrated by the link in vocabulary between blessing and cursing. The gods blessed because they were powerful enough—and active and caring enough—to answer prayers and grant boons. The same rationale holds true for their ability to curse when called upon by a petitioner. Pantheons were populated by divinities both benevolent and malevolent, and these qualities were almost universally embodied in the same capricious deity. The gods may care enough to act in answer to the prayers of the people, but they nevertheless acted in ways which suited themselves and from which they stood to gain over and above any other entity.[60]

A rough pattern thus emerges in ANE theologies of imprecation. First, the various deities and divinities were powerful enough to enact curses and grant blessings, especially in their own domain and sphere of influence. Second, these petitions were answered because of an at least token care for their human worshipers and/or concern for justice. Third, city deities and other patrons in particular had a duty of care to their worshipers, but it was a duty which could be abandoned at any time. Finally, the gods cared for themselves first and foremost, and any extension of care to humans resulted from the deity's self-interest. With these data in mind, several ANE curse texts from various cultures will now be analyzed in order to both provide evidence for these conclusions and to formulate a more robust ANE theology of imprecation.

[60] In the SCL, for example, the destruction of the various cities is never blamed entirely on the sin of the people. The gods simply decided it would benefit them to destroy the cities, and the people were left to deal with the aftermath of the divine council's decision. See Edward L. Greenstein, "The Wrath at God in the Book of Lamentations," in *The Problem of Evil and Its Symbols in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, JSOTSup 366, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 33–34.

Analysis of Select Ancient Near Eastern Curses

Before individual curse texts can be scrutinized, a brief caveat is necessary. In an oft-quoted article, Samuel Sandmel warned against the dangers of what he dubbed "parallelomania."[61] It is not only possible, but also an observable perennial pitfall of biblical scholars—particularly OT scholars—to engage in over-analysis of ANE texts to the extent they themselves become the dominant hermeneutic through which OT texts are interpreted. In short, the role of ANE literature becomes less that of a dialogue partner and more that of a normative expositional force. This is a highly dangerous practice, however inadvertently it may be done. As Christian interpreters of Christian Scripture, we must ensure the biblical text remains the norming force for both Bible exposition and the use of external literature in the task of interpretation. The canon is the inspired word of God; ANE texts are not. To reverse the relationship and allow the ANE texts to determine how to read the biblical ones is to place Judeo-Christian thought in subservience to pagan beliefs. Parallel literature from the ANE is both valuable and highly useful in the task of exegesis, establishing necessary historical and literary context for the biblical text itself.[62] It cannot, however, be assumed a priori that biblical literature reflects in toto ANE literary styles, motifs, and theological themes. Therefore, the use of comparative studies to follow in this and later chapters will keep the OT text in the foreground even as it builds common literary and theological frameworks across the ANE parallel literature.

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[61] Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81, no. 1 (1962): 1–13.

[62] On this topic, the words of William W. Hallo remain as relevant and forceful as ever. Comparative studies, when performed rightly, "allows us a glimpse into the literary and cultural context on which the biblical authors drew to speak with the language of all mankind." As in any exegetical or expositional endeavor, it is dangerous indeed to divorce a text from its various contexts, whether historical, literary, or theological, both internal and external. Hallo rightly observes the fruitfulness of comparison between the OT texts and cuneiform documents as well as other ANE literature. See William W. Hallo, "Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature," in *Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, vol. 3 of *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1–30; here, 16.

With this in mind, it remains necessary to analyze ANE texts. First, the Sumerian City Laments, will be treated, followed by other Mesopotamian curse texts (both Sumerian and Old Babylonian). This will be followed by an analysis of Egyptian curses and Hittite, Luwian, and Phoenician curse texts. Finally, select postexilic Jewish curses contained in the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and ossuary inscriptions will be examined, heirs that they are to the exilic traditions of Lamentations and other OT texts.

Sumerian City Laments

The ancient genre of city lament is extant only in two places: the book of Lamentations and the Sumerian City Laments (SCL).[63] That the two writings share a unique genre makes them natural dialogue partners for comparative study, and the use of imprecation in each follows similar lines, mourning as they do specific cities while crying out for justice and relief. As Alan Cooper rightly notes, Lamentations occasionally seems to incorporate patterns from the SCL wholesale, and this includes "invective against the enemy."[64] As such, the first major ANE parallel literature to be considered is the body of five poems simply known as the Sumerian City Laments.

City laments are not factual reports of the destruction of a city, blow-by-blow histories of the destruction. Rather, they are the stories of the devastation, narrative poems which provide a

[63] Wered Filarski, "Lamentations: A Comparison between Mesopotamia and Judea," *JBQ* 45, no. 2 (2017): 91. Mary R. Bachvarova appears as a lone voice of dissent in the literature, claiming the city lament has a far more expansive lineage than is commonly acknowledged, including even Homer's *Iliad*. She further categorizes the Sumerian *Curse of Agade* as a city lament despite noting it antedates the formal SCL and lacks some of the same generic features and theology. See Mary R. Bachvarova, "The Destroyed City in Ancient 'World History': From Agade to Troy," in *The Fall of Cities in the Mediterranean: Commemoration in Literature, Folk-Song, and Liturgy*, ed. Mary R. Bachvarova, Dorota Dutsch, and Ann Suter (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2016), 37–44.

[64] Alan Cooper, "The Message of Lamentations," *JANES* 28, no. 1 (2001): 12–13. Cooper identifies three elements parallel between Lam and the SCL and other ANE penitential prayers: a petition for guidance, the anticipation of divine wrath, and faith in divine mercy. See ibid.,11.

humanizing element to the destruction, frequently to memorialize the catastrophe in perpetuity.[65] It must be emphasized, however, that the SCL are based on the historical destruction of Sumerian cities: Ur, Sumer and Ur, Uruk, Eridu, and Nippur.[66] The SCL thus date from 2004 BC to no later than 1925 BC.[67] Each account is highly emotional and describes the pain and trauma of the citizens of the city, climaxing in a lament over the destruction of the temple/temple complex.[68] Indeed, the destruction of the temples could have been the specific impetus which birthed the city lament proper as well as formal laments in general; according to W. C. Gwaltney, Jr., the lament genre was created in Sumer, and it was the sack of the cities with their temples which inspired it.[69] In the ancient world, a city was only a city—and thus a fit residence for a deity—if it contained a temple, and the dwelling of a deity in a city was essential for its protection and prosperity. Therefore, the destruction of the temple, the abode of the city deity, was of far more importance than the loss of the remainder of the city, and the SCL

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[65] Bachvarova, "The Destroyed City," 38.

[66] Nili Samet, "קנית הערים השומריות ומגילת איכה: לקראת מחקר תאולוגי משווה," *שנתון: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* (2012): 95.

[67] James A. Durlesser, "The Book of Lamentations and the Mesopotamian Laments: Experiential or Literary Ties," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 3 (1983): 70; W. C. Gwaltney, Jr. "The Biblical Book of Lamentations in the Context of Near Eastern Lament Literature," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. William W. Hallo, James C. Moyer, and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 195–97.

[68] Samet, "קנית הערים," 96.

[69] "Laments were invented as a literary response to the calamity suffered throughout Sumer about 2000 B.C.E. immediately after the sack of Ibbi-Sin, the last of the Third Dynasty rulers of Ur." See Gwaltney, Jr., "Biblical Book of Lamentations," 195. Interestingly, however, there is no known Sumerian term for the city lament genre. See John Jacobs, "The City Lament Genre in the Ancient Near East," in *The Fall of Cities in the Mediterranean: Commemoration in Literature, Folk-Song, and Liturgy*, ed. by Mary R. Bachvarova, Dorota Dutsch, and Ann Suter (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2016), 18.

correspondingly focus on the devastation of the temples over and beyond that of the larger cities themselves.[70]

The accounts of the SCL are often formulaic and demonstrate several fixed features. Gwaltney identifies six: the total destruction of the city; the destruction as a decision of an individual deity or of the divine council; abandonment of the city by the city's patron deity; the return of the deity to the city; the accompanying restoration of the city; and "a concluding prayer to the concerned god involving either praise, plea, imprecation against the enemy, self-abasement, or a combination of these elements."[71] Humans themselves feature little in the SCL; all descriptions pertaining to the state of the city and its inhabitants place the emphasis squarely on the gods and other divine actors, to the point human activity is only incidental in the overall lament.[72] Stock images abound, however, which portray the divine, the human, and the city itself. Jacobs lists a range of six to nine such images characteristic of the SCL, but groups them into three for the sake of simplicity: "the storm of Enlil," "the weeping goddess," and "prayer [by/of the poet]."[73] Another such stock image is the personified city, and the fallen cities often speak in their own laments within the poems, particularly in the later city laments.[74]

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[70] In the words of John Jacobs, "the city lament ritually reenacts the death and the (hoped and prayed for) rebirth not only of the city *per se* but also of the house/temple-city-universe for which that city stands and falls." See idem, "City Lament Genre," 16.

[71] Gwaltney, Jr., "Biblical Book of Lamentations," 202–3. This is contested by Margaret Whitney Green, who claims in her doctoral dissertation that only *LSUr* contains an imprecation. See Margaret Whitney Green, "Eridu in Sumerian Literature" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1975), 277–310.

[72] Gwaltney, Jr., "Biblical Book of Lamentations," 207.

[73] Jacobs, "City Lament Genre," 21–22.

[74] Ibid., 24–31. The personified city is connected to the weeping goddess motif, as recognized by F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp. See F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, BibOr 44 (Rome: Editrice Pontifico Istituto Biblico, 1993), 77–90.

Interestingly, little space of the SCL is given to the reasons for the destruction of the cities. The overall emphasis, again, remains on the gods themselves, and the only reason given for the sack of Ur in its lament, *Lament over Ur* (*LU*), and of Sumer and Ur in their poem, *Lament over Sumer and Ur* (*LSUr*), is simply that the gods willed it; no human guilt is necessary or mentioned.[75] The precise motives of the gods are never fully expressed, but two possibilities are alluded to across the SCL. The first, in a move prescient of (but not equivalent to) the Tower of Babel narrative of Genesis 11:1–9, is that the gods wished to restrain human progress and culture in order to maintain human subservience to the divine. The second is less self-serving but cruel nevertheless: cities are allotted only so much time to exist, and, when their time has run out, they must necessarily be destroyed by the divine council.[76] Again, the humans of the cities themselves have no part in earning the city's destruction, and no sin or transgression is recorded as the basis for divine wrath. It is simply the will of the gods that the city falls, and humans are powerless to stop them or change their minds.

These laments are recorded and used in unique ways in Sumerian literature. Tied to historical realities as they are, they are necessarily occasional in nature, and it is possible they had a single use at that point in history and were later archived.[77] It is more likely, however, particularly given the political ideology present in the SCL, that the laments found later life in

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[75] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1976), 87–91. See also Walter C. Bouzard, Jr., *We Have Heard with Our Ears, O God: Sources of the Communal Laments in the Psalms*, SBLDS 159 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 158.

[76] Samet, "קנית הערים," 108.

[77] Bouzard, Jr., *We Have Heard*, 58–60. Similarly, Gwaltney believes the SCL were used once and remanded to scribes to be used in copyist exercises, whereas the standard *balag* lament was primarily liturgical and used well into the Seleucid period. See Gwaltney, Jr., "Biblical Book of Lamentations,"196–97.

liturgical uses, employed by priests and kings in order to grant communal voice to their pain.[78] The SCL are composed in a priestly/cultic dialect suitable for use by the *gala*-priests, and the dialect shifts with the sex of the speaker in the poem. Male speakers—the assumed priestly liturgical narrators—use the standard Sumerian Emegir dialect, whereas the personified cities and goddesses—both female—speak in Emesal.[79] Structurally, the SCL are divided into *kirugu* (songs) and individual *gišgigal* (antiphons). The larger *kirugu* function as the major structural units which are subdivided into groups of couplets and triplets which comprise each *gišgigal*. No other major structural devices are at play, although the poetry features the standard ANE poetic devices of parallelism, repetition, refrains, lists, and changes in speaker.[80]

The exact nature of the relationship between Lamentations and the SCL is disputed. As Nili Samet observes, the range of relationships posited by scholars runs the gamut from full literary dependency to no direct connection whatsoever.[81] Bouzard claims "more than an accidental affinity with aspects of the communal laments of Mesopotamia," whereas Samet is hesitant to claim any direct relationship due to the large chronological gap between the two (which potentially spans some 1,400 years).[82] Regardless of precise relationship, there are certainly common features between the two texts. First, the deity is portrayed as both destroyer

[78] Bouzard, Jr., *We Have Heard*, 58–59.

[79] Ibid., 58; Gwaltney, Jr., "Biblical Book of Lamentations," 201–2.

[80] Gwaltney, Jr., "Biblical Book of Lamentations," 201–2.

[81] Samet, "קנית הערים," 98. Samet himself concedes a relationship between Lam and the SCL exists, but asserts there is no direct dependence of the former upon the latter. See ibid., 99.

[82] Bouzard, Jr., *We Have Heard*, 201–2; Samet, "קנית הערים," 109–10.

and savior. In *LSUr*, it is Nanna (and Enlil); in *LU*, it is Enlil; in Lamentations, it is Yahweh.[83] Second, both portray immense suffering in the context of a lingering hope for restoration.[84] Third, and perhaps most significantly, imagery is shared between the two collections of poems as well. In both Lamentations and the SCL, particularly *LU*, the extent of the destruction is portrayed as a lack of musicians but the presence of foxes.[85] Stock siege images appear in both also: famine, disease, raids, exile, cultural devastation, etc.[86] The people themselves are shattered as pottery in both, and both feature the prominent "weeping goddess" motif.[87]

Lamentations, however, also differs from the SCL in several important respects, including a greater emphasis on the human element within the lament.[88] Also unlike the SCL, Lamentations, while it personifies Jerusalem and grants it status as a speaker in the poems, does not equate the city with Yahweh; he stands alone and outside of the destroyed city, and his voice is never heard within Lamentations.[89] Moreover, Yahweh is deemed responsible for the

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[83] *Lament over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*, trans. S. N. Kramer (*ANET*, 612–13, lines 1–114); *Lament over the Destruction of Ur*, lines 137–72, trans. Jacob Klein (*COS* 1.166:536); Lam 2:1–9. See Filarski, "Lamentations," 88–91.

[84] *LSUr* (*ANET*, 617, lines 351–55); *LU*, lines 418–36 (*COS* 1.166:538); Lam 3:19–33, 5:1–22. See Durlesser, "Book of Lamentations," 70–71.

[85] *LU* lines 269–356 (*COS* 1.166:537–38); Lam 5:14–18. See Samet, "קנית הערים," 97.

[86] *LSUr* (*ANET*, 614, lines 129–35); *LU*, lines 270–74 (*COS* 1.166:537); Lam 4:1–10. See Thomas F. McDaniel, "The Alleged Sumerian Influence upon Lamentations," *VT* 18, no. 2 (1968): 200–1.

[87] *LSUr* (*ANET*, 614, lines 119–65); *LU*, lines 254–91 (*COS* 1.166:537); Lam 1–2, 4:2. See Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 71–90. The "goddess" of Lamentations, however, is simply the personified Zion/Jerusalem; to portray an actual deity would be to violate Israelite monotheism.

[88] Gwaltney, Jr., "Biblical Book of Lamentations," 208.

[89] Mark E. Biddle, "The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspectives: Scripture in Context IV*, ed. by K. Lawson Younger and William W. Hallo (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 174–81. Biddle notes that the equivalency between Sumerian cities and their patron deities was so great that at times, a single logogram can denote both city and deity, to the point some cities themselves were deified grammatically in sundry texts. In addition, both ANE and Hellenistic iconography depicts personified cities wearing divine crowns. This is, of course,

destruction of Jerusalem in Lamentations, but the sack of the city was not the result of his action alone; instead, human sin and evil which violated his covenant with them is the true reason for the devastation.[90] Indeed, the SCL lack any sense of covenantal relationships between humans and deities whatsoever.[91]

Thomas F. McDaniel, noting the affinities as well as the disparities between Lamentations and the SCL, proposes that each simply arose from a common experience and spoke of it in ways which were similarly common across the ANE. The imagery used is simply that of those who have survived a siege; there is nothing which is unique to city laments. The lack of covenant relationships in the SCL is of major concern to McDaniel, as is the time gap between the texts. In his analysis, McDaniel raises a valid—and amusing—point: there is little popular appeal in a city lament, and there is thus little reason for it to survive outside of its immediate cultic use, particularly in a land so far removed from Sumeria as ancient Israel. It is therefore unlikely ancient Israelites would have learned of the genre and its features during the exile itself, as there is no direct line of literary transmission capable of reconstruction.[92]

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prohibited by the monotheism of the poet of Lamentations, and the closest parallel to such deification of Jerusalem is the allusion to its crown in Lam 5:16.

[90] The SCL underplay any direct human sin which might act as proximate cause for the destruction of the cities. Lamentations itself is restrained in its confession of sin, but such confession is present in every poem (Lam 1:8, 14, 18, 20, 22; 2:14; 3:42; 4:13; 5:7). That the destruction is still the sovereign act of Yahweh, however, is especially evident in two places. First, Lam 2:17 makes it clear that the sack of Jerusalem was Yahweh accomplishing his stated purpose, an allusion to the covenant curses of Deuteronomy. Second, Lam 4:18 echoes the SCL in that the city was given a fixed number of days to exist, and Yahweh had determined those days to have come to an end. Yahweh is the source of the destruction, but his judgment is a response to the sins and covenant violations of the people, freely confessed by the poet of Lamentations.

[91] McDaniel, "Alleged Sumerian Influence," 205. Sin was frequently linked to divine curse, outside of a covenantal relationship, in Mesopotamia. See Walter Farber, "Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia" in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 3:1898–99.

[92] McDaniel, "Alleged Sumerian Influence," 208–9.

Furthermore, McDaniel notes that some prominent Sumerian themes fail to appear in Lamentations, decreasing the probability the latter is literarily dependent upon the former. Overall, McDaniel's skepticism is convincing. While there are undoubtedly some affinities between Lamentations and the SCL, it is unnecessary to posit a strict literary dependency. Both are products of the ANE—and ANE warfare—and both therefore speak of common experiences (i.e., the destruction of a city) in expressions which likewise would have been common to both.[93] It is unknowable if the poet of Lamentations were familiar with the SCL, but such familiarity on his part is not required for him to have written his own laments for Jerusalem in the manner in which he did.[94]

Regardless, for the purposes of the present study, it is significant that these poems share one specific feature: imprecation as a *Gattung* in the conclusion of the lament. The final *gišgigal* of the concluding *kirugu* of *LSUr* calls for a "storm" to sweep the lands of each enemy who contributed to the downfall of the city. Just as the "storm" had swept Sumer, the petitioner calls for it to destroy Tidnum, Gutium, and Anshan. The only specific punishment described is the call for a famine in Anshan:

> Oh bitter storm, Oh storm, "raise your breast," Oh storm, return to your city,
> Oh city-destroying storm, Oh storm, "raise your breast," Oh storm, return to your house,
> Oh house-destroying storm, Oh storm, "raise your breast," Oh storm, return to your house,
> That storm that had afflicted Sumer—may it afflict the (inimical) [la]nds,
> That storm that had afflicted the Land—may it afflict the (inimical) lands,
> May it afflict the (enemy) land Tidnum, may it afflict the (enemy) land,
> May it afflict the (enemy) land Gutium, may it afflict the (enemy) land,

[93] Consider, for example, the use of the storm imagery to portray the destruction of cities and peoples in Ps 83:16 (MT versification) as well as in various inscriptions and records of Sargon, Sennacherib, and Esarhaddon. See *ARAB* 2.33; 2.164; 2.522; 2.563; 2.576.

[94] McDaniel is joined here by James A. Durlesser, who writes, "Connections with ancient Sumer need not be sought for the origins of the motifs in the Hebrew laments…. Such content connections are best seen as arising not out of a direct literary connection, but out of experiential commonality." See idem, "Book of Lamentations," 81–82.

> May it afflict the (enemy) land Anshan, may it afflict the (enemy) land,
> On Anshan, may the dust be heaped *high*, like (dust) carried by the "evil wind,"
> *May* Famine who brings (nothing but) harm dwell there, may it bring *death* to …,
> The *me* of heaven, the rules that govern people—*may* An change them there.[95]

Given that the storm of Enlil is a fixed feature of these laments, this imprecation has manifold implications. First, the cause of the destruction of Ur is attributed to its abandonment by Nanna and Enlil, not human sin. Second, Enlil is implicitly invoked to cause the destruction of the enemy lands. Third, the imprecation is a call for retributive justice: Enlil destroyed Sumer and Ur via the enemy armies, and he is petitioned to use the same means to destroy the enemies of the city. Fourth, by implication, Enlil is able to answer the pleas of the petitioner and enact the curses on the cities as requested.[96] The imprecation at the end of *LSUr*, then, fully matches the larger definitions and theology of imprecation of other ANE curses in addition to bearing the hallmarks of the city lament genre itself. While a full treatment of the imprecations of Lamentations will appear in chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation, it is important here to note the affinities between the curses of Lamentations and those of *LSUr* in that both demonstrate these characteristic traits of ANE imprecations.

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[95] *LSUr* (*ANET*, 619, lines 490–500). Similar imprecations are present across *Lament over Eridu* (*LE*), *Lament over Nippur* (*LN*), and *Lament over Uruk* (*LW*). An unknown number of lines of *LSUr* is missing following line 500, and the only recovered text which follows the imprecation is a fragmentary cry for blessing and restoration by the queen to Nanna, patron god of Ur. See *LSUr* (*ANET*, 619, lines 500+X+1–500+X+6). For Nanna as patron of Ur, see Douglas R. Frayne and Johanna H. Stuckey, *A Handbook of Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient Near East: Three Thousand Deities of Anatolia, Syria, Israel, Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and Elam* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 225–26.

It is possible these curses are developed further within *LSUr*, perhaps even chiastically in a way which would mirror proposed structures for Lamentations, in the missing text which follows line 500. However, given the fragmentary nature of the lament, it is impossible to know how many lines of cuneiform are missing. The extant text trails off in the midst of the appeal to Nanna, and no definitive conclusion to the lament is known.

[96] These conclusions are also evidenced by text from the third *kirugu* which forms a petition to Enlil to gaze upon the ruined cities and return to it in pity. See *LSUr* (*ANET*, 617, lines 341–55).

Other Mesopotamian Curses

In addition to the imprecations of the SCL, a variety of other curses from Mesopotamia are extant. Like the SCL, these Sumerian and Babylonian curses follow the standard ANE pattern of imprecation as outlined previously, demonstrating the continuity of the ANE patterns across the time gap between the SCL and the biblical book of Lamentations. Also like their predecessors in the SCL, some Mesopotamian imprecations are found within lament forms, the Sumerian *balag* and the Akkadian *eršemma*.[97] These forms were heirs to the poetry and pain of the earlier SCL, and it is theorized they had more influence on OT laments, particularly lament psalms, than their predecessors, as the SCL are directly analogous only to Lamentations. The biblical authors could easily have become familiar with the *balag*/*eršemma* form through trade and diplomacy, and it is also possible they were forms learned during the exile.[98]

Perhaps the greatest extant text relevant to the current study apart from the SCL is the Sumerian *Curse of Agade*. *Curse of Agade* antedates the Sumerian city laments by perhaps as much as two centuries, but it contains the same basic plot: the fall of a city, Agade.[99] The story narrates the sins of the king of Agade, Naram-Sin (grandson of Sargon the Great), and the

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[97] The SCL themselves were preceded by Old Sumerian laments such as the "Fall of Lagash," which lamented the conquest of Lagash by Lugalzegesi of Umma in 2350 BC. See William W. Hallo, "Lamentations and Prayers in Sumer and Akkad," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. by Jack M. Sasson, et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 3.1871.

[98] Bouzard, Jr., *We Have Heard*, 131–55. Such a conclusion is not strictly necessary, however. As Brug observes, acrostics were known across the ancient world, and acrostic poems are extant from both Babylon and Egypt; see John F. Brug, "Biblical Acrostics and Their Relationship to Other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics," in *The Bible in Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8, ed. by William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 292–99. As previously noted, it is impossible to determine the exact relationship of the SCL to Lam, but it is unlikely it is one of strict literary dependency. Poetic forms, whether acrostic or lament, were common across the ANE world, and there is no need to posit a strict line of literary transmission for the *balag*/*eršemma* any more than there is for the SCL.

[99] Bachvarova, "The Destroyed City," 44.

destruction of his city in the aftermath of his failures. Interestingly, *Curse of Agade* provides two causes for the sack of the city. The first is indirect. In line with the *Sumerian King List*, the sin of the king is proposed as a reason for the fall of the city he ruled. With the sole exception of the *King List*, all Sumerian depictions of conquests and falls of cities are attributed only to the acts of deities. In the *King List* and *Curse of Agade*, however, the sins of the king result in divine judgment, for "the king needed to remain free from sin in the eyes of the gods. Therefore, a city being sacked by the enemy or destroyed by natural forces could be taken as evidence of a failure on the part of its ruler, and its story was presented by scribes as an admonition to the readers and listeners."[100] *Curse of Agade* thus assumes a didactic role to warn future kings against the sins of Naram-Sin.

However, the second cause for the fall of Agade is more explicit in the text: the city falls at the sole decision of Enlil. At the deity's decision the city must be destroyed, Gutian invaders sack Agade and devastate it utterly. It must be noted, however, that *Curse of Agade* is a parallel text to the Akkadian *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin*, except Agade (Akkad) is not destroyed in the Akkadian *Cuthean Legend*—just as it was not destroyed at that point in history.[101] Regardless of the historicity of its account, *Curse of Agade* ends without any imprecatory elements; no curse is uttered against the Gutian armies, and the poem concludes with a simple "Agade is destroyed! Praise Inanna!"[102] The only curse within the *Curse of Agade*, then, is what befalls the city itself at

[100] *The Curse of Agade*, trans. S. N. Kramer (*ANET*, 648–49, lines 91–150). See Bachvarova, "The Destroyed City," 41.

[101] Bachvarova, "The Destroyed City," 42–44.

[102] *The Curse of Agade* (*ANET*, 651, line 281).

the discretion of Enlil. With that said, the ruin of the city is great indeed, and the city is so destroyed as to be a fit habitation only for wild animals and vegetation.[103]

Two other Sumerian-Akkadian laments also need mentioning here. The first of these is the *Myth of Erra*, a long poem from the (much) later Seleucid period. Its subject matter, however, is the third-millennium destruction of Babylon by the Gutians, and the lament follows standard Mesopotamian patterns. The second major lament is actually the genre known as Dumuzi-laments, neolithic communal laments intended to resurrect the god Dumuzi in order to perpetuate the cycle of seasons and restore the earth to a fertile springtime.[104] While these laments find echoes in the OT—note the reference in Ezekiel 8:14 to Tammuz, the Akkadian name for the Sumerian Dumuzi—they nevertheless lack typical imprecatory formulae, leaving them entirely in the realm of lament.[105]

A variety of other Sumerian-Akkadian laments are extant, and William W. Hallo traces their evolution in broad strokes, noting their influence on OT laments. The Mesopotamian laments, far from lamenting simply the loss of a city or temple, could also mourn the death of a king, a private citizen, or even a deity. Laments for kings were common following 2250 BC, and kings would often order royal periods of mourning for their own family members, as in the case of Nabonidus, who ordered a national lament following the death of his mother in 547 BC. Individual laments, in contrast, could consist of elegies, private letters, individual prayers, and

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[103] *The Curse of Agade* (*ANET*, 651, lines 271–77). See Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 67.

[104] Hallo, "Lamentations and Prayer," 3.1873–74.

[105] The Dumuzi laments in particular emphasize grief above any other concern, and any evil is attributed solely to the bemoaned will of the god; no enemies are mentioned, and therefore no imprecation is possible. See Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, 47–73.

theodicies.[106] Moreover, all Sumerian-Akkadian laments were highly musical compositions intended for liturgical use, and they frequently included notes for instrumentation, including harps, pipes, and percussion, as well as specific liturgical/ritual directions.[107] The core image of the *balag*/*eršemma* lament form is the personified city and its equivalence with the patron deity.[108] In keeping with its poetic nature, such an image is limited to the poetic books of the OT, where the personification is present but the association with Yahweh is not; the stock image has been altered to align with Israel's monotheism.[109]

Mesopotamian laments may or may not feature curses, then, but there is at least a nominal link between the two given the inclusion of imprecations in the SCL and curse elements in *Curse of Agade*. Apart from such laments, however, curse texts are common in Mesopotamian literature. In such texts, the Sumerian term *nam-erím* and the Akkadian *māmītu* signify both oath and curse, as the two concepts are held together quite closely as in Hebrew terminology and texts. Indeed, *māmītu* transitioned over time from denoting "oath with curse" to simply "curse."[110] Such *māmītum*, whether as oath, curse, or both, called on the gods to enforce the words of the text and punish any who transgress its commands or vows. Illness and suffering

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[106] Hallo, "Lamentations and Prayer," 3.1874–79.

[107] Ibid., 3.1871–72. Some of these laments are classified simply by these notations. Hallo describes tambourine-laments, harp-songs, and hand-lifting laments, among others; ibid., 3.1872–73.

[108] Biddle, "Figure of Lady Jerusalem," 176.

[109] Ibid., 174; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "The Syntagma of *bat* Followed by a Geographical Name in the Hebrew Bible: A Reconsideration of Its Meaning and Grammar," *CBQ* 57 (1995): 455–57.

[110] Feder, "Mechanics of Retribution," 127–30. Feder notes that *māmītu* functions as the equivalent of the BH אָלָה. See ibid., 134. Such was the influence of Babylonian vocabulary and curses that postexilic Aramaic oath texts appearing on incantation bowls refer to both oath and curse as *mometā'*, with the Aramaic texts invoking the divine name and the names of angels to adjure various demons. See Markham J. Geller, "The Influence of Ancient Mesopotamia on Hellenistic Judaism," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1.49.

were thus attributable to a deity's enforcement of the imprecation or the curse portion of an oath, and such guilt—and therefore suffering—was contagious, capable of being transmitted by coming into contact with an accursed individual's person or food and water.[111]

Many other curses are inscriptionary, appearing on monuments and in other iconography. The Chaldean Caillou Michaux monument acted as a boundary marker and invoked no fewer than thirteen deities in order to preserve the property line following the gift of the land as part of a dowry. The gods, both named and unnamed within the inscription, were to enact curses on violators of the boundary which included the loss of land, death of offspring, pestilence, terror, despair, and exile.[112] The Inscription of Idrimi (~1475 BC) is an Akkadian text of 104 lines found on a statue of Idrimi, the king of Alalakh. The text concludes with a curse calling for the obliteration of the name and offspring of anyone who destroys or effaces the statue.[113] The Inscription of Adad-Nirari, King of Assyria (~1325 BC) follows similar lines to protect the monument erected by the eponymous king, as does the later Inscription of Nabupaliddin (~883-52 BC). The inscription by Merodachbaladan on the Berlin Stone contains similar curses but extends them to not only those who deface the tablet, but also those who mistreat the handicapped or fail to properly worship the gods. The concern for right worship is shared by an

[111] Feder, "Mechanics of Retribution," 127–33. The *Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon* builds upon the curse/oath duality, calling for a long list of curses (destruction, plague, erasure of offspring, drought, rain of hot coals, defeat in battle, marital discord, love of death of one's family, murder at the hands of one's family, rejection by gods, famine, and strangulation) upon those who violate the treaty and thus break their oath. See Erle Leichty, "Esarhaddon, King of Assyria," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 956. Indeed, the Assyrian treaty curses were even more elaborate than the Hittite. See James W. Watts, "Rhetorical Strategy in the Composition of the Pentateuch," *JSOT* 68 (1995): 12.

[112] "Chaldean Imprecations," *The Old Testament Student* 4, no. 2 (1884): 82–83.

[113] Edward L. Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 3.2423–28.

inscription by Nebuchadnezzar I on his own monument, cursing with famine and captivity, among other ills, those who destroy his work because they worship other gods.[114]

Perhaps the most famous Mesopotamian inscriptionary/monumental curses, however, are found in the Laws of Hammurabi (1700s BC). Like the Laws of Lipit-Ishtar, the Laws of Hammurabi are inscribed onto a stele and contains an imprecatory epilogue in part directed against those who would deface the monument.[115] Nevertheless, the Laws of Hammurabi are primarily directed towards kings who would follow Hammurabi, and thus the curses are likewise aimed toward them, with a clear connection between the behavior of the king and the survival/prosperity of the city as seen in other Mesopotamian curse texts and laments. Here, these conditional curses call upon a wide variety of deities including Bel, Shamash, Sin, Adad, Ishtar, Nin-tu, Za-má-má, and others, petitioning them to destroy the offending king's cities and troops, to cause him to fail in battle and be exiled, and to destroy his rule, family, and legacy, among other imprecations.[116]

Whether contained in laments or displayed on monuments, Mesopotamian imprecations across the millennia continue to follow the basic definition of curses demonstrated earlier and find wide application against any and all offenders, both invaders and those who efface iconography. It is evident, then, that this portion of the ancient world practiced cursing according to the ANE pattern—and did so with great frequency.

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[114] Robert Francis Harper, "Babylonian and Assyrian Imprecations," *The Biblical World* 24, no. 1 (1904): 28–30.

[115] Assmann, "When Justice Fails," 157–58.

[116] Harper, "Babylonian and Assyrian Imprecations," 26–28. Similar monumental imprecations concern future kings, blessing them while cursing those who destroy the steles of the present monarch. See *ARAB* 2.90; 2.94; 2.111; 2.189; 2.218; 2.343; 2.371; 2.427; 2.442; 2.455; 2.581; 2.657–659; 2.665; 2.734; 2.741; 2.751; 2.872; 2.882; 2.955; 2.959; 2.973; 2.1005; 2.1135; 2.1141; 2.1164.

Egyptian Curses

Egyptian curses, like those of Sumer and Babylon, feature the requisite ANE imprecatory elements, and they, too, frequently appear as monumental imprecations. There are significant deviations from the Mesopotamian pattern, however, and in order to establish a more robust ANE pattern of imprecation, it is now necessary to turn to ancient Egypt.

Monumental imprecations appear predominantly from the First Intermediate period (2130–1980 BC) through the New Kingdom (1539–1075 BC), although tomb curses were common as early as the end of the Third Dynasty (2675–2625 BC). Early inscriptions, such as the Moʿalla Inscription No. 8, appear on monuments erected by early pharaohs and promise punishment in the present life, but tomb curses in the style of Koptos Decree "R" promise divinely-sanctioned punishment in both this world and the afterlife.[117] The earliest tomb curses from the Third Dynasty included a brief biography of the deceased before cursing anyone who would desecrate or damage the tomb.[118] Such monumental curses typically included three types of punishments: (1) "deprivation of burial; (2) "bodily destruction (e.g. by burning)"; (3) "exclusion from divine communication (offering) and social memory, a kind of 'excommunication' including outlawry."[119] Indeed, in the words of Jan Assmann, these curses "aim at the total dissolution and decomposition of a person in all his aspects, in this world and in the hereafter."[120] By the end of the New Kingdom, however, the strength of the eschatological curses withered away, and the punishments became increasingly physical—and increasingly

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[117] Assmann, "When Justice Fails," 153–54.

[118] Donald B. Redford, "Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Overview," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 4.2232–33.

[119] Assmann, "When Justice Fails," 154.

[120] Ibid., 159.

obscene, with imprecations now calling for offenders to be sexually abused by animals and to witness their wives raped in front of their eyes.[121]

In all this, the imprecations of Egypt mirror those of monumental inscriptions throughout Mesopotamia. The primary deviation of Egypt from its contemporaries comes in the guise of magic. Curses, as throughout the ANE, were caused by divine power; with that said, rituals were indeed necessary to perform a curse, and the curses took on magical qualities.[122] An array of rites existed in ancient Egypt to curse one's enemies and involved a variety of materials and ritual actions. The most basic of these sees one spit on or lick the offender, as saliva was linked to venom and considered an unclean bodily discharge. Such curses typically sought to inflict illness and bodily infirmity.[123] Others involved the direct, explicit appeal to the name of a deity accompanied by writing the name of an enemy and either trampling it or simply touching it during the curse ritual.[124] The Pyramid Texts contain a more complicated rite, albeit one along similar lines: the ritual of the red vase. The name of the person to be cursed was written on a vase or other pot made of red clay. Once the imprecation was prayed over the name, the pottery was destroyed. If red pottery was unavailable, red wax could be applied to another breakable

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[121] Assmann, "When Justice Fails," 156–57.

[122] This is reflected in Egyptian vocabulary. Whereas the terms for curse in other ANE languages relate primarily to oaths, those of Egyptian dialects are inherently connected to magic. The base word for curse, *sḫwr* (Coptic ⲥϧϩⲟⲩ), means "to cause to be wretched," and it is etymologically linked to the noun *ṯs ḫwrw*, "evil utterance." See Ritner, *Mechanics*, 45–46.

[123] Ibid., 82–102. The saliva was the medium for the curse, but it lacked any imprecatory authority in and of itself; the power of the curse remained in divine hands.

[124] Ibid., 65–135. The Coffin Texts in particular cry out to sundry deities to punish anyone who violated tombs, and they frequently assigned heresy and sin to the offender in order to attract the vengeance of the god. See ibid., 173–74. Christopher A. Faraone notes a ritual for a "voodoo doll" of sorts within the Coffin Texts, writing the name of the person to be cursed onto a wax figurine which is then pierced with three catfish bones. Rather than verbally calling upon the name of a deity, however, the appeal here is made by burying the effigy in the necropolis, sacred as it was to Osiris. See Christopher A. Faraone, "A Wax Effigy Pierced by Three Bones: The Pharaonic Origins of a Late-Antique Cursing Ritual?" *SO* 91, no. 1 (2017): 126–33.

surface, or, failing that, to something flammable. The prevalence of the ritual of the red vase is attested by the number of ostraca and potsherds recovered from well after the end of the New Kingdom, when the ritual was created.[125]

Egyptian curses clearly followed standard ANE imprecatory practices even as they deviated from them. Divine power resulting in vengeance is the very core of the ANE curse, but Egyptian texts add rituals and other magical practices in order to secure this divine power; words alone were insufficient. Egyptian curses, unlike their ANE counterparts, were correspondingly only tangentially related to oaths and oath texts, instead having a clearer reliance on magical arts and abilities.

Miscellaneous Curses: Hittite, Luwian, and Phoenician

A final set of ANE curse texts to be considered include miscellaneous curse texts composed in Hittite, Luwian, and Phoenician. While these imprecations are typically disconnected from larger literary works (with the exception of the Hittite covenant curses), they nevertheless continue the patterns seen in other ANE curses, and thus help to solidify the pattern across both time and space in the ANE world.

The obvious place to begin is with the exception—and, ironically, the text closest to the OT: Hittite covenants. Hittite suzerainty treaties employ the ergative case to make the oaths themselves the enforcers of the terms as well as the punishers of the violators, but a staple feature of all Hittite treaties is the list of deities who serve as witnesses to the signatories.[126] Hittite oaths

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[125] Ritner, *Mechanics*, 140–59. On occasion, skulls were also inscribed or written upon and destroyed as a variation of the standard ritual.

[126] Feder, "Mechanics of Retribution," 121–23. Feder writes that the ergatival verb forms create "personified oaths" which act as their own enforcers. Kitz agrees, stating, "Since curses were somewhat standardized, it may not be surprising to find they could be incorporated into oaths which are nothing other than a

necessarily involve curses, and the *lingai*-forms present in ritual texts describe the evils which result from the curse: "sorcery (*alwanzatar*), impurity (*papratar*), bloodshed (*ešḫar*) and other similar forces."[127] The other forces often produce ritual uncleanness in the forms of skin conditions and unclean garments, but imprecations could also include the ultimate curse, banishment/exile.[128] Given the affinity between Hittite suzerainty treaties and the structure of Deuteronomy—itself the partial basis for the theology of curse in Lamentations—it is significant that such treaties had divine witnesses as well as curses of exile promised for those who violated the terms of the agreement.

Despite this emphasis on self-efficacious curses in treaties, other Hittite texts return to the standard ANE patterns and explicitly call upon a deity to enact the imprecation. The Prayer of Mursilis II, for example, calls on the gods to end a plague in Hatti by sending it to the land of their enemies.[129] Such transference of plagues was often accompanied by a Hittite scapegoat ritual, wherein curses, maladies, and other misfortunes were ritually transferred to enemy kingdoms through cult actions.[130] In this way, curses upon others brought about blessings on the one praying the curse, a noted trait of ANE imprecations. This is further illustrated by the Hittite Kumarbi Cycle, particularly the *Song of Ullikummi*. In the song's description of the

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form of conditional self-cursing." See Anne Marie Kitz, "An Oath, Its Curse and Anointing Ritual," *JAOS* 124, no. 2 (2004): 315.

[127] Feder, "Mechanics of Retribution," 124. *Paprātar* specifically refers to ritual uncleanness and impurity; *ešḫar* can denote either bloodshed or the blood itself, either of which resulted in ritual impurity. See The University of Texas at Austin Linguistics Research Center, "Hittite Online," https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol_english_meaning_index/hitol/11. The practice of witchcraft intended to harm others, according to Feder, likewise was a purity violation.

[128] Kitz, "Oath," 315–20.

[129] Scalf, "Magic," 212.

[130] Ibid. These scapegoat rituals could take the form of the release of prisoners of war who, following certain rites, were sent back to their native land to both pacify the gods and to bear the plague out of Hatti.

creation/birth of Ullikummi, a number of blessings are pronounced upon the child, but each blessing is phrased as a curse upon others.[131] These texts cement the shape of Hittite imprecations, and they follow the patterns of the ANE curses with little significant deviation.[132]

Another major ANE curse text comes in both Luwian and Phoenician forms, the Inscription of Azatiwada (Karatepe 1). The inscription itself dates to 730–10 BC and "memorializes the foundation and construction of a city, named for him, Azatiwadiya."[133] Its sixty lines form the longest extant Phoenician text, and it appears in parallel with hieroglyphic Luwian. The five sections follow a pattern similar to Egyptian Third Dynasty tomb curses, beginning with a brief introduction followed by a biography of Azatiwada and a list of his accomplishments. After a short prayer of blessing upon Azatiwada's kingdom, the text moves into "a curse on anyone who would efface the inscription or destroy the gate": oblivion, total removal from life and memory.[134] That the inscription is found in parallel in both languages will permit it to stand in for both Luwian and Phoenician here and connect both to the (now well-attested) ANE pattern of imprecation. In addition, it features other common elements beyond the standard definition: blessing and curse in tandem; monumental provenance; and a biographical section, an affinity with Third Dynasty tomb curses.

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[131] For example, one such blessing-curse is that Ullikummi would win victories over gods and kings because they would be utterly destroyed. Ullikummi's enemies are similarly cursed in other Hittite texts. See René Lebrun, "From Hittite Mythology: The Kumarbi Cycle," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1974–77.

[132] Unfortunately, there are no extant Hittite laments akin to those of the larger ANE world, so it is impossible to trace imprecation in that most pertinent of poetic forms. See Bachvarova, "The Destroyed City," 49–50.

[133] Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia," 3.2428. The dating is largely dependent upon the reign of Awariku, whom Azatiwada may have served as regent instead of reigning as king himself. If Azatiwada was a regent and not a king, the inscription may conceivably be a century older. See ibid., 3.2428–30.

[134] Ibid., 3.2429–30.

A number of other Hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions share similar features to that of Karatepe 1. Several curses appear on funerary inscriptions, such as the Tilsevet, Meharde, and Topada inscriptions, and even more are written into building and dedicatory inscriptions, particularly at Karkamiš.[135] Each of these calls upon the gods to enact curses similar to those of the Azatiwada inscription should the monuments be effaced, the gods fail to be worshiped, etc. The Luwian inscriptions, then, continue in the line of standard ANE imprecations.

Analysis of Select Postexilic Jewish Curses

Within Jewish literature outside of the canonical books, the closest analogs for ANE curse texts may be found primarily in two corpora: the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and Jewish ossuary inscriptions.[136] The following overview of each will by design be brief, as both groups of texts are of admittedly limited value for comparison with the imprecations of Lamentations. They are included here because they represent the principle extant Jewish curses which follow the traditions of Lamentations; they are of limited value, however, because they can only sketch the legacy and later interpretation, not the origins, of the imprecatory texts of the OT canon.

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[135] Annick Payne, *Iron Age Hieroglyphic Luwian Inscriptions*, WAW 29, ed. H. Craig Melchert (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 17–118. Note in particular the following inscriptions and their curses: the bilingual inscription Karatepe 1; funerary inscriptions Tilsevet, Meharde, and Topada; building inscriptions Hama 4, Karkamiš A11a, Karkamiš A11b+c, Karkamiš A4d, Karkamiš A2+3, Cekke, Karkamiš A6, and Kululu 1; dedicatory inscriptions Babylon 1, Tell Ahmar 6, Aleppo 2, and Sultanhan; and the "miscellaneous" inscriptions of Karaburun and Bulgarmaden.

[136] While imprecations are contained in the deuterocanonical books (e.g., Jdt 9:13; Sir 28:13; 2 Macc 1:28), they will not be treated here in favor of retaining a focus on inscriptionary imprecations and literature more directly related to Lamentations. However, each of the apocryphal curses demonstrates the established definition of an imprecation: they cry to God for retribution against those who have in some way persecuted the faithful (as represented by the speaker of the curses).

Four copies of Lamentations exist within the DSS: 3Q3, 4Q111, 5Q6, and 5Q7.[137] Adele Berlin notes that similar laments and theological motifs run across a number of others scrolls, most notably 4Q179, 4Q282, 4Q439, 4Q445, 4Q453, and 4Q501.[138] In addition, two other scrolls contain marked curse segments: 4QTest (4Q175) and the Damascus Document (D; 4Q266). Moreover, the Manual of Discipline (Serekh ha-Yaḥad; 1QS) and 4QBerakhot (4QBer^{a-e}/4Q286–290) feature the covenant curses in prominent ways. Several of these will be examined below.

4Q175 (4QTest)

The Testimonia Scroll, 4Q175/4QTest, is "a blessing-cursing text" comprising a midrash on Joshua 6, which is itself sometimes taken as a midrash on Deuteronomy 13.[139] Deuteronomy 13 is a warning against the pursuit of other gods, with the potential temptation to abandon Yahweh coming from all quarters: prophets (vv. 1–5 [2–6 MT]), family and friends (vv. 6–11 [7–12 MT]), and "sons of Belial" in the cities of Israel (vv.13–18 [14–19 MT]). The punishment for enticement to follow another god is death for each group, and, in the case of the sons of Belial, the destruction of their city as well. Such is the background for Joshua 6 and its tale of the destruction of Jericho, a city given over to other gods.

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[137] There are no significant textual variants relevant to the present study in the texts of DSS Lam, so these scrolls will be omitted here in favor of analysis of other, more pertinent, scrolls. For a brief survey of DSS Lam, see John Jarick, "The Bible's 'Festival Scrolls' among the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Scrolls and the Scriptures: Qumran Fifty Years After*, JSPSup 26, ed. by Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 174–76.

[138] Adele Berlin, "Qumran Laments and the Study of Lament Literature," in *Liturgical Perspective: Prayer and Poetry in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Proceedings of the Fifth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 19-23 January, 2000*, STDJ 48, ed. Esther G. Chazon, Ruth Clements, and Avital Pinnick (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1.

[139] David Katzin, "The Use of Scripture in 4Q175," *DSD* 20, no. 2 (2013): 201–8; here, 202.

4Q175, in its commentary on Joshua 6, employs a number of allusions to books across all sections of the Tanakh in order to apply the lessons of Jericho to the fall of Jerusalem.[140] The people of Jerusalem had engaged in idolatry at the behest of false prophets, and thus they had abandoned Yahweh; in short, the city had become another Jericho and deserved the destruction which had been visited upon it.[141] In light of this, the scribe of 4Q175, in the character of Joshua, utters imprecations upon those who may rebuild the city, declaring death to their children as well as to those of the enemies of the few Jerusalemites who remained faithful.[142] Curses upon offspring were common throughout the ANE, and 4Q175 continues that tradition. This may also be an instance of retributive justice: the siege caused the death of many children, so the petitioner here cries out for the death of the enemy's offspring as well. In like fashion, the city deserved its destruction for its sin, so the children of those who rebuild it deserve similar punishment.

4Q179 and 4Q501

Like 4Q175, 4Q179 (4QapocrLam A) and 4Q501 (4QapocrLam B) offer critiques of Jerusalem, stating it was the sin of the people which led to the fall of the city even as they offer laments for the destruction.[143] The text of 4Q179 makes frequent allusions to a variety of Scriptures, often conflating verses into a single citation, but it never directly quotes any OT text.[144] As Berlin

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[140] Katzin, "Use of Scripture," 206–18. Only a single reference to Lamentations is identified by Katzin, the phrase על חל בת ציון which appears in 4Q175 29. This connects it to a similar phrase in Lam 2:8, the only time the vocabulary is seen in close proximity throughout the OT. See ibid., 218.

[141] 4Q175 25–29 (*DSSSE*, 1.356–57). See Katzin, "Use of Scripture," 233–6.

[142] 4Q175 14–24 (*DSSSE*, 1.356–57). See Katzin, "Use of Scripture," 219.

[143] Berlin, "Qumran Laments," 2, 13. The primary confession is found in 4Q179 1 i 14–15 (*DSSSE*, 1.369–70), and the accompanying communal lament appears in 4Q501 (*DSSSE*, 2.992–95).

[144] The references include Gen 10:12; Isa 1:7, 23:23, 54:6, 64:10; Jer 30:15; Ezek 16:13, 27:24; Jonah 1:1; Mic 1:9; Job 28:16; and Lam 1:1, 4:2, 4:5. See Berlin, "Qumran Laments," 5–6.

states, "it is a poem, not a *pesher*," and no quotation of Scripture is necessary nor intended.[145] Still, the scroll exegetes its allusions in order to create new understandings of the original texts to provide a critique of contemporary Jerusalem. Building upon the imagery of Lamentations 5:18, Jerusalem is depicted as a wasteland because of its sin, and the true state of the scribe's contemporary city is the same: a spiritual wasteland devoid of true servants of Yahweh.[146] As such, the scroll serves as both a lament for the events of 587 and a rebuke of the rebuilt city.[147]

The second Lamentations apocryphon, 4Q501, features more lament elements than the first, and, as such, stands more in line with ANE lament traditions. Pertinent to this study is its imprecation in the style of the biblical communal laments, cursing the enemies of the faithful in generic terms.[148] No precise punishments are requested, in keeping with the retributive nature of the imprecations of Lamentations; it is merely a bald cry for justice to be done by Yahweh on behalf of his people.

The Damascus Document (4Q266–273)

The Damascus Document (D; 4Q266–273) states the true cause of the destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent exile: the people abandoned the covenant—and therefore Yahweh—and sought instead to pursue their own desires.[149] Because of this, D establishes the curse of exile as a fitting punishment for anyone who would violate the covenantal relationship of the members of the

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[145] Berlin, "Qumran Laments," 3.

[146] 4Q179 2 3–10 (*DSSSE*, 1.370–71).

[147] Berlin, "Qumran Laments," 8–18.

[148] 4Q501 7–9 (*DSSSE*, 2.992–95). The writer asks Yahweh to oppose the enemies and avenge the faithful because the former has failed to uphold truth and care for the needy.

[149] 4Q266 3 ii 9–19 (*DSSSE*, 1.584–87).

Qumran community. Anyone who broke the commandments of Qumran faced temporary exclusion or permanent exile contingent upon the nature of the offense, often with accompanying eschatological curses.[150] The text explicitly groups exclusion and expulsion with other punishments, calling them a curse upon sinners who violate the holy law of the community.[151]

A number of other curses are pronounced upon those who violate the rules of the community or those who pervert justice.[152] Like the earlier curse, these are both present punishment (exclusion and expulsion) and eschatological judgment, although the exact nature of the latter is left to the imagination.

4QBerakhot and 1QS

Serekh ha-Yaḥad (Manual of Discipline; 1QS) and the five scrolls comprising 4QBerakhot (4Q286–290, 4QBer$^{a–e}$) represent the best example of covenant curses among the DSS.[153] Following the punishments of Deuteronomy—and the logic expressed in D—1QS prescribes both temporary exclusion and permanent expulsion from the community depending on the severity of the breach of community rules.[154] The latter, the curse of expulsion, is used primarily as a deterrent against those who do not wholeheartedly accept the terms of the community covenant: "This curse is in effect a general threat, directed *a priori* at whoever even contemplates

[150] Aharon Shemesh, "Expulsion and Exclusion in the Community Rule and the Damascus Document," *DSD* 9, no. 1 (2002): 54–65. The practice of temporary exclusion was based on the complete experience of the exile, for, after all, the exile did end, and the people returned.

[151] Ibid., 47. See, for example, 4Q266 10 ii 1–15 (*DSSSE*, 1.594–97).

[152] See in particular the curse sections of 4Q267–270, especially 4Q267 (4QD^{b}), 4Q268 (4QD^{c}), and 4Q270 (4QD^{e}) (*DSSSE*, 1.598–617).

[153] Andrew R. Krause, "Community, Alterity, and Space in the Qumran Covenant Curses," *DSD* 25, no. 2 (2018): 218.

[154] 1QS 6:24–7:25 (*DSSSE*, 1.84–89). See Shemesh, "Expulsion and Exclusion," 45–50.

sinning."[155] Any violators of the holy law of the community, then, receive the curses of the covenant, up to and including exile. Other covenant curses invoked include fire, darkness, and perpetual fear, all appearing in the context of blessings for obedience.[156]

Similarly, 4QBer$^{a–e}$ explicitly curses all sons of Belial to destruction because of their sin.[157] The curses are symmetrical to the blessings for obedience and align with those of the War Scroll (1Q33/1QM) without consigning Belial's lot to the pit as in the War Scroll.[158] The notions of exile here are chthonic in nature, and those who violate the rules of the community are consigned to eternal estrangement from Yahweh and the righteous.[159]

5Q14 (5QCurses)

While the other scrolls included here have at least tenuous connections to the biblical text/narrative in some way, 5Q14 (5QCurses) does not. It is a fragmentary curse text from beginning to truncated end. The curses include the physical (loss of sight, falling, scarcity) and

[155] Shemesh, "Expulsion and Exclusion," 48.

[156] This has led Andrew R. Krause to dub 1QS the "most complete and well choreographed [*sic*] covenantal blessings and curses text extant from Qumran." See idem, "Community, Alterity, and Space," 224. It is not, however, the greatest use of the covenant curse material from Deuteronomy, which at times is imported wholesale into scrolls such as the Temple Scroll (11QT). See Phillip R. Callaway, "Extending Divine Revelation: Micro-Compositional Strategies in the Temple Scroll," in *Temple Scroll Studies*, JSPSup 7, ed. by James H. Charlesworth (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 149–62.

[157] E.g., 4QBer^{a} 7 ii 1–13 (*DSSSE*, 2.646–49). See Katzin, "Use of Scripture," 221–22.

[158] 1QM 13 (*DSSSE*, 1.112–45); 4QBer^{a} 7 ii (*DSSSE*, 2.646–49). See Krause, "Community, Alterity, and Space," 232–35. On the similarities between 4QBerakhot and 1QM, Krause writes, "The correspondences between the curses of the War Scroll and those of 4QBerakhot should also force us to ask if there were multiple curse traditions in certain Jewish circles at this time."

[159] Krause, "Community, Alterity, and Space," 234.

the noetic (an erasure, presumably from life and memory; the text is fragmentary here). No context is given; the scroll is simply a list of curses upon an unknown party.[160]

Jewish Ossuary Curses

Aside from the DSS, the inscriptions on Jewish ossuaries comprise the bulk of Jewish curses in the Second Temple period. Similar to the features of the Egyptian tomb curses, Jewish ossuary curses sought Yahweh's wrath on anyone who effaced or otherwise disturbed the bones held within the ossuary. Most of these curses appear on ossuaries from the Kidron Valley and seek to permanently separate the offender from Yahweh—and from his/her own life. The offenders were declared קרבן, consigning them to Yahweh through total destruction.[161]

Synthesis

The curses extant from the ANE appear primarily as inscriptionary or monumental curses, although the SCL and DSS curse texts lend them a more literary provenance as well. The overwhelming majority of these imprecations fit the proposed definition perfectly: a powerless petitioner calls for retributive justice to be enacted by a deity. Many imprecations appear in the context of oaths, vows, and blessings as well, highlighting the relationship between each of the three in both popular religion and vocabulary.

Covenant curses, a particular parallel to the imprecation theology of Lamentations, appear with some frequency, and not only in Hittite treaties. Like other curses, they were to be

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[160] 5Q14 1–5 (*DSSSE*, 2.1136–37).

[161] Manekin-Bamberger, "The Vow-Curse," 344–46. Moreover, idolatrous nations and peoples, including perhaps Christians, are cursed in the Tefillah in rabbinic Judaism. See Samuel Krauss, "Imprecation against the Minim in the Synagogue," *JQR* 9, no. 3 (1897): 515–17.

enacted by a deity, although Hittite curses in particular were self-efficacious, and some Egyptian covenant curses were similarly powerful in their own right in a magical sense.[162] In contrast, most other ANE curses were solidly enacted by a divine agent alone, and it is this tradition which carried on beyond the time of the OT into the Second Temple period. Evidence from the DSS reinforces this, and the curses of the scrolls are not magical, but, rather, based on "the nascent biblical traditions" about "the 'mighty acts of God.'"[163]

Summary

Imprecations of the ANE contain three major elements: the notion of retributive justice, connected to conditionality; the impotence of the petitioner to enact justice; and the invocation of a deity or other divine agent who possessed authority and ability to perform the requested curse. Each of these elements is necessary for a proper ANE curse text, with very few exceptions documented among Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hittite, Luwian, and Phoenician curse texts as well as Jewish literature from the Second Temple period. These elements comprise curses extant across a variety of inscriptions and literature, including tombs, other monuments, and liturgical/ritual compositions such as laments.

Moreover, in the ANE world, cursing was a counterpart to blessing and a close friend to vows and oaths. The semantic domains of a variety of ANE languages, including BH, Akkadian, Aramaic, among others, group the terms for oaths, blessing, and cursing together, so they were related not only in terms of thought, but in terms of vocabulary. Syntactic features are common

[162] Ritner, *Mechanics*, 109. Ritner also posits a parallel between the Egyptian covenant curses and those of Num 5:11–31.

[163] Krause, "Community, Alterity, and Space," 222.

as well, including the subjunctive use of imperfect tenses in addition to verbs in the volitional mood. The use of a special precative tense/mood also appears throughout the various Semitic languages, both Eastern and Western, including biblical Hebrew. This precative is used in imprecations throughout the OT canon, including, as will be seen in later chapters, the curses of Lamentations.

This survey of ANE curse language and imprecatory texts has established a functional definition of imprecation suitable to ANE literature which will be used throughout the remainder of this dissertation. As canonical imprecations are analyzed, they will be discussed within this definitional matrix, with any significant deviations treated accordingly.

CHAPTER 3: CANONICAL IMPRECATIONS: THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Introduction to the Psalter

If the literature of the ANE provides the necessary cultural matrix for the study of the imprecations of Lamentations, then the Psalter is their natural canonical dialogue partner. Within the Psalter are found both imprecatory statements and entire imprecatory poems, and their forms and theology, among those of other canonical texts, are adapted and used by the poet of Lamentations. Before discussion of the Psalter's imprecations themselves, however, it is first necessary (briefly) to consider background data concerning the book of Psalms.

Composition

As William L. Holladay states, "There have always been songs."[1] For ancient Israel, the primary corpus of words set to music came in the form of the Psalter. Its composition spans some six or seven hundred years, with traditions (and often-contested superscriptions) attributing individual poems to King David, Solomon, the Korahites, Asaph, and Moses, among others (with many psalms remaining anonymous).[2] The poems were eventually organized into five smaller collections ("books"), each of which concludes with a doxology.[3] Book I (Psalms 1–41 [or 3–41

[1] William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 17.

[2] Ibid., 17–66. Holladay notes that both Jewish and early Christian traditions ascribed the entire collection to David, or, failing that, at least credited him as the redactor/compiler. See ibid., 17. If Moses is indeed the author of Ps 90, then the date range for the composition of the Psalter is enlarged significantly. The wider seven-century range given here is sufficient to include both the Davidic monarchy and the postexilic period and, it must be noted, encompasses the date of Lamentations.

[3] Harry P. Nasuti, "The Interpretive Significance of Sequence and Selection in the Book of Psalms," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, FIOTL 4, ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 324. Holladay believes the first three books of the Psalter to be largely pre-exilic and were compiled prior to the fifth century BC, with the fourth and fifth books collated before the third century. The inclusion of the Psalter in

if Pss 1–2 are taken as a separate introductory sequence]) contains the bulk of the psalms of David.[4] Book II (Psalms 42–72) features both Davidic and Korahite psalms as well as one psalm attributed to Solomon (Psalm 72). Book III (Psalms 73–89) closes the first major collection of the Psalter and binds it together with an emphasis on the Davidic covenant and kingship motifs. Book IV (Psalms 90–106) moves the collection from primarily royal imagery in its various iterations to explicit psalms of praise (the "hallelujah" psalms). Book V (Psalms 107–150) concludes the Psalter with notes of praise with other motifs interspersed throughout.[5]

Within each of these collections is a variety of different types/genres of psalms. Scholars typically identify a few standard psalmic modes: messianic psalms, royal psalms, lament psalms, praise/hallelujah psalms, thanksgiving psalms, and wisdom psalms all appear consistently across the literature.[6] The subdivisions of these, however, are the source of no end of debate. Some would include the messianic psalms with the royal psalms, which also feature enthronement psalms; lament psalms may include a separate category of imprecatory psalms (as will be

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the LXX indicates the book was formalized and canonized prior to 150 BC at the latest. See idem, *The Psalms*, 76–83.

[4] Psalms 1 and 2 have long been recognized as forming a single psalm serving as an introduction to the book as a whole, establishing a pattern which connects blessing and righteousness to following Yahweh. As such, the Psalter begins with a call to attention to the word of Yahweh and ends with his praise. The journey between the opening torah psalms and the concluding praise psalm, however, is anything but monolithic, and a variety of *Gattungen* appear along the way. See Robert L. Cole, "Psalms 1–2: The Psalter's Introduction," in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, ed. Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard, Jr. (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 183–95; J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 25–50.

[5] Holladay, *The Psalms*, 77–80. Sigmund Mowinckel believes the five-fold organization of the Psalter to be an artificial device designed to grant it a structure similar to the Pentateuch, further aligning its purpose and significance with those of the Torah. The concluding doxologies, then, are likewise a deliberate redactional strategy. See Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 2.197.

[6] Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 145–72; Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, FBBS 19, trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 10–33.

discussed later in this chapter) but certainly have both communal and individual laments; and wisdom psalms may incorporate another *Gattung* termed torah psalms. This is to say nothing of the other *Gattungen* such as the songs of ascent, hymns, victory psalms, prayers, and psalms of mixed genres.[7] Regardless of the specific genres identified within the Psalter, it is evident that the collection contains a great many types of songs, each with their own particular theological emphases and structural features.

The structural elements of individual genres are well documented; the overall compositional/compilational strategy for the Psalter as a whole, however, has received less scholarly attention across the years.[8] With that said, the macrostructure and composition of the songbook of Israel has been the focus of much research since the early twentieth century, and renewed interest at the beginning of the twenty-first century has given birth to a new wave of scholarship on the structure of the book of Psalms.[9] While the overall shape of the Psalter remains contested, consensus is emerging regarding some general movements of the book. Nasuti notes three major shifts: (1) the move from torah psalms to praise psalms; (2) a generalized movement from lament to praise; and (3) a progression from individual to communal psalms.[10] More specific structural patterns and motifs also emerge as one moves across the

[7] For a robust discussion of the various genres in the Psalter, see Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998).

[8] Indeed, prior to the twentieth century, scholarly consensus assumed a lack of overall message and shape to the Psalter. See Steffen G. Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms: Love for Enemies in Hard Places* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022), 28.

[9] Nasuti, "Interpretive Significance," 311. Nasuti writes that "the sequence of the individual psalms is of crucial importance for the meaning of the larger whole," but then laments that "few have tried to argue that the movement from one psalm to the next has interpretive significance over the course of all the psalms in the book." This then becomes the larger focus of more recent Psalms scholarship. See ibid., 312.

[10] Nasuti, "Interpretive Significance," 321–22. Nasuti cautions, however, that these are general trends and do not reflect the total placement of material/appearance of genres across the book.

Psalter. Holladay, for example, offers the Davidic theology of the book as the key to its composition, highlighting the presence of Davidic psalms in each book and the use of David throughout each major section as paradigmatic for a right relationship to Yahweh.[11] Similarly, McCann sees the motif of blessing as a unifying structure, as one's right relationship to Yahweh will naturally result in a beatific state; for him, the beatitudes of Book I form a frame both for that collection and the Psalter as a whole.[12] David's relationship to Yahweh thus becomes a study in blessing, and the Psalter seeks to inspire its readers to emulate the model earthly king in order to receive the blessings of the heavenly sovereign.

The flow from one psalm to another thus establishes patterns in the larger Psalter, and these in turn become the bases for the unifying structure of the book. A full examination of the compositional seams of the Psalter will be featured in chapter 5 of this dissertation, but it is necessary at this juncture to note that the book of Psalms encompasses a wide array of genres and motifs, each of which contributes to the overall theological message of the book. It is to the wider theology and purpose of the Psalter we now turn.

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[11] Holladay, *The Psalms*, 80. Nasuti, for his part, rightly recognizes that the Davidic psalms are potentially organized biographically and/or chronologically, despite the superscriptions which may appear to the contrary, lending tentative support to Holladay's Davidic proposal. See idem, "Interpretive Significance," 313–15; Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 114.

[12] J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Shape of Book I of the Psalter and the Shape of Human Happiness," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, FIOTL 4, ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 340–44. Jenkins agrees, writing that "Books I–III trace the rise and fall of the Davidic Monarchy…. Books IV–V respond to [the fall of the monarchy in the exile], and the focus shifts from David as king to Yahweh as king." See idem, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 37.

Theology

As Raymond F. Surburg observes, "Worship in its broadest sense is the central idea of the Psalter."[13] While not all psalms can be conclusively demonstrated to have been composed for liturgical use, it is clear that a great many were, and the remainder themselves serve as conversations with Yahweh which take the form of worship to greater or lesser extent.[14] This worship occurs in a covenantal matrix, and the prayers of the people to Yahweh presuppose a binding covenant between the two; worship is Yahweh's due for his provision for his chosen people.[15] From the beginning, this covenant is expressed in the Psalter as a choice: one may follow Yahweh in fear or may reject him utterly and suffer the consequences.[16]

The covenant concerns of the Psalms seem to emphasize the Davidic rather than the Mosaic. True, as previously noted, the wisdom psalms (and their counterpart, the torah psalms), provide instruction akin to that of the Pentateuch, and that a proper relationship with Yahweh is only possible through obedience to his word is repeatedly underscored across multiple poems, but the Psalter as a whole firmly places these topics into a Davidic framework. Kraus in particular observes the prevalence of Davidic motifs throughout the book, noting its unifying discussions of temple worship, Zion theology, kingship, and the long shadow cast by David over

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[13] Raymond F. Surburg, "The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms," *Springfielder* 39, no. 3 (1979): 88.

[14] Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 59. Mowinckel goes so far as to ascribe authorship of the Psalter to temple singers, thus giving the songs a cultic/liturgical provenance from their very composition, even as he recognizes some may only have found cultic use later on. See idem, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2.85–103, 202–3.

[15] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, CC, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 66–67; Allan M. Harman, "The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter," *RTR* 54 (1995): 65–66. Harman observes that the covenant is rarely explicitly mentioned, but its provisions dominate the poetry.

[16] In this, the Psalter reflects other OT wisdom literature, particularly in the so-called "wisdom psalms" (Pss 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, 128). The identification (and thus exact number) of wisdom psalms is contested, but their concerns for right living and other wisdom motifs is well-established. See Roland E. Murphy, "A Consideration of the Classification, 'Wisdom Psalms,'" in *Congress Volume: Bonn, 1962*, VTSup 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 56–61.

the entire history of Israel.[17] Sans this preeminent concern for Yahweh's covenant with David, the Psalter falls apart.

Worship in the context of the Davidic covenant takes on certain fixed qualities. First, it involves praise of Yahweh for the monarchy itself. The royal psalms in particular highlight the king's status as intermediary, exercising authority and rule over Israel in the place of Yahweh. Thus, the king represents Yahweh to the people as his anointed vessel even as the king represents the people to Yahweh through the king's own cultic roles. This in turn gives rise to the use of royal psalms as national psalms, expressions of the collective prayers of the people in the first-person singular.[18] Second, the enthronement psalms portray Yahweh as cosmic ruler partially in terms of an earthly king. He ascends to his throne; he presides over the course of the nation's history; and he himself grants an earthly king to rule over Israel in his place.[19] It is crucial to note, however, that much of the Psalter's portrayal of Yahweh as cosmic king borrows imagery from the wider ANE world. It is not enough that Yahweh rule Israel alone; he rules the entire cosmos from his throne, and this necessarily involves him in victorious battle against other gods, *Chaoskampf*, and similar stock ANE depictions of cosmic kingship.[20]

Ultimately, these twin concerns for kingship and worship place the theology of the Psalter squarely in a position of high theology proper. Yahweh is the true sovereign of the

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[17] Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 73–175.

[18] Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1.42–80.

[19] Ibid., 1.106–168.

[20] Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1.140–68; Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 134–36. Consider, for example, the portrayal of Yahweh as cloud rider, storm bringer, and commander of chariots in Ps 68, images commonly ascribed to Baal in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle. Each image is one of ultimate lordship over the cosmos. See "Poems about Baal and Anath: III AB A," trans. H. L. Ginsberg (*ANET*, 130, line 8); "Poems about Baal and Anath: II AB iv–v," trans. H. L. Ginsberg (*ANET*, 133, lines 46–51); "Poems about Baal and Anath: II AB viii," trans. H. L. Ginsberg (*ANET*, 135, lines 28–44). Even the imprecations are statements about Yahweh's kingship in the ANE world; see Harman, "Continuity," 66.

universe, expressed in terms both ancient Israel and the wider ANE world would have readily understood. Moreover, his depiction as king enables him to enter into a covenant with his vassal people, Israel, and to allow an earthly king to rule in his stead. This forms the basis of the Psalter's portrayal of the Davidic covenant. The covenant itself then becomes the source for worship, and Yahweh is praised for his sovereignty, care, protection, and rule as well as his promises of continued earthly kingship in the Davidic line. Yahweh in the Psalter is truly God above all gods.

The Imprecatory Psalms

Classification and Features of the Imprecatory Psalms

Yahweh is God and king of the cosmos; this is the fundamental assertion of the Psalter. Like any king, however, Yahweh has enemies, and these enemies double as opponents for his earthly people. The poets of the Psalter face very human enemies repeatedly, and their cries to Yahweh for justice and vindication—and outright vengeance—form a core *Gattung* of the book: the imprecatory psalms. The number and identification of these psalms varies wildly across scholars, as the major criterion for categorizing a psalm as imprecatory—the extent of the imprecation contained within the psalm—seems to be subjective. Some critics find a single hard imprecation sufficient grounds for the classification of the entire psalm as imprecatory, as it dominates the overall tone of the song; others believe such curses (and their frequently accompanying lament) must comprise the majority of the text of the psalm for it to earn the imprecatory designation.[21]

[21] Jace Broadhurst, for example, lists thirty-three imprecatory psalms, but states that "not one of them is completely devoted to curses." Of the thirty-three, only eighteen, by his own admission contain sufficient imprecatory material to be truly classified as imprecatory psalms, but even then, only sixty-five of the total 368 verses represented by those eighteen psalms actually contain curses. See Jace Broadhurst, "Should Cursing Continue? An Argument for Imprecatory Psalms in Biblical Theology," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 23, no. 1 (2004): 67. Similarly, J. Carl Laney writes that a psalm must be primarily imprecatory in content to gain the designation, but considers only nine to meet his threshold, half the final number identified by Broadhurst. See J. Carl

Without a set rubric for evaluating the imprecations, both in extent and impact, the overall category is likely to remain fluid and unfixed.

To refine the definition of an imprecatory psalm, it is necessary to consider the nature of imprecation itself within the Psalter. Once a pattern is established, individual psalms may be evaluated against the posited definitional matrix to determine whether or not they contain truly psalmic curses. If so, the prevalence of the imprecation may be assessed. Should a psalm both (a) contain an imprecation as defined and (b) be dominated in tone and/or content by that imprecation, it will be designated as an imprecatory psalm for present purposes and included in the analysis of the imprecatory psalms in this chapter.[22]

Jenkins maintains that an imprecation is merely a desire for retribution, a wish for "any kind of punishment or vengeance against an enemy."[23] Chapter 2 of this dissertation, however, established a working definition of imprecation in ANE literature which moves beyond Jenkins' simplistic meaning. It has been demonstrated that ANE imprecations: (1) are based in a sense of retributive justice which may or may not be conditional upon future actions on the part of the enemy; (2) are a recourse only when connective justice has failed and the offended party is therefore powerless to enact justice on his/her own; and (3) necessarily involve the explicit or

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Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *BSac* 138, no. 549 (1981): 36. Jenkins, for his part, lists Pss 35, 58, 59, 69, 78, 83, 109, and 137 as candidates for the classification, but states that scholars typically only consider three or so of those to be truly imprecatory. His own analysis focuses exclusively on those of Books I and V, thereby omitting several which he himself posits as possibilities. See idem, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 7.

[22] It is an admitted weakness of this definition that the second criterion remains subjective. In an attempt to make it as objective as possible, however, dominance in content will be set as a plurality of verses of the psalm when compared to other *Gattungen* (thanksgiving, praise, lament, etc.). Dominance in tone will be assessed according to the final sense which may be reasonably assumed to have been impressed upon the average reader given the imagery, tone, and vocabulary of the song. If it is plausible to assume a given reader of the psalm would be left with a sense of curse, frustration, or anger over other emotions (sorrow, joy, etc.), then the psalm will be said to have an imprecatory tone and thus meet the second of the definitional criteria. In this way, the criterion will attempt to balance objective data with emotional affect, for both are crucial to a proper understanding of the Psalter.

[23] Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 8.

implicit invocation of a deity or other divine authority who has sufficient power and agency to enact the punishments of the curse. Each of these criteria must be met for a text to be a true imprecation of the ANE world, and any curse which lacks one or more of these elements is therefore exceptional indeed. Curses are far more than a cry for naked vengeance; they are inherently intensely theological statements and prayers of the highest order.

With these data in mind, it is time to apply them and the posited definition of an imprecatory psalm to the Psalms themselves. As noted, a psalm must both (a) contain an imprecation as defined in the above survey and (b) be dominated in tone and/or content by that imprecation in order to be classified as an imprecatory psalm. The end result is that twelve psalms are designated as imprecatory psalms for the purposes of this dissertation and will be receive fuller analysis: Psalms 7, 12, 58, 59, 69, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137, 139, and 140. Moreover, a number of psalms contain imprecations which do not dominate the song as a whole, and thus they will be treated following discussion of the (fully) imprecatory psalms: Psalms 5:10 [5:11 MT]; 10:2b, 15; 11:6; 17:13; 31:17 [31:18 MT]; 35:4–8, 26; 40:14–15 [40:15–16 MT]; 55:15, 23 [55:16, 24 MT]; 70:3 [70:4 MT]; 71:13; 74:11; 104:35; 119:78; and 143:12.[24]

Before analysis of these imprecatory texts may begin, however, it is necessary to sketch the overall warp and woof of the *Gattung* of imprecatory psalm itself. Gunkel considers the imprecatory psalms a subset of the individual lament psalms as well as the "Psalms of Innocence."[25] Hardships, suffering, and enemies have arisen, and it is necessary to express one's

[24] Throughout this dissertation, versification of the Psalms will follow the MT where it differs from English translations.

[25] Gunkel, *The Psalms*, 35–36. Individual lament psalms, per Gunkel, follow a set pattern including imprecation, and it is out of this pattern the *Gattung* of imprecatory psalm emerges: "Then here is the entreaty, which corresponds to the lament and sometimes alternates with it. Frequently we find an entreaty for revenge on one's enemies; out of such entreaties, perhaps in imitation of older, cultic curses, the genre of Imprecatory Psalms developed (an example is Ps. 109)." See ibid., 35.

innocence and seek vindication by Yahweh's mighty deeds; these concerns undergird the imprecatory psalms and their cries of lament and curse. The typical imprecation in the Psalter consists of five primary segments. First, the psalmist cries out to Yahweh for vindication, with an accompanying description of the enemies. Second, he expresses a concern for Yahweh's glory even as, third, he petitions for retributive justice. Fourth, the innocence and/or righteousness of the psalmist is emphasized, resulting in the final feature, a constant appeal to Yahweh based on the status of the petitioner as a member of the covenant community.[26] Some of these elements may be absent in the imprecations themselves, but they are nevertheless present in the psalm as a whole.

The precise *Sitz im Leben* of the imprecatory psalms, of course, varies from psalm to psalm, and few details emerge. First, the majority of the imprecatory psalms appear in Book I, making them Davidic rather than exilic or post-exilic in provenance.[27] Indeed, in Laney's list of nine imprecatory psalms, all but two (Pss 83 and 137) are Davidic, placing them some four centuries before the exile into Babylon.[28] Second, the enemies are typically external to Israel,

[26] John Shepherd, "The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture – Part I," *Chm* 111, no. 1 (1997): 41–43.

[27] Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 136. Curses in hymnody thus appear well before the exilic period; therefore, as Gunkel succinctly states, "the view which is very widespread at present, that psalm poetry as such originated in the time of the Babylonian Exile [*sic*], in no way accords with the facts." See idem, *The Psalms*, 25. The idea that the Psalter is a result of the influence of Babylonian hymnody primarily stems from the facts that Babylonian poetry is often psalmic (and therefore primarily liturgical) and that it antedates the Psalter (as early as the third millennium BC). See ibid., 4–5. However, there is no reason to assume literary dependency of the biblical psalms on the Babylonian poetry, as poetic forms were simply a shared component of the ANE cognitive environment (see, for example, the discussions of acrostics and laments in chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation).

[28] Laney, "A Fresh Look," 36. The proportion holds for the list considered imprecatory in the present study as well. Of the psalms so-designated here, eight (Pss 7, 12, 58, 59, 69, 109, 139, and 140) are attributed to David; one (Ps 83) to Asaph; and three (Pss 94, 129, and 137) are anonymous, although the LXX attributes Ps 94 (LXX Ps 93) and Ps 137 (LXX Ps 136) to David as well; see Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 708. Of the non-Davidic psalms, only one (Ps 137) can be determined conclusively to be exilic or post-exilic regardless of the LXX designation.

indicating the psalms were composed at a time of battle, siege, or other warfare.[29] Third, such psalms were composed for liturgical and cultic functions. Gunkel writes that "Israel's poetry is as old as the cult itself," and thus the Psalter was intended primarily for worship, as noted previously.[30] If the *telos* of the Psalter is worship, then even the imprecatory psalms must have a cultic function, and Gunkel finds such a use at the times of sacrifice at the temple.[31] Whether or not Gunkel's assertion as to the precise cult use of the imprecatory psalms is correct is a matter for debate; regardless, that the imprecatory psalms saw use by the community at worship is undisputed.

The second of these details about the *Sitz im Leben* of the imprecatory psalms requires further treatment. It is impossible to engage in imprecation without a party to be cursed, and the identity of the enemies in the imprecatory psalms—indeed, the Psalter as a whole—is a perennial focus of Psalms scholars. As has been demonstrated, the enemies are external to Israel and overwhelmingly pre-exilic. Since the imprecatory psalms are primarily Davidic and not exilic, a wide range of human enemies is possible, but it is certain that such enemies are human foes and not supernatural forces (demons, spirits of the dead, malevolent deities, etc.) personified in the poetry. While the enemies are certainly historical, it is not always possible to identify them with a specific people or nation.[32] Regardless, the enemies are described in very human—and very

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[29] Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalm Studies, Volume 1* (Kristiana: Dybwad, 1921–24; repr., HHBS 2, trans. Mark E. Biddle, Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 82; Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 65. Kraus also notes, however, that some communal laments mourn the sins of the people rather than the armies of the enemies.

[30] Gunkel, *The Psalms*, 25.

[31] Ibid., 19–22; Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 124–26.

[32] As Mowinckel correctly asserts, "The background of such a psalm is some definite historical event. The enemies are real and historical; they are the 'nations' who have attacked and invaded Israel (or Judah), and now are oppressing it…. As a rule, however, it is not possible to tell which peoples or rulers are intended by 'the enemies' in the psalm in question." See idem, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1.197. He therefore (also correctly) rejects any attempt to mythologize the enemies of the psalms. See ibid., 1.245–46.

damning—terms, being called a host of terms for wicked outsiders: אויב, גוים, מרעים, משׂאים, צרים, רדפים, and רשׁעים.[33] The underlying message of these terms is that the enemies are inherently evil and hate the righteous, existing outside the covenant. In this way, the enemies of the psalmists are also the enemies of Yahweh, hating his instruction, righteousness, and kingship just as they reject his earthly steward and chosen people.[34] Indeed, in the eyes of Laurence, that the enemies threaten the temple-kingdom complex of Israel is their defining feature, and none who oppose the psalmist can be on the side of Yahweh:

> The significance of the enemy's violent oppression in the imprecatory psalms is not limited simply to its destructive consequences for the nation, community, and individual. Within the theological universe of the Psalter, such aggression is presented more broadly as opposition to God's acts and intentions within history, to the temple-kingdom of God's reign and residence that God is establishing through Israel in faithfulness to his covenant promises and for the blessing of the nations.[35]

Moreover, Laurence sees in the enemies an identification with the "serpent seed" of Genesis 3:15; the enemies oppose Yahweh because they belong to the party of the serpent whom Yahweh has promised to utterly crush in the protoevangelium.[36] The enemies are therefore the enemies of

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[33] Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 127–29.

[34] Ibid., 132–3; Harman, "Continuity," 67; Broadhurst, "Should Cursing Continue," 81; Mowinckel, *Psalm Studies, Vol. 1*, 119; Surburg, "Interpretation," 99–100; Kit Barker, *Imprecation as Divine Discourse: Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Theological Interpretation*, *Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement* 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 153; Trevor Laurence, *Cursing with God: The Imprecatory Psalms and the Ethics of Christian Prayer* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2022), 122–48. This is in part based on the terms of the Abrahamic covenant in Gen 12:3.

[35] Laurence, *Cursing with God*, 128.

[36] Ibid., 135–56. This association—at times pushed to an equivalence in his study—seems to be a unique view of Laurence and is illuminating even as it goes too far. That the enemies oppose Yahweh and his people would indeed align them with the seed of the serpent of Eden and make them heirs to its curse of ultimate defeat because of their rebellion. With that said, such a dualistic view of the cosmos, with Yahweh on one side and his sundry nemeses on the other, is foreign to the OT. The enemies of the Psalter are subordinate physical foes, not equivalent spiritual powers, and the reign of Yahweh is absolute over even them. In the OT world, even the enemies are ultimately tools of Yahweh used to discipline his people, and such evil finds it source with him (Isa 45:7). Laurence's analysis over-spiritualizes the enemies at times, importing a NT view of spiritual warfare into his reading of the OT text. The work of Kraus concurs on this point. He admits the mythological elements recognized by Laurence but again grounds the

Yahweh and his covenant with his chosen people above all. It is on this basis they are enemies of the psalmists, who are themselves members of the covenant community.

Laurence goes on to provide a comprehensive description of the enemies of the Psalter beyond their opposition to the person and purposes of Yahweh. While he states they are "by no means monolithic," they are nevertheless completely and utterly wicked, engaging in both verbal and physical aggression against the psalmists.[37] Some are undoubtedly the classic enemies of ancient Israel such as Edom and Babylon (e.g., Psalm 137). Others are less definite but nonetheless thoroughly wicked and antagonistic (e.g., Psalm 7). Various attempts have been made to read the enemies in other ways, however, including the belief of Gunkel and Begrich that the enemies and the psalmists are at odds primarily because of religious and social contrasts.[38] Mowinckel's counterproposal that the enemies are magicians and sorcerers is similarly unconvincing. His initial analysis, however, is both accurate and worth quoting at length:

> Looked at in detail, the laments complain of the violence and injustice and abuse of power on the part of the enemies, their faithlessness and arrogance and godlessness—they do not worship Yahweh; the poets take for granted that they ought to do so, accordingly they are 'apostates,' 'playing false'; their religion is nothing but 'sorcery.' They are described as completely corrupt people, false, lying, sinners, criminals, 'sorcerers' (''*āwen*-makers').[39]

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work in the overall theology of the OT, stressing the fully human character of the enemies; see idem, *Theology of the Psalms*, 132–4.

[37] Laurence, *Cursing with God*, 122–26, here at 122; Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1.199–200.

[38] The pair see the psalmists as representative of proper piety and the ruling class of Israel, whereas the enemies are simply the impious and poor. See Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 140–50. They are directly opposed in this view by Mowinckel; see idem, *Psalm Studies, Vol. 1*, 120–9; idem, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1.229.

[39] Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1.198.

While the depiction of the evils engaged in by the enemies is certainly true, his conclusion elsewhere is unjustified: "the enemies are, almost without exception, the magicians and practitioners of the secret arts, even if they appear under other names, for example, under the comprehensive designation *rĕšāʿîm*."[40] Magical arts are a minor concern across the entirety of the canon, and there is little evidence of their practitioners within the Psalter specifically. To categorize the entire group of enemies as sorcerers is to define all sin and evil as magic, while the relationship between the two in reality is reversed, with sorcery a subset of sin instead of vice versa.[41] Despite the arguments of these otherwise outstanding scholars, the enemies, contra both Mowinckel and Gunkel/Begrich, are simply human antagonists who engage in unjustified aggression against the people (or a person) of the covenant, and it is best to agree with Patrick D. Miller: "the enemies are in fact whoever the enemies are for the singers of the psalms."[42]

Juxtaposing the Psalter's concern for worship with its words about the enemies raises an interesting possibility: that the imprecations are, in essence, attempts to see the enemies repent, turn to Yahweh, and worship him themselves. This is the essential thesis of Jenkins: "These prayers do not simply demand vengeance, but sometimes desire to show mercy to the enemy, even with a hope that the enemy will repent, be forgiven and be blessed."[43] According to Jenkins, the imprecations are not in line with the principle of *lex talionis*, and he instead writes that

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[40] Mowinckel, *Psalm Studies, Vol. 1*, 85–86. He limits his case to describing the enemies of individual laments only, but bases it more on evidence from Assyrian and Babylonian lament psalms more than the canonical psalms; see ibid., 87–100.

[41] Whereas Mowinckel corrected Gunkel and Begrich before, the tables have now turned, and their criticism of Mowinckel's argument is both sapient and accurate. See Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 140–50.

[42] Patrick D. Miller, "Trouble and Woe: Interpreting the Biblical Laments," *Int* 37, no. 1 (1983): 34.

[43] Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 4.

David, rather than seeking judgment, asks for mercy instead of retribution.[44] Likewise, Kraus states that the cries of revenge in the Psalter come out of a desire for mercy; Mowinckel believes the imprecations themselves rely on the חֶסֶד of Yahweh to be efficacious, for his mercy is shown in judgment; and Laurence boldly writes that the imprecator "petitions from love" of his enemies.[45] Curses are intrinsically punitive (and occasionally apotropaic), but such curses are "meant to prepare the way for restoration by smiting the enemy with misfortune."[46] Even the prayer to kill the enemies is loving in Laurence's eyes, and such prayers "may be understood as a merciful last resort, a sovereignly administered preventative that restrains the enemy from adding to his iniquity."[47]

Mowinckel rightly observes that blessings and cursing are related within the Psalter—Psalm 137, for example, expresses its imprecation upon Edom in terms of blessing on Israel—but the notion that the psalmists actively seek the benefit of their enemies and express it as imprecation is to stretch the text to the breaking point.[48] Jenkins, Kraus, Laurence, and

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[44] Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 190–95. He goes on to say of Ps 139 that Israel had no right during the exile to pray against their enemies, and, recognizing this, they saved their anger for the post-exilic era. Both Pss 137 and 139, with their undeniable curses, are thus necessarily post-exilic, and their imprecations, rather than seeking retribution, simply describe the historical catastrophes which befell Babylon when the empire fell in 539 BC and again when the city itself was destroyed in 300. See ibid., 244–49. While other elements of Jenkins' argument may have merit, this, it seems, is a blatant attempt to sanitize the horrific words of those psalms to bring them into alignment with an (anachronistic) Christian ethic (or else comprise a skewed take on the relationship between the Psalter and historiography).

[45] Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 67; Mowinckel, *Psalm Studies, Vol. 1*, 1.202–6; Laurence, *Cursing with God*, 160–69, here at 160.

[46] Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalm Studies, Volume 2* (Kristiana: Dybwad, 1921–24; repr., HHBS 3, trans. Mark E. Biddle, Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 716–730.

[47] Laurence, *Cursing with God*, 169. For Laurence, hatred of the enemy is necessary to truly love them, and the hate expressed by the psalmists can have no other meaning. See ibid., 170–71.

[48] Mowinckel, *Psalm Studies, Vol. 2*, 732–41. He elsewhere similarly notes the connection between blessing and cursing in the lament psalms, writing that the blessing of the psalmist must on occasion arise from the cursing of the enemies. See idem, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2.46–49.

Mowinckel are admirable in their desire to see a commendable mercy and love of the enemy in the curses of the Psalter, but it is ultimately only that: a desire, not a text-based exegetical observation. Imprecation in the ANE lacks any sense beyond the retributive and punitive, and the curses in the Psalter are no different. The enemies have committed violence against the covenant people, and the people cry out to their covenant lord to protect them as he said he would. Justice must be done, and justice in the ancient world lacks an intrinsic connection to rehabilitation.

With that said, the desire of so many critics to see a Christian charity in pre-Christian biblical literature is an understandable reaction to the horrors of the psalmic imprecations. The imprecatory psalms pose a number of interpretive troubles and have left a most problematic exegetical legacy. Such are the difficulties involved with the exposition and application of the imprecatory psalms that McCann bluntly states that Psalm 109 is "the worst-case scenario" for Christian interpreters, and there is little to be done to redeem it as Christian Scripture.[49] Daniel P. Overton similarly calls the imprecatory psalms "abrasive, caustic, sadistic" texts.[50] Such psalms pose problems for tender-hearted expositors with a high view of Scripture, and often "the imprecatory psalms have had their violence hermeneutically excised, since such violence was judged too carnal in light of purported divine inspiration."[51]

Attempts to Christianize the imprecatory psalms typically use one of five approaches, as outlined by Broadhurst.[52] The first is to say that David is not truly the author. Two possibilities

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[49] McCann, *Theological Introduction*, 112.

[50] Daniel P. Overton, "Singing through Clenched Teeth: Psalm 137 and the Imprecatory Psalms as Traumatic Liturgy," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 43, no. 2 (2020): 55.

[51] Overton, "Singing through Clenched Teeth," 56.

[52] The following survey of hermeneutical and exegetical gymnastics applied to the imprecatory psalms is adapted from the treatment in Broadhurst, "Should Cursing Continue," 69–76.

stem from this assumption: either David is simply reporting the words the enemies said to him, or else, if David has nothing to do with the psalm, then the text is not inspired Scripture.[53] The second approach is to term the OT an inferior dispensation from a *Heilsgeschichte* perspective, recognizing that the NT's ethic of loving one's enemies is superior to that of OT mores which allow imprecation.[54] Third, one may attempt to explain away the imprecations by calling them prophetic in nature, belonging to the category of predictive prophecy. In that way, the desires of the psalmist remain unknown.[55] Fourth, one may declare the enemies as demonic and spiritual instead of human, but, as this section has demonstrated, the enemies of the Psalter are very human indeed. Finally, in a variation of the first technique, one may simply declare that the sentiments of the human author have overridden those of the Divine Author, and the curses are thus reflective of earthly, not heavenly, anger.[56]

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[53] The belief that only David was an inspired author of psalms, however, is flatly refuted by the number of psalms composed by other authors (Moses, Solomon, Asaph, etc.). Either all the psalms are inspired, or none are, and it is dangerous to attempt to parcel out inspired and uninspired appellations based on assumptions of authorship. See Laney, "A Fresh Look," 38.

[54] Jenkins succinctly states this position: "the Psalms are noticeably pre-Christian." See idem, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 237. However, this approach fails because of the care for the enemy extant in the OT (e.g., Exod 23:3–5, Lev 19:18, and Prov 25:21). Kraus again is relevant here: "It would be a superficial and emotional response to characterize the desire for revenge in the Psalms as something typical of the Old Testament, irreligious, unchristian, and repugnant." See idem, *Theology of the Psalms*, 67.

[55] Note here, however, that the grammar of the curses rarely permits such an interpretation, as observed in ch. 2; the use of volitional moods, the precative, and subjunctive imperfect verbs are used to express imprecation, whereas prophetic perfects are absent.

[56] This explanation, like its counterpart, fails to take seriously the inspiration of Scripture and must be rejected on that basis alone.

Daniel Simango and P. Paul Krüger give a similar list of potential hermeneutics to explain away the vitriol of the imprecatory psalms. Their first two, "personal sentiment" and "prophetic revelation," mirror the third and fifth of Broadhurst's study. Their final two methods, unique to them, are to treat the imprecations as expressions of covenant curses and therefore permissible or to give the curses a strictly apotropaic function. See Daniel Simango and P. Paul Krüger, "An Overview of the Study of Imprecatory Psalms: Reformed and Evangelical Approaches to the Interpretation of Imprecatory Psalms," *OTE* 29, no. 2 (2016): 284–91. Like the other approaches, however, these fall short in their explanatory power. The enemies generally are not members of the covenant community and are thus not subject to the covenant curses, and while some imprecations may be apotropaic in some sense, the overwhelming majority are not.

Each of these approaches fails in the final analysis. It will not do to lessen the doctrine of inspiration, just as one cannot argue from grammatical-historical exegesis that the imprecations are anything other than ANE curses. As Christopher B. Hays notes, however, "There are two common ways of getting rid of a biblical passage one doesn't like: one can refuse to read it, or one can 're-read' it."[57] If scholarly attempts to "re-read" (or rewrite) the imprecatory psalms fail, then it is possible for the church to simply refuse to read them—which is precisely what has happened. Psalms 58, 83, and 109 are completely omitted from the Roman Catholic Liturgy of the Hours and the Revised Common Lectionary. Moreover, any psalm which contains any statement bordering on an imprecation is likewise absent, resulting in the omission of the three complete psalms and an additional fifty-six verses from throughout the Psalter.[58] The church at worship, it seems, shies away from any sort of malediction, treating it as unsuitable for the church of Jesus Christ and its NT ethic.

Hays rightly observes, however, that an understanding of the OT imprecations is necessary to fully grasp the NT doctrines of judgment and hell.[59] Moreover, the imprecatory psalms teach a great deal to the NT church concerning the faithfulness and holiness of God:

> The imprecations and maledictions in the Psalter may be understood to ask God to do with the ungodly and wicked exactly what the Bible says that God has done (for example, the punishment of the world in the days of Noah; the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's day; the punishment of Israel in the days of the Judges), is

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[57] Christopher B. Hays, "How Shall We Sing? Psalm 137 in Historical and Canonical Context," *HBT* 27, no. 2 (2005): 36. It also worth quoting Hays concerning the various efforts to change the clear meaning of the curses: "But if we re-write the imprecatory psalms, then our bowdlerization of our Bible will only *begin* there." See ibid., 36–37, emphasis original. No one, even the academic guild, has authority to rewrite Scripture simply because it is difficult.

[58] Holladay, *The Psalms*, 304–5. Omitted from the Liturgy of the Hours and Revised Common Lectionary are Pss 5:11; 21:9–13; 28:4–5; 31:18–19; 35:3a, 4–8, 20–21, 24–26; 40:15–16; 54:7; 55:16; 56:7b–8; 59:6–9, 12–16; 63:10–12; 69:23–29; 79:6–7; 110:6; 139:19–22; 141:10; and 143:12 (versification reflects the MT). See ibid., 305. The only differences in omissions between the Liturgy of the Hours and the Lectionary are that the Lectionary retains Pss 28:4–5 and 35:20–21, 24–26 but further omits Pss 137:7–9 and 139:23–24. See ibid., 314.

[59] Hays, "How Shall We Sing," 37.

> doing, and will do. Without doubt, that person has made the greatest progress in godliness who in his thinking follows God and judges evil men exactly as the Psalm-writer asks God to do. The holiness of God cannot brook sin in any form, shape, or manner. God has clearly and frequently announced that the unrepentant sinner will be punished. The Bible has much to say about the wrath of God that will be manifested against all ungodliness and wickedness of men…. Christians have found comfort in them because in the Imprecatory Psalms they find the assurance that the Judge of all the earth generates the ultimate destruction of their enemies as well as the complete triumph of their cause.[60]

The character of God remains consistent across the canon, and thus the church must come to terms with the inspired curses present in the Psalter—and even find comfort in them.[61] After all, it is the purpose of imprecation, not only to condemn, but also to recognize and praise the sovereignty and authority of Yahweh, confidently declaring who he is to the world.[62] Just as he was in the OT world, so is he in the present, and the church must not be guilty of worshiping a mere fraction of the divine whole.

Discussion of the Imprecatory Psalms

As noted above, the present study has identified twelve imprecatory psalms and fourteen other imprecatory texts within the Psalter: Psalms 7, 12, 58, 59, 69, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137, 139, and 140; and Psalms 5:11; 10:2b, 15; 11:6; 17:13; 31:18; 35:4–8, 26; 40:15–16; 55:16, 24; 70:4; 71:13; 74:11; 104:35; 119:78; and 143:12. Each will now be treated in turn with an eye to synthesizing a theology of imprecation for the Psalter—a critical step in the creation of a canonical theology of curse which is also evident in the imprecations of Lamentations.

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[60] Surburg, "Interpretation," 99–100.

[61] As rightly observed by Simango and Krüger in their discussion of OT vs. NT ethics. See idem, "Overview," 595.

[62] Laney, "A Fresh Look," 41.

Psalm 7

Psalm 7 is, at base, a cry for vindication by David after being falsely accused by Cush the Benjaminite.[63] Commentators seem agreed that the psalm is an individual lament, in part based upon the correlation between שִׁגָּיוֹן in the title (v. 1) and the Akkadian *sĕgû*/*šigû*, "lament."[64] It appears that the Benjaminite has publicly defamed David in such a way as to provoke a response on the part of king, and he cries out to Yahweh to proclaim his innocence and seek vindication. The hypothetical nature of the statements in vv. 4–6 speak to David's innocence in the matter; he therefore petitions Yahweh to deliver him from the false accusations of his enemy Cush (v. 2). As such, the psalm represents a legal drama, with David entering the courtroom of Yahweh to make his case before the ultimate judge.[65]

The structure of the psalm is complex, and various divisions and subdivisions are possible, but breaking the song after the title in v. 1, following the first cry to Yahweh in vv. 2–3, after the interlude marker (סֶלָה) at v. 6, and again after v. 17 (so as to make the final vow of praise of v. 18 a distinct textual unit) appears to result in the most logical demarcation of the stanzas of the psalm. This results in a five-fold structure: (1) the title (v. 1); (2) the initial cry for salvation and deliverance (vv. 2–3); (3) protestation of innocence (vv. 4–6); (4) imprecation and

[63] deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 109.

[64] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, CC, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 26, 169; John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1–41*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 144. The Hebrew is a hapax, appearing only here, and Kraus takes it to mean an "agitated lament." See ALCBH, s.v. "שִׁגָּיוֹן"; *CAD* 17.2, s.v. "šigû," a.

[65] Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 169. This is supported by the use of the psalm at Purim, associated as the festival is with plots, accusations, and justice. See deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 110; Peter C. Craigie and Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 99–100.

accompanying plea for vindication (vv. 7–17); and (5) final vow of thanks and praise (v. 18).[66] Interestingly, then, the segment which contains the imprecation is the longest section of the psalm and comprises the majority of the text (eleven of the eighteen verses), with the curse against Cush spanning over three verses (vv. 7–10a). With such a large portion of the psalm given to imprecation and retribution, it is proper to classify the psalm as imprecatory per the criteria established earlier in this dissertation.

Craigie and Tate note the major verbs of the imprecation are expressed as imperatives: Yahweh is to "arise" (קוּמָה), "lift yourself" (הִנָּשֵׂא), and "awaken" (עוּרָה) (v. 7).[67] The result of these is the judgment of the enemy and the vindication of David (v. 9–10a). Cush and all other false accusers, David prays, should be brought to an end by Yahweh—immediately (v. 10a). The use here of the *qal* imperfect form יִגְמָר is in line with the jussive; the clause should therefore be rendered "Let the evil of the wicked ones be ended now."[68] The curse is, *prima facie*, one of instant cessation of evils; David prays not for the end of the wicked ones, but of their evil ways. However, it is generally recognized that, failing some sort of repentance—which vv. 13–17 both describe and make unlikely in the case of the false accuser in question—the curse will result in the end of the evils by bringing about the death of the wicked ones themselves, for Yahweh will

[66] Other outlines are of course possible; see, for example, the tripartite scheme in deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 110. Another potential structure breaks the psalm at the use of the vocatives and results in six stanzas: v. 1; vv. 2–3; vv. 4–6; vv. 7–8; vv. 9–17; and v. 18.

[67] Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 101. As observed by Tremper Longman, III, the string of imperatives are not separate commands but, rather, simply a use of parallelism by David. See Tremper Longman, III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 15–16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 76–77. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Scripture/BH are original.

[68] For the purposes of this study, third-person and first-person imperfect forms (whether singular or plural) which adhere to the standard morphology for those moods will be denoted by jussive and cohortative, respectively. Any second-person imperfects functioning as volitionals will be labeled subjunctive imperfects in alignment with the argument from ch. 2 of this dissertation. Similarly, third-person and first-person imperfects which are not in the jussive or cohortative form but express those ideas will be categorized as subjunctive imperfects.

use his "instruments of death" (v. 14) against the impenitent wicked. The imprecation thus calls for the death of Cush the Benjaminite and, by extension, all those who falsely accuse David.[69]

The remainder of the curse segment (vv. 10b–17) again proclaims David's innocence and calls for Yahweh to enact justice in retributive terms (vv. 16b–17). The imprecation of Psalm 7, then, petitions Yahweh to deliver retribution on the head of his false accuser in a way that will result in his death. The vow of praise which concludes the psalm (v. 18) is a simple statement of confidence that the curse will occur and Yahweh will vindicate the psalmist; David will therefore give Yahweh all thanks and praise for his deliverance.

Psalm 12

Psalm 12 is a communal lament and therefore contains communal imprecation.[70] Another psalm of David (v. 1), the song likewise contrasts the truth with the words of the ungodly; this time, however, it is Yahweh who is the speaker of truth, not David himself (vv. 7–9). The content of the lies is treated only briefly, and it seems the words express two thoughts. First, the ungodly have rejected the lordship of Yahweh (v. 5). Second, they have used their lies to oppress the poor and afflicted (v. 6). As a result, they have pitted themselves against both Yahweh and the psalmist, even as David bemoans the fact the wicked now outnumber the righteous (v. 2).[71]

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[69] Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 102–3; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 173; Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 151. This conclusion is contra Longman and Goldingay, who speak only of the end of the evils committed by the wicked, not the wicked ones themselves. See Longman, *Psalms*, 77; Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 1*, 147.

[70] Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 137; Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms," in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 85–86.

[71] As Craigie and Tate rightly note, it is impossible to be more specific in determining the exact *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm beyond these generalities, for the descriptions "are too general and common to be fitted into a particular period or event in Israel's history." See idem, *Psalms 1–50*, 137. Any number of historical situations fit the psalm, all of them a general community crisis. See deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 151–52. Longman's suggestions that the psalm suits the rebellion of Absalom or Saul's persecution of

The psalm may be divided into three parts: (1) the title (v. 1); (2) the description of the enemies and general situation (vv. 2–6); and (3) the contrast between Yahweh and the wicked (vv. 7–9). It is also possible, following Craigie and Tate, to break the psalm a verse earlier into a description of the words of the wicked (vv. 2–5) and the contrasting words of Yahweh (vv. 6–9).[72] The imprecation of Psalm 12 occurs in vv. 4–5. It thus appears in the center of the psalm, indicating the emphasis the psalmist has placed upon the curse, and Yahweh's promise to carry out this imprecation (v. 6) functions as the climax of the psalm.[73]

The imprecation itself calls for a cessation of the deception of the needy by the wicked who have rejected Yahweh. The primary verb of the imprecation is a *hiphil* jussive in form, and therefore v. 4 should be glossed as "May Yahweh cut off all flattering lips, the tongue speaking boasts." For Yahweh to "cut off" (כרת) the ungodly is for him to utterly exterminate them.[74] Like in Psalm 7, then, David in Psalm 12 calls for the deaths of the ones who stand against him, Yahweh, and the truth, extending their opposition in this psalm to the community at large as well. The imprecation is a curse against the very lives of the wicked, and it is one which Yahweh will enact because he is pure and cares for the poor (vv. 6–8). The imprecation thus follows the typical ANE pattern: the afflicted suffer but are unable to bring about justice on their own, so the psalmist calls for Yahweh to bring down retribution on the enemies in his stead.

David may be accurate, but he stretches the text too far to assert either is conclusively linked to the psalm, particularly given its overall communal nature. See idem, *Psalms*, 93.

[72] Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 137. This, however, fails to account for the return to the state of the wicked in v. 9. With that said, either proposed structure places proper emphasis on the contrast between Yahweh and the wicked, the dichotomy which David seeks to underscore and exploit in the song. Precisely because the wicked are evil and Yahweh is righteous, the psalmist calls upon Yahweh to put an end to the lies which deceive the poor and needy and restore his lordship over all in Israel who may have rejected it.

[73] Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques*, JSOTSup 26 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 248.

[74] *HALOT*, s.v., "כרת"; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 209.

Psalm 58

Of the psalms considered to this point, Psalm 58 is the most violent and bloodthirsty in its treatment of the enemies of David. Psalms 7 and 12 call for the death of the enemies, but Psalm 58 calls for their active suffering in excruciatingly cruel detail. Like Psalm 12, Psalm 58 is typically classified as a communal lament, but there is no doubt that if any psalm should be primarily categorized as imprecatory, then it is this one.[75] The psalm is composed of three main segments: the first describes the enemies (vv. 2–6); the second curses them (vv. 7–10); and the third speaks of the joy of the righteous when the curses come to pass (vv. 11–12).[76] A full third of the psalm, then, is devoted to imprecation.

The identity of the enemies is uncertain; they are described in such stock images as "the wicked" (vv. 4, 11), "serpent" and "cobra" (v. 5), "charmers" (v. 6), and "enchanter" (v. 6). What is certain, however, is that they remain human enemies who oppose Yahweh and the psalmist, perverting justice and poisoning the people with their falsehoods.[77] Unlike the enemies of Psalm 7, these are beyond any hope of repentance or redemption, having erred since birth (v. 4). All that remains for them is judgement and destruction at the hands of Yahweh.

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[75] Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC 20 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 84; Longman, *Psalms*, 235. This is contra Kraus and deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, who see it as an individual prayer. See Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 534–35; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 492. However, Longman again strains credulity (and the textual evidence) by asserting that "There is no doubt that the psalmist faces a life-threatening problem." See Longman, *Psalms*, 235.

[76] deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner dub the second of these sections "demand for God to act," removing (in name, if not in substance), the force of the imprecation. See idem, *The Book of Psalms*, 492. The harshness of the language used, however, is recognized by other commentators, and there is some debate about whether or not to take the psalm as a prophetic oracle or a prayer. See ibid.; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 534–35; Longman, *Psalms*, 235; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 84–85. Indeed, the imprecations are so severe that Ps 58 is among those completely omitted by the Liturgy of the Hours and the Revised Common Lectionary, as noted previously. See Holladay, *The Psalms*, 304.

[77] Contra Goldingay, who claims the enemies are supernatural forces only. See John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42–89*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 202–3.

The central imprecation (vv. 7–10) contains seven direct curses pronounced on the enemies. These begin with two *qal* imperatives in v. 7 which transition into a *niphal* jussive in v. 8. The final curse of v. 10 uses a *qal* jussive.[78] The verbs themselves are highly imagetic. Yahweh is to "shatter" teeth, "break out" fangs, and sweep them away like a whirlwind; the enemies are to "dissolve like water," "be cut off," and "melt away" like snails and miscarriages. The overall effect is one of great violence and destruction; Yahweh will surely judge the enemies and utterly destroy them, but he will do so in ways which seem out of character to Christian readers. This Yahweh is not the God of חסד; this is the God of קצף. Indeed, only Yahweh could wreak such havoc on the wicked; as Tate observes, "The maledictions in vv 8–10 belong to the category of a curse whose execution is the responsibility of a deity."[79] While the specific terminology of cursing is absent, the verbal forms and intent are nevertheless present here, and the curses of vv. 7–10 fit the standard definition of an ANE imprecation and cohere with the theology of same: a deity must destroy the transgressor for the petitioner is powerless to enact justice on his own.

Psalm 59

Following immediately on the heels of the terrible imprecations in Psalm 58 are those of Psalm 59, another psalm of David, but this time one with an ascribed setting. According to the title (v. 1), the lament and cry for deliverance of Psalm 59 arose from David's suffering at the hands of Saul (given the parallels, most likely the events of 1 Samuel 19:11–17). The psalm is therefore

[78] It should be noted that most commentators and translations take the imperfect as a simple imperfect with a future sense, but to preserve the parallelism of the imprecations and align it with the preceding *niphal* subjunctives, it is better taken as another subjunctive imperfect.

[79] Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 87.

considered, on the whole, an individual lament.[80] As is usual in such a lament, the psalmist begins with a declaration his innocence (vv. 2–5a) and concludes with a final vow of praise (vv. 17–18). Between these come alternating depictions of the enemy (vv. 7–8, 15–16) and imprecations and other cries to Yahweh (vv. 5b–6, 9–14). The imprecations once again form the largest segment of the psalm, and thus Psalm 59, like its immediate predecessor, is best classified as an imprecatory psalm.

The curses of Psalm 59 are substantially tamer than those of Psalm 58, however, and it is the first imprecatory psalm in which the psalmist explicitly petitions Yahweh to spare the lives of his enemies (v. 12). This is to ensure the people of Israel remember the enemies and their evils, thereby avoiding falling into the same deceitful errors and instead continuously acknowledging the lordship of Yahweh (v. 14).[81] The imprecation then becomes contradictory, with the final curse called down upon them one of utter destruction (v. 14). The final plea for destruction is justified on retributive principles: the enemies have uttered curses (אלה) and thus deserve to be cursed themselves. The earlier depiction of the enemies states that their sins are primarily verbal, lying and boasting, pitting themselves against the authority of Yahweh (vv. 7–8, 13); they are thus answered in similarly verbal terms, and the psalmist returns curse for curse.[82] As in the previous imprecatory psalms, the wishes of David are expressed to Yahweh in a mixture of

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[80] Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 540; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 498; Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 2*, 213. Tate and Longman, however, leave it open as to whether the lament is indeed that of an individual or a community. See Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 94–95; Longman, *Psalms*, 236–37.

[81] Tate, noting that v. 14 still calls for their destruction, writes that v. 12 simply calls for a gradual, not sudden, destruction, as the immediate removal of the enemies would not serve as a sufficient warning across the years. See idem, *Psalms 51–100*, 98. Goldingay states that, by being preserved at least temporarily, the enemies of David in the psalm will function similarly to the earlier Canaanites: not destroyed entirely, but scattered and kept alive as a perpetual reminder of the power of Yahweh. See idem, *Psalms, Vol. 2*, 219.

[82] Further, they are twice described as dogs (vv. 7, 15), a particularly damning description in the ANE. See Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 97–98; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 541.

imperatives and jussives (here in the *piel* and *niphal*). The curses in this psalm, then, adhere to the standard forms in content, theology, and grammar.

Psalm 69

Psalm 69 has been classified variously as individual lament and prayer song, but, in the final analysis (as Goldingay observes), the prevalence of jussives and imperatives serves as the basis for categorizing it with the imprecatory psalms.[83] Its status as an imprecatory psalm, however, raises interpretive problems for NT scholars as well as OT experts, for the psalm, along with Psalm 109, appears on the lips of Jesus Christ and, separately, the pen of Luke.[84] Regardless, it contains a great deal of curse, and the overall impact of the psalm is dependent on the vehemence of those imprecations.

The psalm, again attributed to David (v. 1), is the psalm of a suffering servant. David has attempted to serve Yahweh, but he has failed, and he has therefore become the subject of ridicule by his enemies. The first stanza (vv. 2–5) establishes the despair of the psalmist; the second (vv. 6–13) sees David confess his sin while still proclaiming his innocence contra the enemies; the third (vv. 14–20) is a naked cry for deliverance; the fourth (vv. 21–22) once again pits the psalmist against his enemies; the fifth (vv. 23–29) contains the imprecations on the enemies of

[83] For the psalm as individual lament, see Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 192–93; Longman, *Psalms*, 262. For its features compared to the prayer song, see deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 553; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, CC, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 59–60. Goldingay's grammatical observations may be found in idem, *Psalms, Vol. 2*, 338.

[84] As Surburg writes, "If the Imprecatory Psalms are ethically deficient and morally wrong, then Jesus must be reprimanded because He quoted from Psalm 69 and 109, two of the most criticized of the Maledictory Psalms." See idem, "Interpretation," 96–97. The quotations appear in Acts 1:20, used there by Luke to describe the suicide of Judas, and in John 2:17, 15:25, where Jesus applies texts from both psalms to himself and his life. A full treatment of imprecations in the NT, including the imprecatory psalms quoted there, will appear in appendix 1 of this dissertation.

David; the sixth (vv. 30–34) contain David's final vow of praise; and the seventh and final stanza (vv. 35–37) expresses the confidence of the psalmist that Yahweh will hear and answer his petition and exhorts the cosmos to give Yahweh praise.

The enemies are described sparingly and in stock terms. They are enemies (איב) who hate David (v. 5); they are gossips and drunkards (v. 13), haters/foes (שׂנא) and deep waters (v. 14); and enemies and adversaries (צרר) (vv. 19–20). The work of the enemies has caused him shame, reproach, estrangement from his family, and a host of other ills; he is completely isolated and alone with only Yahweh for solace.[85] The situation is all the worse for the fact the psalmist cannot proclaim his own righteousness, being all-too-aware of his own faults (v. 6).

In this context, then, the psalmist utters imprecations against the enemies. As is now the typical pattern for imprecatory psalms, the verbs of the curses are a mixture of *qal*, *niphal*, and *hiphil* imperatives, jussives, and participles. The curses match the situation of the psalmist: David calls for their alienation and shame, ending with a call for their removal from the book of the living (סֵפֶר חַיִּים) itself (vv. 23–29). The imprecations are thus retributive in nature, fitting the standard form of curses. The final imprecation of v. 29 is expressed in parallel terms, clarifying the removal of the enemies from the book of the living by stating their removal from the record of the righteous. This should not be taken as a simple removal from the Israel or communion with Yahweh, but, rather, is a bald plea for the death of the enemies.[86]

The imprecations are retributive; they are severe; they are possible only through the power of Yahweh; and they are plentiful. The harshness of the curses and their placement at the

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[85] deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 559.

[86] So Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 199–200; Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 2*, 352; contra Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 63. If the punishment is analogous to that of removal from the book of life in Ex 32:32–33 and Dan 12:1–2 (as well as throughout the NT, particularly in Revelation), then the death called for here is eternal and not simply an end to mortal life.

end of the psalm leave a bitter taste in the mouth of the modern reader, and the song thus rightfully earns a place among the imprecatory psalms.

Psalm 83

The first of the imprecatory psalms which is not Davidic, Psalm 83 is attributed to Asaph, with the only other designation in the title (v. 1) simply being "a song." Commentators are agreed that the psalm is a communal song of lament, although Goldingay observes that, if so, it is a curious communal lament indeed, for it never speaks in first-person plural (and only uses the first-person singular once, in v. 14).[87] The provenance of the psalm, however, is the subject of far more dispute. Kraus, having scoured the commentaries in his own day, arrives at the conclusion it is pre-exilic based on the mention of Assyria as a global power in v. 9; Tate, on the other hand, uses the same list of nations in vv. 7–9 to conclude the psalm is post-exilic, with Assyria mentioned only as a representative of former powers.[88]

Psalm 83 readily divides into two primary segments, split at the musical/liturgical term סֶלָה: the description of the enemies (vv. 2–9) and imprecations (vv. 10–19). Just over half of the psalm, then, is composed of curses against the various enemies of Yahweh delineated in the first strophe. In a contrast to previous psalms, the enemies here are named in a table of nations: Edom, Moab, Gebal, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia, Tyre, and Assyria, along with the descendants of Ishmael and Hagar (vv. 7–9).[89] Like the enemies of the previous imprecatory psalms, however,

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[87] Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 2*, 572–73; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 345; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 161; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 645; Longman, *Psalms*, 308.

[88] Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 161–62; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 345–46.

[89] The enemies listed are classic villains throughout the OT literature, organized here geographically (moving from south to north in the Transjordan region before repeating the journey up the coast). Assyria functions as the climax and capstone of the list, and, if the psalm is indeed pre-exilic, has been placed in that position due to

those of Psalm 83 are described as the total enemies of Yahweh (vv. 3–6). They are conspirators who hate Yahweh and his covenant people, creating their own heathenish covenant binding the nations together in their opposition to the will of Yahweh, and, in so doing, arrogating themselves to his level.

The enemies, then, are standard-issue for imprecatory psalms, despite their specificity. The imprecations called down upon the enemies deviate from those of earlier psalms, though, as they feature fixed historical referents as the bases for the curses. Yahweh is asked to curse the nations as he did Midian, Sisera, Jabin, Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah, and Zalmunna. Each of these allusions comes from the book of Judges and reflect Yahweh's victory over enemy armies.[90] Just as he defeated those who had invaded Israel and sought to destroy it, so, too, is he called upon to repeat those victories. Both the general curses of vv. 10–13 and the more specific curses of vv. 14–18, as in previous psalms, are expressed in *qal* and *piel* imperatives along with *qal* jussives and a single use of a *piel* subjunctive imperfect in v. 16b. The psalmist prays that Yahweh would destroy them in his storm, killing them and returning their bodies to the ground as fertilizer, so that the nations would know he is the only ruler of the cosmos.

Psalm 83 thus continues the imprecatory patterns seen in the first half of the psalter (and therefore the Davidic psalms scrutinized so far in this study). A people (or person) is powerless

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its relative power vis-à-vis the other nations and tribes included in the list. See Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 346–47; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 647.

[90] For Sisera and Jabin, see Judg 4–5; for Oreb and Zeeb, see Judg 7; and for Zebah and Zalmunna, see Judg 8. The final four individuals listed were Midianites defeated by Gideon, making them a parallel explication of the initial reference to Midian in v. 10. The first two persons listed, Sisera and Jabin, however, were Canaanites defeated by Deborah and Barak (and, in the case of Sisera, Jael). Their inclusion among the Midianites and the victories of Gideon is therefore curious—doubly so given the geographic disparity between Midian and Jabin's king-city of Hazor. It is possible Asaph simply pulled names from the classical stories of Judg 4–8, but any attempt to identify a specific tradition or source behind the inclusion of the Canaanites with the Midianites is speculative at best.

to defend or avenge themselves, and Yahweh is called upon to do to them what they are attempting to do to Israel. Interestingly, this is the first imprecatory psalm analyzed which uses an unconditional curse to punish both present and future action; after all, the enemies have engaged in conspiracy and blasphemy (vv. 3–6), but they have not yet (again) sent their forces into Israel. Regardless, the imprecations follow the standard pattern throughout the ANE and the Psalter in terms of both content and theology.

Psalm 94

Psalm 94, in contrast to the preceding imprecatory psalms, is entirely anonymous; it features no title to ascribe authorship or provide musical or liturgical information. The LXX assigns it to David, but any such designation is completely absent in the MT.[91] Regardless, the psalm is an amalgamation of various *Gattungen*, including elements of thanksgiving psalms, praise psalms, enthronement psalms, and communal and individual laments.[92] What is certain is that the various parts combine to form a gestalt of imprecation, which is evident from the very first verse: "God of vengeance—O Yahweh, God of vengeance, shine forth!" While Yahweh's vengeance is referenced throughout the Latter Prophets in particular, only here (Psalm 94:1) in the OT is Yahweh directly named the God of vengeance, and that appositive is determinative for the remainder of the psalm. Yahweh in Psalm 94 is only incidentally a merciful God; the primary image is that of a vengeful, wrathful God of judgment.[93]

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[91] The LXX title reads Ψαλμὸς τῷ Δαυιδ (LXX Ps 93:1a). As such, Ps 94 could mark a return to the psalms of David, but it is uncertain given the text of the MT.

[92] Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 486–90; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 709–10; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 238–39; John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 3: Psalms 90–150*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 75.

[93] In what seems to be an effort to soften this appellation, many commentators prefer different translations of אֵל־נְקָמוֹת, variously glossing the phrase as "God of vindication," "God of retribution," and even "the God of all

The vengeance of Yahweh is explicitly connected to retribution early in the psalm, as v. 2 calls for the "Judge of the earth" to "return recompense" to the enemies in the psalm, highlighting their evil deeds and the retributive nature of the psalmist's request. Likewise, v. 23, in a series of *hiphil* imperfects, states that Yahweh will return their evils upon them and destroy them because of their wickedness. The enemies are dubbed evil and wicked throughout the psalm, and the exact nature of the enemies is described once more in stock imagery: they are arrogant blasphemers who destroy the poor, murder widows and orphans (vv. 4–7). Following their description, they are contrasted with the righteousness of both the psalmist and Yahweh for the remainder of the psalm (vv. 8–22).

The imprecations of Psalm 94 appear in a substantially different fashion than those of the earlier imprecatory psalms.[94] The initial call for retribution (v. 2) is expressed in the standard imperatives (here, both *niphal* and *hiphil*), and, as noted previously, the final declaration of confidence that Yahweh will indeed enact justice according to their evil works comes in a series of three *hiphil* imperfects stating that he will annihilate the wicked (v. 23). Beyond this, however, there are no direct curses uttered upon the enemies. The closest approximations to the typical curses appear in vv. 13–15, where the psalmist writes that the sorrow of the people will

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redress." See Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 482–83; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 237; and Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 3*, 76, respectively. Tate specifically argues that the feminine plural נקמות is better taken as "'vindication,' 'justice,' 'retribution,' or 'avenging'" instead of its basic sense of "vengeance." See idem, *Psalms 51–100*, 483. However, both *BDB* and *HALOT* prefer the simple gloss "vengeance," with *HALOT* referring to the use of נקמות in Ps 94:1 as an example of the plural of amplification, making Yahweh a true God of vengeance as it pertains to divine retribution. See BDB, s.v. "נְקָמָה"; *HALOT*, s.v. "נְקָמָה." Similarly, *DCH* prefers the gloss of "vengeance," citing Ps 94:1 specifically as an example of the vengeance of Yahweh. See *DCH* 5, s.v. "נְקָמָה."

For the use of the feminine plural ending as an intensification morpheme, see Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. by A. E. Cowley (Garden City, NY: Dover, 2006), 396–401; Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed., SubBi 27 (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2022), 470–71; Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 122. For the use of such nouns in appositional phrases, see Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 29–31, esp. 30.

[94] This is perhaps one reason to reject Davidic authorship of the psalm, despite its title in the LXX.

be ended when Yahweh digs "a pit for the wicked," at which point his "judgment will turn to righteousness" once more. Both of the verbs involved in the future conditions, יִכְרֶה and יָשׁוּב, are imperfects, but, contrary to those in other imprecations and their contexts, they are best taken as standard imperfects with a futuristic sense. To take them as subjunctives would be to render their clauses incoherent.[95]

As such, the imprecations of Psalm 94 are simply the call and promise of future retribution, when Yahweh will visit judgment upon the wicked and restore peace to the righteous in Israel through the destruction of the enemies. The lack of specificity (beyond annihilation) and typical curse language places the psalm in a category all its own, but it is nevertheless a truly imprecatory psalm according to the posited definition. The curses, limited though they may be, call to Yahweh to avenge the powerless sufferers, and the confident conclusion of the psalm leaves the reader with the sense of the psalmist's anger and despair as much as his faith in Yahweh to punish the wicked.

Psalm 109

Psalm 109 returns the psalmist to the divine court to plead his innocence in an individual lament.[96] Indeed, according to Goldingay, Psalm 109 "is the most systematically explicit psalm

[95] The final verb of the psalm, יַצְמִיתֵם (with the 3mp suffix), is the only contender for a jussive or other volitional mood in the imprecatory passages of the song. That it is a futuristic imperfect, however, is obvious in its context: the verb appears twice in a row, both as the conclusion to the previous clause and as the beginning of the final clause. Principles of parallelism and repetition alone are sufficient cause to render the second occurrence of the verb in the same sense as the first, and the first instance can be glossed no other way given its own position at the *Athnach* of the verse (and therefore also given its relationship to the initial verb of the verse, here a *hiphil* imperfect).

[96] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC 21, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 100. The prevalence of forensic language is well-noted by Shepherd. See idem, "Imprecatory Psalms," 30.

of protest and plea about being subject to false accusation."[97] However, the defining feature of the psalm is not its protestations of innocence per se; rather, it is the substantial use of imprecation. Its curses are long and harsh, and they are all-too-well constructed by David. As Shepherd remarks, "It would appear… that Psalm 109 is a carefully constructed composition, making use of many of the common features of Hebrew poetry. It is not simply the spontaneous, unthinking prayer of an angry man."[98] Such is its harshness that Shepherd states unequivocally that "Psalm 109 is seen by many as the climax of the Imprecatory Psalms, with the longest, most sustained series of imprecations recorded against the writer's enemies. The writer desires judgment upon his enemy in terms of his life, his office, his possessions, his family and even his memory."[99] The psalm bases its right to imprecate on Yahweh's fundamental opposition of those who oppose his people, and it expresses confidence that Yahweh will ultimately grant its petitions because of his חסד (vv. 21–31, esp. vv. 21, 26).[100] Yahweh is loving toward his people, and that love, according to David, requires his acting against the enemies of Israel.

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[97] Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 3*, 275.

[98] Shepherd, "Imprecatory Psalms," 34.

[99] Ibid., 29. For their part, it is only when treating Ps 109 that deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner offer their initial definition of imprecatory psalms. See idem, *The Book of Psalms*, 827. Even Kraus, usually hesitant to move beyond the category of lament, classifies the psalm as truly imprecatory. He does go on, in what seems to be an attempt to soften the curses of the psalm, to raise the possibility that David is simply repeating the curses his enemies have uttered against him and is therefore not actively wishing the harm of the enemies. See idem, *Psalms 60–150*, 337–38.

[100] The covenantal חסד of Yahweh serves as the source of confidence (and basis for cursing) for many psalms. See Laurence, *Cursing with God*, 158–60; Shepherd, "Imprecatory Psalms," 27; McCann, *Theological Introduction*, 124. Jenkins writes that the overall focus of Ps 109 is on חסד, not true justice or retribution. While he is certainly correct to note the significance of Yahweh's חסד in the psalm, his arguments disparaging the importance (and, at times, even the existence) of the imprecations themselves are unconvincing. See idem, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 190–205. Goldingay, however, is quite correct when he writes, "Retribution is not *the* fundamental principle, in OT or NT; in both, God's wrath in less central to God's character and activity than God's love. But it is *a* fundamental principle." See idem, *Psalms, Vol. 3*, 288–89 (emphasis original).

To be sure, the enemies of Psalm 109 are depicted as particularly heinous. They are wicked liars who oppose David, betraying his love for them and returning evil and hate in exchange for his goodness (vv. 2–5). Moreover, they oppress the poor and afflicted; in direct contrast to Yahweh, they are said to have acted without חסד (v. 16). This is standard fare for the enemies of the Psalter, but following this initial depiction, the enemies become far worse, engaging in more-than-usual wickedness. They outright kill the brokenhearted (v. 16) and have a great love for cursing, wearing their own imprecatory words like garments even as they soak into their very bones (vv. 17–18).[101]

The retribution prayed for in the psalm corresponds to these crimes to a degree not evidenced in other imprecatory psalms. The enemies have murdered; David prays they themselves may die (vv. 8–10). They have oppressed the poor; the psalmist asks they become poor (vv. 10b–11). They have failed to show חסד; David prays they would be denied חסד themselves (v. 12). Given the grievous nature of their sin, the psalmist petitions Yahweh to obliterate their lineage and even remove their name from memory (v. 13). Ultimately, instead of being clothed with the curses uttered against others, the enemies are to be clothed in their own shame (v. 29). Interestingly, the imprecations prayed in Psalm 109 correspond to a number of standard ANE curses. David prays for retribution, then, using the common language of his time. The curses are therefore harsh, but not uncharacteristically so for their context.[102] The majority of

[101] Psalm 109:17–18 marks the only uses of קְלָלָה in the Psalter. Such cursing, according to Bernard Gosse, is verbal only, but nevertheless ritualistic. Still, even Gosse recognizes that the actual rituals are absent in Scripture and are largely incapable of being reconstructed: "Ces rituels sont peu développés dans la Bible, où ils doivent être souvent compris par allusions." See Bernard Gosse, "L'influence de Pr 30,11–14 sur le Ps 109 dans continuité de celle de Pr 30,1–14 sur le Ps 18 et la dénonciation des pratiques de malediction," *ZAW* 132, no. 3 (2020): 418–23; here at 423.

[102] Unlike the ANE curses, however, the imprecations of David invoke only a single deity. The deities of the ANE could only curse in their own spheres of influence, but Yahweh is able to curse all domains of life (as

the curses are expressed in either imperatives, primarily *qal* and *hiphil*, or jussives in the *qal*, *niphal*, *piel*, and *hiphil*. A single verb, דרשׁ, appears in the *qal* precative perfect (v. 10b).

David thus prays down imprecations upon the worst of enemies in the worst of terms. Here the full sense of divine retribution is on display, and the psalm fits the proposed definition of imprecatory psalm to the letter. Furthermore, Psalm 109 mirrors curse texts from the ANE in explicit as well as implicit ways, making it the best linguistic match for its cultural context out of the psalm treated heretofore in the present study. Psalm 109 presents true imprecation in every sense of the word, and its clarion call for retributive justice to be enacted by Yahweh, while uncomfortable to modern readers, is completely at home in its ANE world.

Psalm 129

The text of Psalm 129 lack ascription to any particular author; it has no title beyond שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת, "a song of ascents." The songs of ascents stem from post-exilic times, perhaps either to mark the return to Jerusalem from the exile or a simple pilgrimage to celebrate a religious festival.[103] Regardless, the psalm expresses a concern for the status of Zion, and its curses fall upon those who consider Zion an enemy in their hatred of the city. As such, the psalm is considered a communal lament, although critics have also considered it a number of other *Gattungen* such as thanksgiving psalm and song of trust.[104] Its major emphasis on the cursing of those who oppose

discussed in ch. 2 of this dissertation). With that said, the imprecations also mirror those of Jeremiah and other post-exilic fare, establishing traditional biblical curse language. See Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 101.

[103] deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 923; Longman, *Psalms*, 409–10. The exact nature of the "ascent" is ultimately unknown and unknowable.

[104] deClaissé-Walford, "Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms," 85–86; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 247–48; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 923.

Zion, however, best classifies it as an imprecatory psalm, albeit one with elements of communal lament.

The structure of the psalm is straightforward and divides easily into two halves. The first half, vv. 1–4, describes the situation of the petitioners and their enemies.[105] The second half, vv. 5–8, consists of imprecations uttered against the enemies of Zion and Israel. The description of the enemies is unusually sparse in detail despite its relative length. Their wickedness is summed up as persecution of Israel (the verb צרר appears twice in vv. 1–2), and v. 3 restates the persecution in an agricultural metaphor. No specific sins are listed, and the true evils of the enemies are left to the imagination. The psalm does, however, state that the persecution has been continuous, "from my youth (up)." A number of enemies could be in mind: Egypt, Midian, Amalek, the Rephidim, etc.[106] However, the foes are unnamed in the psalm, and any identification of them is tentative at best and speculative at worst; it is therefore preferable to leave them unnamed and generalized.

The imprecations use similar language. Initially, the curses are general, calling for shame upon those who hate Zion (v. 5). They then shift into agricultural imagery, desiring the enemies to be withered grass, useless to the harvesters (vv. 6–7). The final curse is not an active curse but a passive omission of blessing: those who pass by are to refrain from blessing the enemies in the

[105] The psalm opens by allowing all Israel to speak (vv. 1–4; it is uncertain, however, where the dialogue by Israel ends or if it continues throughout the remainder of the psalm). It is necessary, therefore, to refer to the speaker of the psalm as plural—the first time this has occurred in the imprecatory psalms despite any communal elements observed throughout the songs.

[106] Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 462; Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 3*, 516.

name of Yahweh (v. 8).[107] The first two curses use *qal* jussives, but the final imprecation is expressed via a *qal* precative perfect.[108]

With the exact nature of the offenses unknown, it is impossible to assess the curses for coherence to retributive justice. Retribution is certainly called for, however; persecution has come, and punishment must be meted out in the name of justice. If the punishment fits the crime, so to speak, is unknowable. At a minimum, however, the imprecations of Psalm 129 petition Yahweh to punish those who have persecuted Israel in some fashion, and, furthermore, to withhold his blessing from same.[109]

Psalm 137

Of all the imprecatory psalms, Psalm 137 is perhaps the most famous, and there is certainly no dearth of scholarship on the song. Any number of scholars have sought to make sense of the psalm and force it to cohere with a Christian ethic. Unfortunately, such an enterprise is destined to fail; there is nothing in the imprecations of the psalm which can be accommodated into Christian mores, and its pronouncement of blessing upon those who commit infanticide will forever repulse and horrify those who read it while affirming the faith of the NT.[110] It is in these

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[107] As Jenkins states, "Instead of asking for trouble, [the Israelites] ask for the absence of blessing." See idem, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 223.

[108] So the translation of deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, but contra Allen, who takes the imperfects as futuristic and shifts the perfective verb into a simple present. See deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 924; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 246.

[109] When taken with Ps 128, the final curse becomes an inclusio, and the enemies may be defined as those who do not fear Yahweh and walk in his ways. See Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 224.

[110] As Miller writes, "Such horrendous prayer for the brutal killing of the children of one's enemies seems to defile the character of prayer itself." See Patrick D. Miller, *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology*, FAT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 199. Perhaps for this reason, Miller classifies the curses of Ps 137 as primarily hyperbolic. See ibid., 201. With that said, Miller is one of many interpreters who identify hyperbole where there is none in an attempt to accommodate the text to an NT ethos.

horrors, however, that Psalm 137 finds a greater affinity with the book of Lamentations than all other imprecatory psalms. Both are sorrowfully united by dead children, with the one calling for the deaths of the enemy children and the other mourning the loss of their own during the siege of 587.[111] Moreover, Jewish tradition holds the pair tightly together, and both serve as liturgical texts read on the Ninth of Ab to commemorate the tragedies suffered by the Jewish people.[112] Whereas Lamentations provides an outlet for grief, Psalm 137 provides both a lament and a way to end that mourning with fury, allowing the reader to cry tears of anger and rage in addition to those of sorrow.

The psalm is exilic in origin, or, at the very latest, was composed early in the post-exilic era.[113] It is rather an unusual psalm, lacking the standard meter and parallelism of most Hebrew poetry as well as the typical line breaks and average lengths of colons and strophes. Instead, it finds a great deal of linguistic affinity with the judgment oracles of the Latter Prophets, particularly Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Obadiah.[114] It is therefore unsurprising that the enemies of the psalm are Babylon and Edom (vv. 1–3, 7–8). Their specific sins were apparently so prominent in ancient Israelite consciousness that the psalmist (anonymous) saw no need to record them. The entire experience of the exile is summed up by calling the enemies of the psalm

[111] Overton, "Singing through Clenched Teeth," 62–63.

[112] Mowinckel, *Psalm Studies, Vol. 2*, 728.

[113] Hays considers the psalm to be exilic and connects it to the language and sentiments of both Esther and Daniel. See idem, "How Shall We Sing," 50. Of those who consider Ps 137 to be post-exilic, Simango prefers a very early post-exilic composition (537–515 BC), whereas Jenkins dates it later in the post-exilic period (after the destruction of the city of Babylon in 331 BC). See Simango, "A Comprehensive Reading of Psalm 137," *OTE* 31, no. 1 (2018): 233; Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 244–45. As noted previously, Jenkins attributes all imprecatory psalms to the post-exilic age, considering them to record historical events which have already passed rather than to express the desires and prayers of the psalmists. In the case of Ps 137, he finds sufficient evidence for his view in a single *qal* passive participle in v. 8 (with the article: הַשְּׁדוּדָה) which has the city already devastated.

[114] Hays, "How Shall We Sing," 40–43; Harman, "Continuity," 67.

"captors" (שׁבה) and "tormentors" (תולל) who taunted the exiles (v. 3) and called for the destruction of Jerusalem (v. 7). The psalm is unique, then, in not directly referring to the enemies as wicked, evil, or another similar term.

The psalm is also unique in its imprecations. The second stanza (vv. 4–6) contain a number of conditional curses upon the psalmist himself. Should he forget Jerusalem and no longer find joy in her, even at the distance of both time and place in the exile, he is to suffer loss of poetic and musical skill. Only after expressing these self-imprecations (in *qal* subjunctive imperfects) does the psalm conclude with imprecations upon Edom and Babylon (vv. 7–9). The imprecations on the enemy are stark in their brutality: Yahweh is asked to remember the sins of Edom, ostensibly to do to them what they have done to Israel (v. 7), and those who murder the infants of Babylon will be counted as blessed (or happy) (vv. 8–9). The curses in vv. 7–9 are intriguing in their structure. First, the imprecation against Edom is a simple *qal* imperative, as may be expected given the overall patterns of the Psalter. Second, in a clear deviation from those patterns, the pronouncements of blessing/happiness upon those who kill the children of Babylon are expressed in verbless (null copula) clauses. Gunkel and Begrich believe the imprecations are the only curses in the Psalter to contain the original Hebrew/Israelite curse formulae connecting cursing and blessing, and this accounts for the discrepancies.[115]

Regardless of grammar, the imprecations of Psalm 137 decidedly fit the theological pattern of the Psalter. These imprecations drink deeply from the well of *lex talionis*, and the psalmist, despite the seeming barbarity of his words, is doing nothing more than expressing a desire for retribution. What Babylon had done to Israel, so the psalmist desires to happen to

[115] Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 234–35. While this is a possibility, it should be remembered that Ps 129 also links blessing and cursing, and therefore the phenomenon is not unique to Ps 137.

Babylon.[116] Only Yahweh could bring about both the curses upon Edom and Babylon and the maledictions the psalmist utters against himself, for skill, talent, and blessing have their source in Yahweh, and this knowledge serves as the basis for the psalmist's prayer to Yahweh to remember in v. 7. Therefore, despite the grammatical differences between the curses of Psalm 137 and those of the other imprecatory psalms, the imprecations in Psalm 137 espouse the same basic theological content and continue to adhere to the proposed definition of imprecation common throughout the Psalter and the larger ANE.

Psalm 139

Psalm 139 is frequently included in lists of imprecatory psalms, but it is largely an outlier in the genre. Of the psalm's twenty-four verses, only four (vv. 19–22) are truly imprecatory. The remaining twenty verses form an individual prayer of thanksgiving containing a number of elements from laments, hymns, and wisdom psalms.[117] Overall, the psalm is "often read as a calm reflection on God's omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence," but to do so is to ignore the imprecatory elements near the conclusion.[118] Indeed, in the final analysis, the imprecations dominate one's reading of the song. There is a marked shift in tone both before and after the imprecations, and those verses form a strophe all their own—but their position at the conclusion (aside from a final plea in vv. 23–24) leaves a bitter taste in the reader's mouth, and one leaves

[116] Barker, *Imprecation as Divine Discourse*, 170–71; Simango, "A Comprehensive Reading," 227–28.

[117] Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 323; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 962. Kraus, considering the elements of various *Gattungen* present in the psalm, ultimately classifies it as a didactic poem, as it fits no other form in terms of structure, content, and linguistics. See idem, *Psalms 60–150*, 511–13.

[118] Longman, *Psalms*, 451–52.

the song with the forcible impression of the curses.[119] For that reason, the psalm fits the proposed definition of imprecatory psalm despite the relative lack of imprecations, and it is therefore included here for further analysis.

Attributed to David, Psalm 139 largely praises Yahweh for his divine attributes as they intersect with the lived experience of the psalmist. For example, David can praise Yahweh for his omnipresence precisely because it gives him comfort in dark moments (vv. 7–12). With such a prominent focus on the divine character, the switch in v. 19 to imprecation is all the more jarring. In contrast to the psalmist, the enemies have no words of praise to offer Yahweh. They blaspheme; they take his name in vain; and, ultimately, they hate and actively oppose him (vv. 20–21). In addition, they are described as "men of blood," prone to the violence and murderous tendencies of enemies in earlier psalms (v. 19). Because of their wickedness, David writes that they are truly his enemies—and thus Yahweh's enemies—and he hates them "with perfect hatred" (v. 22).[120] While Laurence maintains such hatred is necessary to truly demonstrate love for the enemies, no indication of that love is present in the psalm; there is no evidence the enemies are capable of repentance or of turning to Yahweh, nor is there the suggestion the death of the enemies (prayed for in v. 19) would ultimately benefit them in an eschatological sense by eliminating the possibility of future wickedness.[121] This is indeed a raw, perfect hatred.

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[119] Various structures have been proposed for the psalm, but most agree on a four-strophe breakdown: vv. 1b–6, 7–12, 13–18, and 19–24 (v. 1a is the title). See Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 321; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 962.

[120] That the enemies of David are the enemies of Yahweh is evident from vv. 20–22. They are already the enemies of Yahweh because of their actions, and, because of their opposition to the covenant Lord of Israel, they have become the enemies of David as well.

[121] Laurence, *Cursing with God*, 170–71.

The end result of this hatred is the plea for the death of the enemies at the hands of Yahweh (v. 19). The wish for their slaughter takes the form of a *qal* subjunctive imperfect and may be rendered a number of ways: "If only you would slay the wicked"; "I wish you would slay the wicked"; "may you slay the wicked"; "O that you would slay the wicked"; etc.[122] The remainder of the imprecatory section simply describes both the enemies and David's hatred of them. The only curse requested, then, is the death of the wicked, a petition well in line with those of other imprecatory psalms. The psalm thus stands beside the other imprecatory psalms in both grammar and content, despite the low proportion of imprecation.

Psalm 140

The final imprecatory psalm is also Davidic, and, like its immediate predecessor, contains little in the way of imprecatory content but is nevertheless dominated by the vehemence of the final curses. Psalm 140 is an individual lament psalm and closely adheres to the regular lament pattern: it contains an initial plea for help combined with a description of the enemies (vv. 2–4 and again in vv. 5–6), a statement of praise and additional petition for divine aid (vv. 7–9), imprecation against the enemies (vv. 10–12), and a final statement of confidence (vv. 13–14).[123] Each of these sections, with the exception of the shift from imprecation to statement of confidence at v. 13, ends with סֶלָה, making the demarcation between strophes quite apparent.

The enemies are described twice, first in vv. 3–4 and again in vv. 5b–6 following a repetition of the initial petition for deliverance in v. 5a. They are twice referred to as violent men

[122] Given the initial אִם of the verse, perhaps the first of these possibilities is preferable, as it preserves both the vocabulary and the irreal mood of the clause up to the *Athnach*.

[123] Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 334. As Kraus rightly observes, however, the petitions against the enemies truly begin in v. 9, although the verse is not phrased as an imprecation. See idem, *Psalms 60–150*, 521.

(vv. 2, 5); they engage in conspiracies and plots against David (vv. 3a, 5b–6); they create violence and war (v. 3b); and they speak lies and deceit (v. 4). Later, they are referred to as "the wicked" (v. 9), and, by the implications of v. 13, oppress the poor and afflicted. The enemies are thus depicted with the standard imagery and terms found across the imprecatory psalms.[124]

The imprecations, by contrast, contain a number of previously unused images. David prays for the heads of the enemies to be covered by their own lies and plots (v. 10)—an image of retribution, as the enemies plot against David, as well as an image of inversion, as Yahweh covers the head of David (v. 8). The final colon of v. 11 is likewise retributive, petitioning Yahweh to make the enemies fall prey to their own traps, snares which had been set for David by the enemies in v. 6.[125] The prayer for the wicked to be under a rain of burning coals and thrown into the fire (v. 11a–b) is likewise retributive. David has suffered because of the חמה of the enemies (v. 4), so here he engages in wordplay, as חמה may refer to both the venom of the vipers, as in v. 4, or to heat, the image of v. 11a–b.[126] Finally, just as David feels hunted by the enemies, so, too, does he ask that the wicked be hunted and exterminated (v. 12). The verbs appear in a variety of stems (*qal*, *niphal*, *piel*, and *hiphil*) but always in the jussive or other subjunctive imperfect form. Interestingly, the imprecations of Psalm 140 lack imperative forms.

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[124] The nature of the plots against David are unknown. Kraus raises the possibility of treason and betrayal by another king, whereas Longman posits a forensic setting. See Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 521–22; Longman, *Psalms*, 455–56.

[125] The colon of v. 11c contains a hapax. מַהֲמֹרָה appears only here in the MT and refers to a pit of water or a bottomless pit (note, however, its use in Sir 12:16 in the same sense). The association here is that of a pit used for hunting. See BDB, s.v. "מַהֲמֹרָה"; *HALOT*, s.v. "מַהֲמֹר"; *DCH* 5, s.v. "מַהֲמֹרָה." BDB notes, however, that H. Grätz and T. K. Cheyne prefer the emendation of מַהֲמֹרָה to מַכְמֹרָה, "net, snare." See BDB, s.v. "מִכְמֹרָה." The emendation is supported by *DCH* 5, s.v. "מִכְמָר." This strengthens the association with hunting/traps and accords with Akkadian usage. See ALCBH, s.v. "מַכְמֹר"; *CAD* 8, s.v. "kamāru A." It is (rather unhelpfully) glossed ταλαιπωρία ("misery") in the LXX.

[126] Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 337.

Psalm 140 therefore adheres to the established definitional matrix for imprecation and imprecatory psalms. David cries out to Yahweh for retribution he cannot enact himself, and his curses against the enemy dominate the tone of the psalm so as to linger in the mind even after one reads the final statement of confidence in vv. 13–14.

Synthesis

The various imprecatory psalms depict their enemies in seemingly stock images as wicked, evil, lying men who conspire against both the psalmist (usually David) and Yahweh himself. Because of the power and prominence of the enemies, the psalmists are unable to enact justice on their own, so they pray to Yahweh for deliverance in the forms of both pleas for salvation and imprecation. Moreover, the curses themselves are inherently retributive. What the enemies have done to David or to Israel, the psalmists petition Yahweh to return on their own heads. In all this, then, the imprecatory psalms continue in the traditions of ANE imprecations. Furthermore, the imprecatory psalms make use of the expected grammatical/syntactic features common in ANE imprecation and express their curses in a mix of imperatives, jussives/subjunctive imperfects, and precative perfects. While the majority of ANE curses are monumental or otherwise inscriptionary, those of the Psalter are, by default, literary, and therein lies the only significant difference (aside from the monotheism of Israel) in the imprecatory texts across the various cultures.

Other Imprecations within the Psalter

With full psalms now treated, it is necessary to consider the array of fourteen standalone imprecations found throughout the psalter: Psalms 5:11; 10:2b, 15; 11:6; 17:13; 31:18; 35:4–8,

26; 40:15–16; 55:16, 24; 70:4; 71:13; 74:11; 104:35; 119:78; and 143:12. Each of the following texts are found in non-imprecatory psalms across diverse *Gattungen*, although the lament psalms, of course, feature the largest proportion of imprecations across all genres of psalms. These imprecations will be considered in the same manner as the full psalms, and any deviations from the expected pattern of cursing in the Psalter will be explored as necessary.

Psalm 5:11

Psalm 5:11 appears in the broader context of an interesting declaration of Yahweh's hatred of all who commit wicked deeds (vv. 5–7). The sinners are then described in v. 10 in standard terms before the imprecation is uttered against them in v. 11. The psalmist (David) there prays for their destruction according to their own plots and in the midst of their own sin and rebellion against Yahweh. Two *hiphil* imperatives bound a *qal* jussive as David seeks retribution because of their sin against the people and Yahweh.[127]

Psalm 10:2b, 15

Psalms 9–10 form an acrostic, with א through כ in Psalm 9 and ל through ת in Psalm 10.[128] The first half, Psalm 9, is a thanksgiving psalm, but Psalm 10 devolves into lament over the state of the wicked. The enemies of Psalm 10 are atheistic liars who deny the existence of Yahweh and therefore oppress others with a sense of impunity (vv. 2–14). After an initial retributive

[127] The psalm is an individual lament, but any sins of the wicked against David are not specified; the verses following the initial cry for help in vv. 2–4 never go into detail as to what the wicked have done to David, only Israel (vv. 6–7, 10) and Yahweh (v. 11). See Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 85–89. Therefore, as deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner note, the psalmist never prays for deliverance from the enemies, only that they "fall prey to their own plots and plans." See idem, *The Book of Psalms*, 91.

[128] Much like the acrostics of Lamentations, Ps 10 reverses the usual order of ע and פ. It also, however, omits מ entirely. See Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 123; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 191–93.

imprecatory statement in v. 2b (in a *niphal* jussive), the primary imprecation appears in v. 15, where David, in a *qal* imperative and *qal* subjunctive imperfect petitions Yahweh to break the arms of the wicked and utterly destroy them.[129] The two verses are insufficient to designate Psalm 10 as an imprecatory, but they nevertheless still call for the destruction of the enemies at the hand of Yahweh in an act of retributive justice.

Psalm 11:6

The enemies of the lament of Psalm 11 have David squarely in their sights, and the king is impotent to do anything in his own defense. He thus appeals to the righteousness of Yahweh to deliver him, and, in v. 6, utters imprecations against them. The curses uttered against the enemies come in the form of a single *hiphil* imperfect followed by a null copula clause. If the initial imperfect is taken as futuristic (or even a simple present), as is the consensus view, then the absent copula must be taken similarly.[130] Admittedly, the simple future sense of the imperfect is perfectly logical and coherent here, and there is no reason to assume automatically a subjunctive sense to the verb. With that said, however, both Kraus and deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner take the verb as volitional in some sense, with the former preferring a gloss indicating permission and the latter one of causation.[131] Interestingly, several English translations take the

[129] David is given as the composer of Ps 9, and granted that (1) Pss 9–10 are most likely a single psalm which was divided for unknown reasons and (2) Ps 10 has no separate title, Ps 10 is likewise to be ascribed to David.

[130] Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 131; Longman, *Psalms*, 92; Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 1*, 188.

[131] Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 200; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 147.

verb as a jussive, thus indicating such a sense is no barrier to a logical gloss.[132] If so taken, the imprecation fully aligns with the standard content and grammatical criteria.

Psalm 17:13

Psalm 17 is a prayer of David petitioning for deliverance from the proud words of the wicked who speak against him (vv. 8–12, 13b–15); it is therefore classed as an individual lament or prayer for protection.[133] The imprecation itself appears in v. 13 in the form of three imperatives, one each in the *qal*, *hiphil,* and *piel*. No verbs appear in the imperfect in the curse, which asks Yahweh to rise up and deliver David through the destruction (or perhaps simply the abasement) of the enemies. If the enemies are proud and wish to cast down others in their own bid for power and status (vv. 10–11), then the curse is again one of inversion and retribution in a standard grammatical form.

Psalm 31:18

Psalm 31 is a prayer for help and deliverance, with petitions and pleas interspersed with statements of piety and praise.[134] The enemies speak lies against David, causing him to be the subject of mockery and slander to the point others sought to kill him (vv. 12–14, 19). Before the song turns back to pure praise and thanksgiving, it offers a single verse of true imprecation. Just as the enemies had caused David to be put to shame with their lies—again to the point he felt they sought his very life—he petitions Yahweh to put them to shame instead, causing them to

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[132] See Ps 11:6 in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), Christian Standard Bible (Nashville: Holman, 2020), and The NET Bible (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

[133] Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50,* 161; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59,* 245–46.

[134] deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 300; Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 1*, 436–37.

finally fall silent in Sheol (v. 18). The principles of retribution at play are obvious, as the sins of the wicked are inverted and turned against them, and the wish for their death is, as has been seen, typical of imprecations across the psalter. The verbs are both *qal* jussives, once again adhering to the pattern demonstrated throughout the imprecatory psalms.

Psalm 35:4–8, 26

Psalm 35 is often grouped with the imprecatory psalms, and understandably so, as six of its twenty-eight verses are imprecations.[135] However, it is omitted from that category in the present study because it fails to meet the established criteria. It does contain a number of imprecatory texts, but they do not form a plurality of verses in the psalm; moreover, the bulk of the curses are positioned early in the psalm (vv. 4–8), and the reader is left, not with a sense of rage or vengeance, but one of calm assurance in the faithfulness of Yahweh toward the righteous.[136] It cannot therefore be rightfully classified as an imprecatory psalm and should instead be considered an individual lament or prayer.[137]

The enemies of the psalm are, once again, false accusers of David who mock and hate him, lying about him throughout Israel and seeking to kill him (vv. 4, 11–16, 19–21). Against such enemies David prays two discrete segments of imprecations. The first, vv. 4–8, do not directly invoke Yahweh, instead pleading for the work of the angel of Yahweh (מלאך יהוה) to

[135] Jenkins, *Imprecations in the Psalms*, 7; Laney, "A Fresh Look," 36.

[136] Longman, *Psalms*, 172; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 337; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 395.

[137] So Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 285; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 392; Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 1*, 489.

pursue them and drive them into darkness following their humiliation.[138] Each imprecatory verb in vv. 4–8 appears as a jussive (*qal* and *niphal*). Because of this, Craigie and Tate observe that these imprecations reflect treaty curse forms, aligning them in structure (and, it may be added, theology) with those of Deuteronomy.[139] The second imprecatory segment consists of a single verse, v. 26. *Qal* jussives return in these pleas to Yahweh for the humiliation and shame of the enemies.[140] The imprecations here are thus retributive and phrased in the standard pattern.

Psalm 40:15–16

Psalm 40 is interesting for its fusion of praise/thanksgiving song (vv. 2–11) and individual lament (vv. 12–18).[141] That two of the seven verses of the lament are imprecations is significant, but they are minor in the psalm as a whole. The enemies of the second segment of the song have, as usual, rejected David and Yahweh, seeking the life of the king and rejoicing in his shame and reproach (vv. 13–16). In response, David prays that they themselves would be put to shame to an even greater degree (vv. 15–16). The verses make good use of parallelism to expand the initial call for the enemies' shame, but that is ultimately the only curse uttered against them. The imprecations are crafted in a series of jussives (*qal* and *niphal*). As is evident, they continue the usual patterns of cursing found throughout the Psalter.

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[138] deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner write that the switch from יהוה to מלאך יהוה in the petitions may be nothing more than "poetic license," but it is nevertheless a significant change. See idem, *The Book of Psalms*, 335–36.

[139] Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 286–87.

[140] While Yahweh is not mentioned by name in v. 26, he is nevertheless the last person addressed in the context of the verse (v. 24).

[141] Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 423.

Psalm 55:16, 24

Psalm 55 is an individual lament with elements of thanksgiving psalms, as, by the end the song, David expresses his faith in the salvation of Yahweh.[142] The lament stems from the work of the enemies who cause no end of trouble for the psalmist, causing sin and mischief wherever they go, to the point David fears for his life (vv. 4–12). In stark contrast to the enemies of other psalms, however, the foes here are not truly David's adversaries, but his friend (vv. 13–15). It is this friend David curses twice. The first imprecation, v. 16, still speaks in the plural, calling for the death and final condemnation of the enemies in Sheol; it is the only fitting punishment for such evil in the eyes of the psalmist. Here, as is expected, the psalm sings in subjunctive imperfects/jussives (one *hiphil* and one *qal*). The assurance that Yahweh will enact this curse is expressed in v. 24. He will indeed bring the foe down to the pit, and the psalmist expresses his confidence in Yahweh's justice in a simple futuristic *hiphil* imperfect. The curse proper, then, adheres to conventions of imprecations.

Psalm 70:4

Psalm 70 is a standard individual lament psalm of David. The enemies are standard-issue as well: they seek David's life and laugh at his misfortune (vv. 2–4). As may be expected, then, the verse of imprecation is likewise standard, seeking the rebuke and shame of the enemies using a single *qal* jussive.

[142] Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 55.

Psalm 71:13

Psalm 71 is a prayer song which closely follows individual laments, although it contains elements of thanksgiving and praise as well.[143] It features a number of petitions, but the sole imprecatory plea appears in v. 13. The enemies of the psalm are the usual riffraff, speaking against the psalmist and denying the power of Yahweh to deliver him from their hands (vv. 10–11).[144] They are wicked and ruthless, opposing the psalmist at every turn (v. 4). In response, the psalmist prays that Yahweh may bring them to shame, dishonor, and destruction (v. 13). The *qal* jussives of the imprecation are again expected, although the lack of imperatives is noteworthy given their prevalence throughout the remainder of the psalm.

Psalm 74:11

Psalm 74:11 contains perhaps the shortest imprecation in the entire Psalter, comprised of a single word in BH: the *piel* imperative כַּלֵּה. Throughout the lament of the psalm, the psalmist (Asaph) has described the enemies as the foe of Israel in every way, seeking to destroy the land and its people, despising Yahweh and his covenant community (vv. 3b–23).[145] In the midst of the description of the situation and its attendant enemies, the psalmist cries out the single word to petition Yahweh to destroy them utterly with his mighty right hand. Such is the only fitting

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[143] Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 211. Goldingay provides an excellent breakdown of the various *Gattungen* present in the psalm. See idem, *Psalms, Vol. 2*, 365–66.

[144] The MT lacks a title indicating who the psalmist may be, but the LXX ascribes it to Δαυιδ, υἱῶν Ἰωναδαβ (LXX Ps 70:1).

[145] Indeed, the actions of the enemies and the pleas of the psalmist on behalf of the exiled oppressed (e.g., v. 21) have caused scholars to attribute it to any number of historical situations, including the exile, the sack of Jerusalem by the Edomites in 485 BC, and the persecution by Antiochus IV Epiphanes during the Maccabean period. See Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 246–47.

punishment for those who have committed the crimes of the enemies, and the curse thus finds itself in familiar territory.

Psalm 104:35

Psalm 104 is full of praise from beginning to end, with the rather singular exception of v. 35a. After extoling the marvels of Yahweh's creation and his sovereignty over it for thirty-four verses, the psalmist (David according to the LXX) rather jarringly includes an imprecation of unnamed enemies; their only description is that they are sinners and wicked (v. 35).[146] The psalmist petitions Yahweh to destroy them utterly, then abruptly returns to praise to end the verse and the psalm. Due to the lack of data, it is possible to determine the extent the psalmist calls for retribution only through speculation, which will be forgone here. Regardless, that the enactment of the curse is dependent on Yahweh puts it in line with other imprecations of the psalms, a position bolstered by the imprecation's use of the *qal* jussive.

Psalm 119:78

In the midst of the longest acrostic poem—indeed, the longest chapter—of the Bible comes an unexpected curse. The *yod* section of Psalm 119 speaks of the arrogant who lie about the psalmist, and in the same verse curses them with shame (v. 78). The imprecation, a *qal* jussive, does not invoke Yahweh directly, but it may be safely assumed the prayer is directed toward him based on its context, as he is directly addressed in the final clause of the verse. It thus aligns, as expected, with the usual imprecatory pattern.

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[146] Allen considers the sin of the wicked in Ps 104 to be a threat to creation itself, given the psalm's emphasis on the created order; beyond this, no specific sin is discernible. See idem, *Psalms 101–150*, 48.

Psalm 143:12

The final imprecation of the Psalter appears in Psalm 143:12. The enemies, described in v. 3, have caused overwhelming depression in the psalmist (David). The prayer describes his situation in the first half (vv. 1–6), then, following the musical/liturgical marker סֶלָה, petitions Yahweh for divine aid in the second half (vv. 7–12). The final verse (v. 12) is comprised of an imprecation and a final dedication of David to Yahweh. Interestingly, the imprecation directly connects the curse pronounced on the enemies with Yahweh's חסד toward David; because Yahweh is merciful and loving to David, he will, the psalmist writes, cut off and destroy his enemies. The prayer to cut off the enemies is expressed with a standard *hiphil* imperfect, and its counterpart, the petition to destroy them, is a *hiphil* precative perfect. With some little variation, then, this imprecation concludes the pattern of curse established throughout the remainder of the Psalter.

Summary

As has been demonstrated, the imprecations of the Psalter, while appearing in some twenty-seven of the 150 psalms, all conform to a general pattern of cursing which was also extant in the ANE. A petitioner who cannot enact justice on his own prays to Yahweh to curse his enemies in an act of retribution. The curses use the standard imperative, subjunctive/jussive, and precative verbal forms throughout, with very little deviation. The imprecations of the Psalter, then, continue in the same vein as their ANE counterparts.

The distinction, of course, is that the curses of the Psalter belong to Israel, not to Sumer, Babylon, Hatti, or another ANE culture. This means that, while their theological bases run along similar lines, they are necessarily extended to include a number of other beliefs. The first (and most obvious) is their monotheism. The imprecations of the Psalter are addressed solely to

Yahweh or, in the singular instance of Psalm 35:4–8, his agent. Only Yahweh has the ability and authority to enact curses, and it is his own dedication to justice and his covenant community which moves him to do so. Indeed, the various OT covenants appearing in the Psalter are evident in the Psalter—the second necessary deviation from ANE curses. Because Israel is composed of the children of Abraham, Yahweh has promised to curse those who curse them, and the knowledge of—and appeal to—the covenant terms of Genesis 12:3 are evident across the imprecations. More than this, however, is the influence of the ever-looming presence of the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 27–28. Psalm 74:20 makes this the most explicit, calling as it does upon Yahweh to remember his covenant with Israel in the midst of petitioning him to curse the enemies, but the notion that Yahweh cares for the righteous enough to curse the ungodly, and that he is able to curse those who violate his covenant, is found in every imprecation throughout the Psalter.[147]

The imprecations of the Psalter well-accord with those of the ANE, but they are also inherently Israelite curses, uttered in an Israelite context to an Israelite God who exists in a covenant relationship with his chosen people.[148] If any of those elements were other than they are—if, for example, Yahweh were not Yahweh—then the imprecations would not be as they are. The significance of this cannot be overstated in interpreting the theology of the OT imprecations. They are fundamentally dependent on Yahweh's relationship to his covenant

[147] Gosse, "L'influence," 416. Broadhurst is quite correct here: "The imprecations are a response to a covenantal God. God said he would curse those who cursed Abraham's children; that is his statement. The people sing with the desire of vindication in the hearts of the singers–a desire for God's justice to prevail; that is their response to his statement. In this, they respond in agreement to the Suzerain (God) involved in the treaty…. The imprecations are covenantal confessions and serve as the vassal's ratification response." See idem, "Should Cursing Continue," 83.

[148] As Laurence states, "The God of the imprecatory psalms is thus the covenant God of Israel—lovingly oriented toward the protection, preservation, and prosperity of his covenant kingdom, willfully constrained by the power of a promise to a *telos* from which he will not waver." See idem, *Cursing with God*, 190.

people Israel. In the end, then, "There is no way to soften the words or alter the sentiments expressed in the words of the imprecatory psalms."[149] The words are what they are, and they cannot be otherwise unless Yahweh himself were otherwise; they depend upon his righteousness and his covenant.[150]

[149] deClaissé-Walford, "Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms," 79.

[150] "The psalmists are looking to the eschatological finality of the kingdom of God when the righteousness of God will be fully displayed. Their calls for vindication have to be seen in the perspective of the standards which will prevail at the judgement seat." See Harman, "Continuity," 71. As Kraus notes, however, the psalmists also look for retribution in the present, not only at the eschaton. See idem, *Theology of the Psalms*, 67.

CHAPTER 4: OTHER CANONICAL IMPRECATIONS

In order to fully analyze the literary, historical, and theological contexts of Lamentations, it is necessary to consider canonical imprecations outside of the Psalter; only then can a canonical theology of imprecation be constructed which will inform the discussion of the curses in Lamentations. The curses will be treated in canonical order, beginning with those of the OT before moving into a brief overview of NT imprecations.

Old Testament

Pentateuch

Numbers 10:35

The first imprecation within the Judeo-Christian canon appears in Numbers 10:35.[1] The first of two verses termed "The Song of the Ark," Numbers 10:35 appears as a brief poem by Moses when the ark of the covenant begins its journey from Sinai to Canaan; the next verse (v. 36) is the song of Moses when the ark rested after its travels.[2] The segment is offset by inverted *nun*s in the MT, indicating it may not be original to this portion of Numbers; its original placement, however, is unknowable, and therefore one must treat it where it is at present.[3]

[1] A brief word of clarification is necessary. It is obvious that cursing itself occurs well before the book of Numbers, with the curses of Eden appearing in Gen 3:14–19 and the curse protecting Cain coming a chapter later in Gen 4:15; cursing is therefore as old as humanity itself. However, the curses which appear prior to Num 10:35 are divine, not human, in origin, and they appear as the words of Yahweh himself. As such, they cannot be treated as imprecations, which are at base petitions to Yahweh. They are therefore omitted from the present study.

[2] Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 316.

[3] Ibid., 317–18; Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 199.

The imprecation is straightforward: Moses petitions Yahweh to rise up and scatter his enemies, making those who hate him flee from his presence as represented by the ark. The ark itself is subject of a divine warrior motif running from the Pentateuch to the Former Prophets and the Psalter, just as Yahweh himself is the divine warrior of those books who fights for Israel.[4] Indeed, such is the legacy of this particular verse and its symbolism that it is quoted almost verbatim in Psalm 68:2; the power of Yahweh to scatter his enemies seems to have become a stock image following Numbers 10:35. The imprecation is grammatically composed of two jussives, both in the *qal*.[5] It thus fits the standard definition of imprecation as seen in the ANE and the Psalter, but with an added theological assumption. The enemies of Yahweh in Canaan have not, as yet, acted against Israel directly, but the curse nevertheless calls them אֹיְבֶיךָ. The retribution called for in the curse, then, cannot be because of an action against Israel, but, rather, because of actions taken against Yahweh. Whereas in the Psalter the enemies of the psalmists are also treated as the enemies of Yahweh, here the identification is reversed: the enemies of Yahweh are now assumed to also be the enemies of Moses and the Israelites. Sins against Yahweh by the pagans are therefore punishable by Yahweh at the request of his covenant people, even though they have not been wronged directly.[6]

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[4] Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1996), 57–58; Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, WBC 5 (Grand Rapids: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 199. Olson mentions the prevalence of the ark/divine warrior motif in Pss 68:1; 132:8; 1 Sam 4:1–7:2; and 2 Sam 6:1–19.

[5] Contra Levine, who explicitly states that "The mood of the verbs…is indicative, not modal." He further prefers to gloss קוּמָה as "attacks," treating it also as an indicative instead of an imperative or cohortative. See idem, *Numbers 1–20*, 318. His glosses are to be rejected, however. The sense of the passage is clearly one with a more futuristic or volitional bent, as recognized by Budd, Ashley, and the overwhelming majority of English translations. See Budd, *Numbers*, 112; Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 192. It is also preferable to take the verbs in a modal sense in order to preserve the basic grammar of imprecation, and there is nothing in the text which would contradict such a reading. For this reason, among others, Num 10:35 is included in lists of canonical imprecations. See John Shepherd, "The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture – Part I," *Chm* 111, no. 1 (1997): 27n3.

[6] It is possible, therefore, that the Song of the Ark calls more for connective justice than retribution: sins against Yahweh must receive their due consequences.

Deuteronomy 27–28

Without question, the most significant curses of the OT, and the ones which undergird all which follow them (as well as the prophetic literature more generally), are the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 27–28.[7] The covenant at Sinai contains an incredible number of curses which, while nevertheless a standard feature of suzerainty treaties and covenants, modify the ANE curses in one critical way: they are pedagogical, seeking to teach the terms of the covenant and modify the behavior of the covenant community to the same degree they serve to enforce those terms.[8] Yahweh, alone of the ANE deities, sought to instruct as much as chasten.[9]

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[7] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Disputes, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 373–85; Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 192; Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 479–511. Brevard S. Childs writes that the theology of the OT as a whole is dialectical, navigating the reality of "the single covenant as a medium of blessing as well as conversely one of curse." See Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 420. Walther Eichrodt agrees, seeing the tension between faith in a good God and faith in a God whose Spirit is responsible for evils as fundamental in the OT; nevertheless, the good and evil acts of Yahweh in history are bound by the terms of the covenant. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament, Volume 2*, OTL, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 50–56, 271–90. James L. Crenshaw summarizes it succinctly: the concept of election paired with the futility curses contained in the covenant of Deuteronomy create a dialectic of "fear and love," concepts which are inextricably connected to both piety and Torah as a whole by Leo G. Perdue. See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Story and Faith: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 91–102; Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 20–34.

Furthermore, it must be noted that covenant curses appear earlier in Lev 26; however, given that they largely parallel those of Deuteronomy and that it is the Deuteronomic forms which carry the most weight throughout the remainder of the OT, those of Leviticus are omitted here in favor of those of Deuteronomy. It is also important to note that the covenant curses of Deut 28 are an original part of the Torah, not the addition of a later, post-exilic redactor, and thus form the background for the imprecational theology of the wider OT across its stages of composition. See Daniel I. Block, *The Gospel according to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 37.

A significant Deuteronomic curse appears outside the covenant curses proper, coming earlier in Deut 21:23. Any who hangs on a tree is accursed (קְלָלַת). While this specific curse has little bearing on the analysis of OT imprecations, it has immense implications for the theology of the NT.

[8] Pierre Gilbert, "The Function of Imprecation in Israel's Eighth-Century Prophets," *Direction* 35, no. 1 (2006): 51–55. As Gilbert asserts, the defining characteristic of the covenant curses relative to those of the larger ANE is the "pedagogical function which constitutes an axiological transformation of its usage in the ancient Near Eastern world." See ibid., 55. This pedagogical use is later employed by the prophets as well.

[9] In contrast to Yahweh, who alone enacted and gave power to curses, using them for instruction and covenant enforcement, some ANE deities were the subjects of curses themselves. A pyramid curse, for example, invokes magic to imprecate the gods themselves, proclaiming they will lack comfort and sustenance if they fail to construct a staircase to heaven for Meri-Re Pepi I. See "Curses and Threats b," trans. John A Wilson (*ANET*, 327).

The curses of Deuteronomy 27 are structured similarly to the blessings, which is to say, chiastically, with an emphasis on the most deplorable of sins which earn curses.[10] Each curse is relational in some fashion, with the first and final curses concerned with the vertical relationship to Yahweh and the intervening curses focused on horizontal relationships among people. Those who violate the provisions of the Decalogue as well as other laws which govern either of these relationships are proclaimed to be accursed. The verb ארר begins each verse from vv. 15–26, and each curse is ratified by the people saying אָמֵן. The pronouncements of curse place the verb in the *qal* passive participle (אָרוּר). Such declarations fall outside the typical imprecatory grammar, but, too, they are also the rare use of actual cursing vocabulary. While it is not outside the realm of possibility the covenant curses could have been written using *qal* jussives (יֵאָרֵר), the passive participle is stronger; the curse is thus definite, not a matter of volition. Moreover, the use of ארר in the covenant curses abrogates any need to specify penalties. The covenant-breaker is cursed, with the implication the curses themselves are already known or will be specified in due course.

This is precisely what happens. Deuteronomy 27 proclaims the state of being cursed; Deuteronomy 28 delineates the exact curses which will befall anyone who violates the covenant as outlined in the previous chapter. Much like its predecessor, Deuteronomy 28 begins with blessing (vv. 1–14) before moving into a description of the curses (vv. 15–68); the final verse (v. 69; Deut 29:1 in English translations) provides a summary statement, indicating both blessing and curse are integral components of the covenant which Yahweh made with Israel in Moab. The opening verse (v. 15) proclaims that the curses which follow will be upon all those who violate

[10] The crux of the initial curses (Deut 27:15–26), appearing in Deut 27:20–23, emphasizes sexual sins over social sins. Meanwhile, the crux of the corresponding blessing passage (Deut 27:11–14) highlights the existence of the curses to follow and begins the delineation of the tribes to stand on Mount Ebal as the curses are read. See Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*, WBC 6B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 660; Michael D. Swartz, "The Aesthetics of Blessing and Cursing: Literary and Iconographic Dimensions of Hebrew and Aramaic Blessing and Curse Texts," *JANER* 5, no. 1 (2005): 187–88.

the covenant as explained to them. This is followed by four verses (vv. 16–19) which repeat the אָרוּר formula of Deuteronomy 27:15–26. Here, however, instead of stating the individuals will be cursed for violating specific laws, the text pronounces curses upon both individuals and objects across a range of times and places which encompass the sum of one's life: food, agriculture, offspring, living in the city, and living in the country.

The passage then moves into specific curses sans the אָרוּר formula, each more horrifying than the last (vv. 20–68).[11] For example, punishments for breaking the covenant include fever and blight (v. 22), madness (v. 28), the rape of a wife (v. 30), and children taken into slavery (v. 41). As in chapter 27, the curses of chapter 28 are arranged chiastically, emphasizing vv. 30–32 in what Christensen terms "undoing of the blessings."[12] The section climaxes in the final ten verses (vv. 58–68), and the curses are summarized and restated along with a final admonition to adhere to the terms of the covenant (v. 58).[13] The verbs throughout the segment are imperfects of various stems, all with a basic future meaning; Yahweh will curse them for their covenant infidelity, and such cursing is definite.

The covenant curses of Deuteronomy 27–28 therefore do not adhere to the standard imprecatory grammar evident across the Psalter and ANE curse texts.[14] With that said, however,

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[11] Christensen describes vv. 20–44 as a series of expansions upon the earlier curse pronouncements, and vv. 45–68 are the assurances of the destruction of the unfaithful, resulting in a spiritual (and perhaps literal) return to Egypt. See idem, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*, 676–97.

[12] Ibid., 683. The verses depict the loss of livestock, children, and produce, resulting ultimately in a state of oppression by strangers outside the covenant community—the loss of the land itself. See Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 345.

[13] Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 350–53.

[14] See the curses previously treated: Pss 5:11; 7; 10:2b, 15; 11:6; 12; 17:13; 31:18; 35:4–8, 26; 40:15–16; 55:16, 24; 58; 59; 69; 70:4 MT; 71:13; 74:11; 83; 94; 104:35; 109; 119:78; 129; 137; 139; 140; and 143:12, as well as the SCL; *Curse of Agade*; the Laws of Hammurabi and Laws of Lipit-Ishtar; various Egyptian tomb curses and Jewish ossuary texts; some Hittite, Phoenician, and Luwian monumental inscriptions; etc.

the theology behind the curses is solidly in-line with its counterparts; indeed, it is foundational to them. A covenant lord has the power to curse, here because of his status as deity. The principle of justice remains in play; admittedly, though, the element of retribution has been lost. The curses are not imprecations—they are not retributive petitions to a divine agent—but they are standard covenant curses, and the deviations present here are similarly found in Hittite suzerainty treaties.[15] This basic theology—that Yahweh is in a covenant relationship with Israel and that violating the terms of the covenant will inevitably result in Yahweh cursing the offenders—is fundamental to the OT, but it is especially prevalent in its imprecations.

Former Prophets: Judges 5:31

One would expect a great deal of imprecation throughout the narratives of the conquest of Canaan and its aftermath (the books of Joshua and Judges), but this is not the case. A single primary imprecation appears in Judges 5:31 as the conclusion of the Song of Deborah and Barak. The verse itself is possibly a later addition to the song following in the tradition of the Psalter, with the redactor of Judges emending the song to include the typical imprecation evidenced in the psalms which followed it. With that said, however, the song would otherwise lack a conclusion, and therefore it is best to consider the verse as original.[16] The song, then, ends with

[15] As is generally acknowledged, Deuteronomy mirrors the form and language of such treaties. Unlike the Hittite treaties, however, the covenant curses of Deuteronomy are not self-efficacious but rely on the power of Yahweh. See Block, *The Gospel according to Moses*, 1–20; Yitzhaq Feder, "The Mechanics of Retribution in Hittite, Mesopotamian and Ancient Israelite Sources," *JANER* 10, no. 2 (2010): 121–23; Anne Marie Kitz, "An Oath, Its Curse and Anointing Ritual," *JAOS* 124, no. 2 (2004): 315–20.

[16] Arthur E. Cundall, "Judges: An Introduction and Commentary," in *Judges and Ruth*, TOTC 7, by Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 101. Similarly, Trent C. Butler observes the overall pattern of blessing and curse throughout the song and concludes that the final verse is essential to producing that theme in the work. See Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, WBC 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 133–34. For his part, J. Clinton McCann notes that Judg 5 is likely older than the narrative version of events in Judg 4, so some post-David redaction of the chapter is entirely possible; still, he does not mention Judg 5:31 as a candidate for later addition. See J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 8–12, 60–61.

the twin concerns of blessing and curse: blessing upon those who follow Yahweh and curse upon those who oppose him and his chosen people Israel.[17]

The curse is straightforward: Deborah and Barak petition Yahweh that all who would be his enemies may die. The counterpart is a blessing upon those who love him, seeking strength and power on their behalf.[18] The imprecation is expressed in a *qal* jussive, as is standard, but the blessing is in the form of a *qal* infinitive construct. It would seem that the curse of Judges 5:31 thus follows the typical imprecatory pattern seen throughout the OT and ANE.

Latter Prophets: Jeremiah and Habakkuk

Jeremiah 11:20

While many prophets engage in judgment oracles against the nations which include the future actions of Yahweh expressed in prophetic perfects, Jeremiah stands as the prophet of true imprecation.[19] This is perhaps a result of Jeremiah's status as the "weeping prophet." His laments exhibit a familiarity with the individual and communal lament forms of the Psalter, and he adapts these forms in order to weep and curse his enemies in true psalmic fashion.[20] Other prophets may

[17] As in the Psalter and the covenant curses, it is evident throughout the book of Judges that those who oppose Israel are the enemies of Yahweh, and vice versa. See Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 217–19.

[18] The epilogue of the verse, "And the land was at peace for forty years," serves as the conclusion for the story of Deborah's judgeship and prepares the reader for the next judge in the cycle.

[19] Consider in particular the speeches of Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah, which, according to Gilbert, possess an "imprecatory motif." Gilbert defines imprecation, however, as either a true curse or as a simple prophetic announcement of pending destruction; such a broad definition does not align with imprecation as seen in the ANE or the canonical curses, so his imprecatory motif in these books must be redefined as simply a "motif of destruction oracles." See idem, "The Function of Imprecation," 44–46. Such judgment speeches are frequently juxtaposed with salvation oracles, creating what Sigmund Mowinckel terms "disaster-deliverance" complexes; the final emphasis is not on curse, as in the imprecations proper, but on blessing. See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Spirit and the Word: Prophecy and Tradition in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 71–80, esp. 79–80.

[20] William L. Holladay, "Indications of Jeremiah's Psalter," *JBL* 121, no. 2 (2002): 245–61; Klaus Koch, *The Prophets, Volume Two: The Babylonian and Persian Periods*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress,

have had training which included prophetic phrasing and poetry, but Jeremiah is a genuine psalmist as well as a prophet, and it is in his psalms and laments (chapters 11–20) that we find the heirs of the Psalter's curses.[21]

A number of texts in his book may be considered imprecatory, and the first is Jeremiah 11:20.[22] Jeremiah 11 is bipartite, with vv. 1–17 lamenting the broken covenant and promising punishment because of the same, and vv. 18–23 lamenting the present situation of Jeremiah vis-à-vis his detractors. This second segment appears as an individual lament psalm, complete with a description of the personal enemies (vv. 18–19), vocative address to Yahweh as judge (v. 20a), imprecation (v. 20b), a statement of confidence (v. 20c), and a response from Yahweh (vv. 21–23). The enemies, like those of the Psalter, seek the life of the prophet, plotting against him. In response, Jeremiah calls out to the righteous judge Yahweh for aid.[23]

The imprecation proper, v. 20b, continues the prayer of Jeremiah and very simply asks for Yahweh's vengeance (נקמה) against his foes. The word is typically taken to refer to the

1984), 38–45. For a full structural comparison of Jeremiah's laments and lament psalms, see Patrick D. Miller, "Trouble and Woe: Interpreting the Biblical Laments," *Int* 37, no. 1 (1983): 40–44.

[21] Koch particularly emphasizes the beauty of the oracles of Amos as representative of prophetic poetry and training. See Klaus Koch, *The Prophets, Volume One: The Assyrian Period*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 38–39. The structure of Jer 11–20 is complex, and it is likely the chapters were composed in different stages and later compiled (with additional material added by the redactors/compilers). See Holladay, *The Architecture of Jeremiah 1–20* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University, 1976), 125–26.

[22] Jeremiah 11:3–5 is a curse in language reminiscent of Deut 27, even going so far as to invoke the covenant itself. The influence of the DtrH in Jeremiah is pronounced, and it is fundamental to the imprecations of the book. See Koch, *The Prophets, Vol. 2*, 13–80; William L. Holladay, "Elusive Deuteronomists, Jeremiah, and Proto-Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 66, no. 1 (2004): 55–77. The first true imprecation in the book comes a few verses after this curse, at 11:20, where our discussion begins.

[23] The description of Yahweh in the first bicolon of v. 20 approaches doxology in its praise of Yahweh's skill as judge, but the object of his judgment is ambiguous. It is uncertain if Yahweh judges the heart of Jeremiah or those of the enemies. See Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1–25*, WBC 26 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 178; William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1–25*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 373.

vengeance of Yahweh; however, glosses of "retribution" or "vindication" are also possible.[24] If it is vengeance as retribution, then the force of the imprecation is concretized, for the prayer becomes a bald cry for a curse against the enemies in stock imprecatory terms. Regardless of specific nuance to the noun (here as the direct object), the verb (ראה) appears (unusually) in the first-person. Jeremiah prays that he himself may see the vengeance of Yahweh, not explicitly that Yahweh would take action. Despite this minor deviation from the typical pattern of imprecation, the verb is a *qal* subjunctive imperfect, as expected.

Jeremiah 15:15

The next imprecation in Jeremiah appears in chapter 15. Woe is pronounced over Jerusalem (vv. 1–14), and Jeremiah even fears for his own life in the face of Yahweh's coming judgment (v. 10). After the depiction of the coming destruction (and a promise to spare Jeremiah in v. 11), the prophet petitions for deliverance and vengeance in a forceful echo of the earlier prayer of Jeremiah 11:20. First Jeremiah calls to Yahweh to remember him, just as he had earlier appealed to him as righteous judge. Following that prayerful bicolon (v. 15ab), Jeremiah secondly prays for Yahweh's vengeance against his enemies (v. 15c). Another bicolon follows which relates a further appeal for deliverance (v. 15de).

The prayer is thus structured chiastically, and the imprecation forms the crux around which the pleas revolve.[25] The primary verb, נקם, shares a root with the noun Jeremiah used in

[24] BDB, s.v. "נְקָמָה"; *HALOT*, s.v. "נְקָמָה"; *DCH* 5, s.v. "נְקָמָה"; H. G. L. Peels, "נקם," *NIDOTTE* 3:154–56; Edward Lipiński, "נָקַם," *TDOT* 10:1–9; Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 21A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 638. Holladay, however, prefers either of the alternative glosses. See Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 374.

[25] So the colometry of Lundbom; see idem, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 742–43. Contra that of Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard and Holladay. See Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1–25*, 206–210; Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 457–58.

11:20 to ask for Yahweh's vengeance; his vocabulary is therefore consistent in his imprecations. The verb here is a *niphal* imperative, a common form in imprecations throughout the Psalter. It is significant to note that, in the context of the chapter, the imprecation of 15:15 identifies the enemies of Jeremiah with the enemies of Yahweh who are already slated for destruction.[26] This imprecation, as its predecessor in Jeremiah, follows the typical pattern established previously.

Jeremiah 17:18

Two chapters later comes the next imprecation: Jeremiah 17:18. Unlike the earlier calls for simple vengeance, the imprecation of this verse is fourfold, and Yahweh's retribution is not directly requested. In another contrast, Yahweh himself is not mentioned at all; Jeremiah's vocatives end in v. 14, and Yahweh is granted no additional title or petition in v. 18 beyond the imprecations (and a single inversion of the curse wherein Jeremiah requests a blessing for himself). The verse is therefore substantially different in content from the previous imprecations by the prophet—but the disparities nevertheless align with the imprecations of the Psalter.

Chapter 17 is a description of the sin of Judah (vv. 1–11), a lament of Jeremiah (vv. 12–18), and an admonition to keep the Sabbath (vv. 19–27).[27] The middle section echoes the lament psalms, and it comes as no surprise that Jeremiah has included here another curse against his enemies.[28] Jeremiah prays that his enemies may be put to shame, dismayed, destroyed, and

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[26] Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 742; J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 395.

[27] It must be noted that a curse pronouncement appears in vv. 5–6, again mirroring those of the covenant curses in Deut 27. Here it is even paired with a pronouncement of blessing (vv. 7–8) in a further borrowing from the DtrH.

[28] Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1–25*, 234; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 426; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Tiberius Rata, *Walking the Ancient Paths: A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 224.

destroyed again (v. 18). The verbs of the first two punishments are jussives (*qal* and *niphal*), but the final two pleas are imperatives (*qal* and *hiphil*). As expected, then, the imprecation uses standard curse forms for its petitions.

Jeremiah 18:19–23

The penultimate imprecation of Jeremiah is also the longest, comprising the final five verses of chapter 18. The pericope begins a verse earlier, and the words from vv. 18–23 describe both the plot against Jeremiah (v. 18) and his response (vv. 19–23). The segment uses the general pattern of complaint and lament seen both in the Psalter and across the book of Jeremiah and is regarded as one of the "confessions" of the prophet. As such, v. 18 follows typical prose conventions, with the lament psalm proper beginning in v. 19.[29] Verse 18 details the scheme of the enemies against Jeremiah, a conspiracy which presents the enemies in terms akin to those of the Psalter: they are conspirators which seek to publish false accusations against the prophet, ignoring both him and his message while disparaging both.

The imprecation of vv. 19–23 calls to Yahweh to remember Jeremiah and his innocence and faithfulness (vv. 19–20) before cursing the enemies of vv. 18–20. The imprecation begins and ends with imperatives but features a number of jussives and, uniquely for the canonical imprecations, two *hophal* participles (one in v. 21 and another in v. 23).[30] Jeremiah petitions Yahweh to destroy the children of his enemies by famine and sword to the point the young men

[29] Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1–25*, 252–53; Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 529–30.

[30] The *hophal* preserves the petitionary sense of the clauses. At the end of v. 21, Jeremiah prays, "may the young men be smitten by the sword (מֻכֵּי־חֶרֶב) in battle," and the penultimate petition of v. 23 is "may they be overthrown (מֻכְשָׁלִים) before you." The former verb, נָכָה, appears primarily in the *hiphil*, so the use of the *hophal* to render it passive is expected. See BDB, s.v. "נָכָה"; *HALOT*, s.v. "נכה." Verse 23 marks the only occurrence of כָּשַׁל as a *hophal* in the MT (though a potential/disputed second occurrence comes in Ezek 21:20), perhaps to emphasize the prayerful nature of Jeremiah's imprecations. See BDB, s.v. "כָּשַׁל"; *HALOT*, s.v. "כשל."

are killed in battle and all wives are widows and childless and screaming in terror of the invading armies (v. 21–22); he additionally prays that Yahweh will neither forgive nor forget the sin of the enemies but instead will deal with them in the fullness of his wrath (v. 23). While such curses seem harsh to modern ears (or eyes), they are nevertheless fully in-line with the content of ANE curses as well as others throughout the OT itself.[31] After all, the enemies oppose Yahweh and his word, and such iniquity requires swift and severe correction. These imprecations, then, follow the standard grammatical and theological patterns of other canonical imprecations.[32]

Jeremiah 20:12

Jeremiah 20:12 serves as the final imprecation found in the book and represents a return to earlier patterns of cursing found in Jeremiah. Like Jeremiah 11:20 and 15:15, the imprecation here is simply a cry for Yahweh's vengeance, again using נקמה and a *qal* subjunctive imperfect (here to request permission, making it distinct from the cohortative/volitional imperfect).[33] The enemies, like that of Psalm 55, are the former friends of Jeremiah who now wish his harm.

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[31] Even so, one should not read the imprecations of Jeremiah as unnecessarily violent or come to the conclusion that the prophet enjoyed his petitions for retribution; as Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard write, "There is no glee or comfort to Jeremiah in these words. It is the people's actions, not Jeremiah's words, that cause these inevitable actions." See idem, *Jeremiah 1–25*, 253. Whereas the psalmists in particular seem to mean their imprecations in full and desire the fruition of the curses with all their being, Jeremiah comes across as being more compassionate, seeking the repentance of those who hear his prophetic words more than their destruction; a return to Yahweh remains his ultimate goal despite the consistent severity of the imprecations. See Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 441–42; Kaiser and Rata, *Walking the Ancient Paths*, 237.

[32] The imprecation of Jer 18:19–23 is immediately followed by a judgment oracle accompanied by the prophetic act of symbolically breaking pottery to represent how Yahweh will break the people who have turned from him (Jer 19:1–13). The episode resembles the enactment of an Egyptian pottery execration rite, as do the similar events of Amos 1:2–2:16; Robert Kriech Ritner thus finds additional correlations between the imprecations of Jeremiah (and by extension the oracle of Amos) and ANE curses. See Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, SAOC 54 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), 140n623.

[33] The affinities between Jer 11:20 and 20:12 are documented by several commentators. See Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1–25*, 272–74; Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 558; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 862; and Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 461.

Habakkuk 2

The second chapter of Habakkuk is a series of woe (הוי) statements organized into a taunt song beginning in v. 6.[34] The song is introduced as the record of a vision from Yahweh which will come to pass in the future as he judges those who have committed great acts of theft and violence (vv. 1–3), among other, specific sins listed with the corresponding pronouncement of הוי, the majority of which appear as variations on those general themes (dishonest gain [v. 9], bloodshed and violence [v.12], etc.). The enemies are not specified within the chapter itself, leading to the conclusion the woes are generalized against any who commit the sins described therein.[35]

The taunt song is composed of five pronouncements of הוי (vv. 6, 9, 12, 15, and 19), each with an explanation of the sin which brings the woe, and two of which have a specific curse accompanying the woe. Both curses are retributive in nature. The first oracle (vv. 6–8) pronounces woe upon those who engage in dishonest gain. Because of this plundering, vv. 7–8 declare that the sinners themselves will become spoil and loot for other nations; the plunderers will become the plundered. The second oracle (vv. 9–11) continues the theme of dishonest gain but does not pronounce an additional curse. The third oracle (vv. 12–14) pronounces woe upon those who build cities based on violence, but it does not imprecate the perpetrators. The fourth oracle (vv. 15–17) condemns those who put their neighbors to shame through "venom" (חמה; v.

[34] Donald E. Gowan, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), 52.

[35] The enemies (and audience of the prophecies) of Hab 1 are the Babylonians, but the oracles describe judgment on Israel carried out through Babylon, with the latter itself facing eschatological judgment. The woe oracles in Hab 2 are most likely intended toward Babylon first and foremost, but the nature of the sins listed make the woes generalizable. See Francis I. Andersen, *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 25 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 18–19. Gowan simply calls the enemy "the tyrant," noting the difficulty in a precise identification. He offers variously the Assyrians, the Babylonians, or the king of an unnamed nation. See idem, *Triumph of Faith*, 57.

15), cursing them to come to their own disgrace and violence (vv. 16–17).[36] The final oracle (vv. 18–20) offers first a rhetorical question concerning idols (v. 18), then pronounces woe upon idolaters (v. 19) before offering praise to Yahweh (v. 20). The only curses among the woe oracles, then, appear in vv. 7–8, 16–17 as retributive prophecies. The grammar of the first curse varies between perfect and imperfect forms, with what is most likely a prophetic perfect (*qal*) in v. 7c and a futuristic imperfect (*qal*) in v. 8b. Likewise, v. 16a contains a prophetic perfect (*qal*) and v. 17a uses a futuristic imperfect (*piel*).

The curses of the woe oracles therefore do not conform to standard imprecatory patterns grammatically—imprecations do not use prophetic perfects or real moods—but they nevertheless showcase the concern for retribution one would expect.[37] The woe oracles, then, share a number of affinities with imprecations, but they are not in full alignment with the typical pattern for the *Gattung*. Like the covenant curses, however, the examination of the curses of the woe oracles (and the taunt song generally) is illuminating if only to further demonstrate the narrowness of the definition of imprecation in the OT.[38]

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[36] The nakedness brought about through drinking the חמה of the enemies may refer to the capture (and dishonor) of prisoners of war, but Andersen sees a stronger case for sexual licentiousness. See idem, *Habakkuk*, 249.

[37] O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 188. Isaiah 14, the other primary taunt song of the OT, varies from standard imprecations in similar ways, hence its exclusion from the present study. The inclusion of Hab 2 is necessary due to its multiple curses and ability to represent the taunt song *Gattung*.

[38] Gordon Leah finds more imprecatory phrases in Hab 3, as throughout the Book of the Twelve, but the primary source of curse-adjacent language appears in the woe oracles of Hab 2. See Gordon Leah, "Lifting the Curse: Reflections on Retribution and Restoration," EuroJTh 22, no. 1 (2013): 19–27.

As throughout Hab 2, a number of woe statements/oracles appear throughout the Latter Prophets (Isa 1:4, 24; 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22; 10:1, 5; 17:12; 18:1; 28:1; 29:1, 15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1; 45:9, 10; 55:1; Jer 22:13, 18; 23:1; 30:7; 34:5; 47:6; 48:1; 50:27; Ezek 13:3, 18; 34:2; Amos 5:18; 6:1; Mic 2:1; Nah 3:1; Zeph 2:5; 3:1; Zech 2:10, 11; 11:17). John N. Day finds that the woe statements of the NT "bear a large measure of similarity [to] and partial semantic overlap [with]" the OT imprecations, and the same holds true for the woe oracles of the OT. While they are not formal imprecations, they are nevertheless a curse pronouncement akin to the covenant curses of Deut 27. To pronounce woe is to pronounce an impending divine punishment, and therefore there is indeed a great overlap between imprecations in the OT and woe statements across the canon. See John N. Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach Us about Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 89. It must be noted, however, that הוי is capable of a variety of glosses, not all of them curse-adjacent, so some of the woe

Summary

Throughout the OT, a number of imprecations appear which pronounce curses on a variety of enemies, both internal and external to Israel. It must be said, however, that the accursed individuals and groups are not always inherently an enemy; the covenant curses of Deuteronomy, for example, curse the Israelites themselves if they break the terms of the covenant. Regardless, the imprecations exhibit the expected features of curses, continuing the pattern established in the wider ANE literature and the Psalter. Enemies who are beyond human justice are cursed by an imprecator who petitions Yahweh to avenge him in retributive terms. These petitions are expressed in jussives and other subjunctive imperfects; the precative perfect, while present in the Psalter, is absent in other OT imprecations.[39] The *Gattungen* of taunt songs and woe oracles, while demonstrating some overlap with the content features of imprecations, do not share their grammatical features, and thus remain distinct genres. Likewise, some curses, in particular the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 27, simply pronounce the curse without any explicit invocation of Yahweh or other petitionary elements; they therefore lack the usual imprecatory grammar while showcasing the primary concerns of OT curses, namely retribution at the hands of Yahweh (implicit though it may be).

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oracles may use the term in the sense of a general exclamation, including as a vocative address, or in a way of self-pity. See Gowan, *Triumph of Faith*, 53–55; Allan M. Harman, "Particles," *NIDOTTE* 4:1032; Delbert R. Hillers, "*Hôy* and *Hôy* Oracles: A Neglected Syntactic Aspect," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 185–88.

[39] The LXX for these imprecations primarily uses imperatives, with optative forms occurring in Judg 5:31; Jer 11:20, 17:18 (with three other imperatives), and 20:13. Whether imperative or optative, the verbs are in the aorist tense.

New Testament

Cursing in the NT follows the same basic lines as imprecation in the OT. Comparatively speaking, curses appear with far less frequency in the NT than in the OT, with imprecations evident in only nine places in seven books: Matthew 10:14–15//Luke 10:10–12; Acts 13:10–11; 23:3; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Galatians 1:8–9; 5:12; 2 Timothy 4:14; and Revelation 6:9–10. One of these is a parallel text found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, making the true count a mere eight independent imprecations. They come from a correspondingly small selection of speakers: Jesus Christ (the Gospels), the apostle Paul (Acts and the Pauline Epistles), and the martyrs around the throne of God (Revelation).[40]

The imprecations of the NT, much like those of the OT, rely fully on the power of God to enact divine retribution on those who have offended, persecuted, and even killed the followers of Jesus Christ. Some of the Pauline imprecations contain simple cries for vengeance, but others, as well as those of the wider NT, call for anything from blindness to death (Acts 13:10–11; Galatians 5:12; Revelation 6:9–10), with the most shocking expressing a desire for the enemies to be castrated (Galatians 5:12). Paul appears as the most frequent imprecator, cursing others in both Acts and the epistles which bear his name.[41] Given that imprecations are uttered by Christ on earth and by the martyrs in the presence of God as well as Paul, it seems clear that the Almighty is no stranger to hearing and executing curses in either Testament.

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[40] Interestingly, then, and in a feature unique to the NT imprecations, the curses are uttered by both the living and the dead, meaning such imprecations are present both on earth and in heaven. The speakers are further diversified in terms of inherent nature; given that Christ curses in the Gospels, imprecations are uttered by both humanity and divinity.

[41] Paul is also the sole author of the NT to directly invoke the Deuteronomic curses and apply them to the Gospel proclamation. Galatians 3:13 is a quotation of Deut 21:23, a curse which also forms part of the basis for the Pauline assertion that the gospel of Christ and his cross is a stumbling block to Jews (1 Cor 1:23).

Grammatically, the NT imprecations differ from their OT counterparts in a few key ways. First, they are all expressed in indicative (real) moods, not irreal moods like the subjunctive or the volitional moods (jussive and cohortative). Second, and correspondingly, the NT curses are expressed in simple future tenses, with the exception of the present tense verbs in the imprecation of Revelation 6:9–10. These future verbs are, as previously noted, in the indicative, and no special use of the future is employed to mimic the irreal moods. Third, the final imprecation of Revelation is phrased as a question, not a statement, command, or petition. This makes it unique among the canonical curses. Still, the curses remain, on the whole, phrased as prayer, petitions, or commands, falling in line with the basic forms of OT imprecations. The NT curses are therefore theologically analogous to the OT imprecations, but that theology is grammatically and structurally distinct.[42]

Synthesis

Imprecations appear with some great frequency throughout the OT, but cursing tapers off in the NT, with only three figures responsible for the sum of the Testament's canonical curses: Jesus, Paul, and the martyrs as recorded by John. The theology behind the curses is consistent, as are their sundry *Sitze im Leben*. Opponents of various types have arisen, whether in hostility to the people of Israel or in animosity towards the proclamation of the gospel, and they persecute the people of God; the enemies are uniformly opposed to any people of the covenant, be it the old or the new. In response to such persecution and suffering, the offended parties cry out to God for retribution, as they are unable to stop the pain themselves. The expectation is that God will hear from heaven and deliver them, and this is anticipated in the present, at the eschaton, or at both

[42] For a fuller examination of the curses/imprecations in the NT, see Appendix 1 of this dissertation.

times. Echoes and allusions to the imprecatory psalms and their forms are rare but not fully absent in the NT, and the curses of the OT rely both on the psalms and the curses of Deuteronomy to shape their vocabulary and structure.

The use of imprecation therefore relates significant theological motifs across both parts of the canon, and a great deal of canonical theology can be uncovered by analysis of the curse texts. Like those of the Psalter, the other OT imprecations are predicated upon the reality of the covenant curses of Deuteronomy (except for the curse of Numbers 10:35, which nevertheless assumes a covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel). The covenant is thus foundational to the curses, and their conceptions of covenant infidelity and sin resulting in curse come from the covenant curses. The Davidic covenant is downplayed outside of the Psalter, and its attendant Zion traditions are similarly absent. Given the concerns of Jeremiah, this is unexpected; nevertheless, both the prophet Jeremiah and other prophets such as Habakkuk are more focused on one's obedience to the word of Yahweh even as imprecations relating to Jerusalem and the king are absent.

Both Testaments contain imprecations which assume a number of core beliefs. First, God hears his people and responds to their prayers. An imprecation is worthless without divine will and power to enact it.[43] Second, and relatedly, Yahweh is a God of justice. He is concerned both for the welfare of his people (primarily in the OT imprecations and Revelation) and for the proclamation of and obedience to his word (primarily in the NT imprecations). Yahweh is thus depicted as a God who works inside human history in observable ways to protect the faithful and

[43] As Brent A. Strawn says, "In the OT, at least, it seems clear that imprecation derives its power solely from God." See Brent A. Strawn, "Imprecation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman, III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 315. His observation holds true for the NT as well.

their proclamation of Torah/the gospel. This concern for justice enables the retribution sought by the canonical imprecators: if Yahweh did not care for his people and for justice, the petitions would remain unanswered. Third, the imprecations are covenantal. The influence of the DtrH and relative absence of the Davidic covenant have already been noted, but the curses follow the Abrahamic covenant in addition to the Deuteronomic/Mosaic. Whoever worships Yahweh and is part of his people is blessed; those who oppose are cursed, just as Yahweh told Abram in Genesis 12:3. This is true even of NT imprecations, despite their removal from the (now fulfilled) earlier covenants. Obedience to God is paramount, and he protects those who are in a covenantal relationship with him. Fourth, as a result of this Abrahamic emphasis, the imprecations are curses on other human beings. No curse is uttered against a malevolent spirit or deity. While the exact sins of the offenders vary, they are universally human errors against other humans who stand innocent before God. This means that the enemies of the imprecations oppose both humans and Yahweh, and each curse necessarily involves all three parties.[44]

Morphologically, the OT imprecations follow those of the Psalter and take the form of irreal mood verbs, whether subjunctive imperfects, jussives, or cohortatives. The curses of the NT, however, are expressed in the real mood, almost exclusively by future tense verbs (with the singular exception of the prayer of the martyrs in Revelation 6:9–10). Whereas the LXX glosses the BH irreal moods using the optative or imperative mood as appropriate, the NT abandons the irreal entirely. Moreover, the curses across both Testaments are uniformly phrased as curse declarations or petitions (with the exception of the imprecation of Revelation once again, as it

[44] Kit Barker, however, classifies NT imprecations and curses differently. The former is directed toward God, but the latter is a "self-fulling" utterance whose efficacy does not depend upon God's power. See Kit Barker, *Imprecation as Divine Discourse: Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Theological Interpretation*, *Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement* 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 151. As has been demonstrated in this study, however, each NT imprecation/curse depends upon God acting in some fashion; the utterances lack any semblance of magical empowerment or self-efficacy.

takes the form of a direct question). The similarities in form suggest fixed patterns for imprecations which were known and used by the biblical authors; just as they represent canonical theology, the curses also demonstrate a canonical grammar.

CHAPTER 5: IMPRECATORY TEXTS IN LAMENTATIONS: EXEGESIS AND STRUCTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Exegesis of Imprecations

As observed in chapter 1, two texts in Lamentations are widely considered to be imprecations: Lamentations 1:21–22 and 3:64–66. A third text, Lamentations 4:21–22, is similar to the imprecations, but it remains sufficiently distinct in form and theology so as to be treated separately. The focus of this chapter is the exegesis of these passages, considering their grammar, context, and basic theological content, before a treatment of their compositional/structural use within the book of Lamentations. Each imprecation will be compared to the definitional matrix created from earlier analyses of canonical and ANE imprecatory texts, with deviations explored as necessary.

Lamentations 1:21c–22

Translation

> [21c] May you bring the day you proclaimed,
> and let them become like me.
> [22] Let all their evil come before you,
> and deal with them according to how you have dealt with me
> on account of all my transgression,
> for my groanings are great and my heart is faint.[1]

In keeping with the imprecatory sense of the cola, the perfective verb (הֵבֵאתָ) has been taken as a precative, and the imperfective verbs (יִהְיוּ [as a *wayyiqtol*], תָּבֹא) have been rendered here as

[1] All translations are original.

jussives/subjunctives. It is clear the verses form a prayer to Yahweh, so the verbs have been glossed accordingly.[2]

Context

The opening chapter of Lamentations is, as Adele Berlin states, "a portrait of Jerusalem, destroyed, shamed, and dejected."[3] Two speakers, a narrator and Daughter Zion, describe the devastation of the city from third-person and first-person perspectives, respectively.[4] The narrator's voice dominates the first half of the chapter, weaving his dirge over the fallen city. Daughter Zion's voice in vv. 12–22 sings a lament for her destruction and piteous condition, culminating in the imprecation of vv. 21–22, itself a standard feature of such laments (as evident in the Psalter).[5] Both sing of immense devastation and loss; however, Daughter Zion relates the

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[2] Interestingly, Iain Provan considers each of the verbs of v. 21 to be in standard usage for the perfect/imperfect tenses. See Iain Provan, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991; repr., Vancouver: Regent College, 2016), 56. His arguments elsewhere for the precative perfect in Lam 3:52–66 seemingly do not apply here in the earlier chapter. See Iain Provan, "Past, Present and Future in Lamentations III 52–66: The Case for a Precative Perfect Re-Examined," *VT* 41, no. 2 (1991): 164–75. Taking the imperfects as jussives, however, accords with the preferred translation of other commentators. See Johan Renkema, *Lamentations*, HCOT, trans. Brian Doyle (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1998), 197; Heath A. Thomas, *Poetry and Theology in the Book of Lamentations: The Aesthetics of an Open Text*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 47 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 128; Hans Gottlieb, *A Study on the Text of Lamentations*, Acta Jutlandica 48 (Århus, Denmark: Aarhus Universitet, 1978), 21–22.

[3] Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 49.

[4] The personified city speaks in 1:9c, 11c–22; the narrator speaks in 1:1–11b (except 9c), 15a, and 17. See William F. Lanahan, "The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations," *JBL* 93, no. 1 (1974): 41–42. The poetic technique of personification is most likely used in Lamentations to give additional emotional weight to the words of the poem and connects the canonical lament with those of the ANE. See Knut M. Heim, "The Personification of Jerusalem and the Drama of Her Bereavement in Lamentations," in *Zion, City of Our God*, ed. Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 138–41.

Throughout this dissertation, the designation of the personified city בת ציון will be glossed as "Daughter Zion." F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp has convincingly argued that the phrase is a unified nominal, not a genitive or other construct. See F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "The Syntagma of *bat* Followed by a Geographical Name in the Hebrew Bible: A Reconsideration of Its Meaning and Grammar," *CBQ* 57 (1995): 451–70. See also David A. Bosworth, "Daughter Zion and Weeping in Lamentations 1–2," *JSOT* 38, no. 2 (2013): 225–26.

[5] Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 37–41. Bo Johnson describes the split between vv. 11 and 12 as creating a "fact half" and an "interpretation half" to the poem. The narrator's half of the chapter relates the truths of

story of the siege in terms of an abused woman, making her version of events far more impactful to the average reader.[6] Daughter Zion also offers a rationale for the destruction: she has rebelled against Yahweh, and he has acted in accordance with his word to punish her iniquity (v. 18). By the end of the chapter, her sorrow has become anger; the events both she and the narrator have described can lead only to a cry for justice.

Exegesis

Lamentations 1:21‑22 is composed of the *sin* verse and the *tav* verse of the acrostic. The pair of verses form a chiastic bicolon, creating an appeal for justice framed by the groanings of Daughter Zion.[7] The enemies first appear in the final clause of v. 21 (the *sin* verse); with that said, the imprecation proper appears only in v. 22 (the *tav* verse). The first poem of Lamentations thus begins with the wailing cry of אֵיכָה and ends in the first of "the satisfying if ugly calls for retribution against the enemy."[8] The enemy is unknown within the chapter beyond a simple identification with the attackers of Jerusalem; no verse assigns the siege and destruction to any

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the destruction, but Daughter Zion's half demonstrates what such horrors mean in human terms. See Johnson, "Form and Message in Lamentations," *ZAW* 97, no. 1 (1985): 62–63.

[6] Indeed, the majority of ANE laments were sung by women, and personified cities were frequently given a female voice in which to sing their dirges, perhaps precisely for this reason. See Bosworth, "Daughter Zion," 218; Nancy C. Lee, "The Singers of Lamentations: (A)Scribing (De)Claiming Poets and Prophets," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, SBLSS 43, ed. by Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 38–39.

[7] John Goldingay, *The Book of Lamentations*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 81. The close connection of the verses is also noted by Frank Moore Cross. See Cross, "Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Verse: The Prosody of Lamentations 1:1–22," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 129–55.

[8] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 23. Renkema, however, disagrees, stating that Lamentations does not contain true imprecations since it does not call for vengeance, but simply a return to the land. In this, he is mistaken, and Dobbs-Allsopp is quite correct in viewing Lam 1:21–22 as a call for retribution. See Renkema, *Lamentations*, 197–98, 470–72.

particular nation or people, and blame for the troubles of Zion is ascribed to both their own sins and the righteous judgment of Yahweh (v. 18).[9]

The verses call for curse in typical canonical (and ANE) fashion. Verse 21 begins by introducing the enemies and crying out for the day of Yahweh, a day which Daughter Zion begs to bring retribution; she pleads to Yahweh to "let them become like me." What they have done to her, she prays will be done to them in turn. The Day of Yahweh motif runs throughout Lamentations, but it is first introduced here in the context of judgment.[10] However, v. 21 petitions for that day to come in the present; it is not a prayer for eschatological judgment, nor is the verse prophetic in the sense of predictive prophecy. Instead, Daughter Zion, confident that Yahweh will not let justice go undone in the course of Israel's history, petitions him to enact retributive justice in the here and now.[11]

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[9] The assertion of Rainer Albertz that the enemies cursed in Lam 1:22 are "faithless lovers" is unmerited by the text. The lovers (מְאֻהָבַי) are confined to v. 19, and their actions there are abandonment and self-preservation at the expense of the people of Jerusalem. Verse 21 turns the text of ch. 1 to the enemies proper, leaving behind the discussion of the מְאֻהָבַי. See Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.*, StBibLit 3, trans. David Green (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 152.

[10] Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 78; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)*, 2nd ed., BKAT 20 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), 34; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth—Das Hohe Lied—Das Klagelieder* (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1962; repr., Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1970), 215.

It is significant to note the possibility that the author of Lamentations views the Day of Yahweh as a past event, namely the destruction of Jerusalem which gave rise to the poems. See Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, SBT 14 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1954), 169. However, the imprecations calling for present/future judgment for the sins of the enemies assign the Day of Yahweh to a future event, albeit one which is hoped for in short order. See Otto Plöger, "Die Klagelieder," in *Die Fünf Megilloth*, HAT 18 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 139. Both present and future judgment are inextricably connected, with the former giving assurance of the latter; as Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. states, "all the historical moments where God's wrath was poured out were but earnests and small tokens of what that final great day of His wrath would be like." See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Grief & Pain in the Plan of God: Christian Assurance & the Message of Lamentations* (Chicago: Moody, 1982; repr., Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2004), 56.

[11] In the words of Julius Steinberg, Lam 1:21–22 is "Aufruf an Gott, die Feinde ebenfalls ihrer gerechten Strafe nicht entgehen zu lassen." See Julius Steinberg, *Die Ketuvim – ihr Aufbau und ihre Botschaft*, BBB 152 (Hamburg: Philo, 2006), 378. That Yahweh remains lord of history in Lamentations is fundamental to the thought and theology of the imprecations. If he were powerless to act in the present, the imprecations would be meaningless prayers to an impotent deity. However, as Gottwald states, "The several imprecations directed to God are of theological importance inasmuch as they show that Yahweh's control of events is still very much alive in Israel's faith." See idem, *Studies*, 92.

Verse 22 continues the judgment theme and contains the full imprecation against the enemies: Yahweh is now petitioned to see their evil and deal with them in (yet again) a retributive fashion. However, the verse deviates from the imprecation in the final two clauses, returning to the frame of groaning as in v. 21a. Moreover, v. 22 features a frank admission of the guilt and sin of Zion (v. 22bc). Yahweh has judged Daughter Zion because of her transgression (פָּשַׁע); she thus confesses her rebellion and recognizes that the current state of the city and her people is a direct result of covenant infidelity.[12] Still, the work of the enemies is regarded as evil itself (רָעָה), regardless of its employment by Yahweh to judge the city.

The verbs in the verses, as previously noted, contain both a *hiphil* precative perfect (הֵבֵאתָ) and *qal* irreal mood imperfects taken as jussives/subjunctives (יִהְיוּ [as a *wayyiqtol*] and תָּבֹא). In addition to these, a single imperative appears in the rare *poel* in v. 22: עוֹלֵל, glossed as "deal with."[13] The verb (and stem) is repeated later in the verse as a simple perfect to establish parallelism and retribution: Yahweh is to deal with (עוֹלַל) the enemies just as he has dealt with (עוֹלַלְתָּ) Daughter Zion. Together, they combine to form a series of petitions; as John Calvin has it, "the faithful lay their prayers humbly before God."[14]

The language is that of retribution and petition throughout; at no point does Daughter Zion plead for her own restoration, nor does she pray for the ability to avenge herself on her

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[12] Jill Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah*, OTM (New York: Oxford University, 2005), 209. It must be noted that both here and earlier in v. 18 the precise sin of Judah is never stated, and this presents a problem for interpreters who would see a more direct link between the sin of the people and the punishment endured (and its consequent call for retribution in v. 22). See Alan Mintz, *Ḥurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, Jewish Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art (New York: Columbia University, 1984; repr., Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1996), 25.

[13] For the *poel* stem, see Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed, SubBi 27 (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2022), 156–57.

[14] John Calvin, *Jeremiah & Lamentations*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 300. The degree of humility is open to debate, but Calvin must be credited inasmuch as the prayers feature a confession of sin.

enemies.[15] Like the canonical and ANE curses, the first imprecation of Lamentations pleads for retributive justice to be enacted by Yahweh and Yahweh alone, with the petitioner recognizing her own impotence in the situation.[16] As such, it is a tacit statement of belief in the sovereignty of Yahweh over all nations, tribes, and peoples. No one and nothing can withstand his power, and the final day of Yahweh which was foretold will have repercussions for everyone everywhere.[17] Moreover, the imprecation implies a belief on the part of the petitioner that Yahweh both hears and answers prayers, which itself presupposes both the power of Yahweh to act in history (as noted above) and his commitment to justice on the part of his people.[18] He has become both destroyer and savior.[19]

At base, the first imprecation of Lamentations mirrors other canonical imprecations and ANE curses in both form and content/structure. It goes beyond them as well, most notably in its included confession of sin and theology proper, and it thus functions as a recapitulation of theological themes/motifs in the chapter.[20] Again like other canonical imprecations, it is an

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[15] Indeed, Claus Westermann writes that the plea for retaliation is uttered precisely because "no one yet dares voice a plea for Israel's restoration." See Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 138.

[16] S. Paul Re'emi, "The Theology of Hope: A Commentary on the Book of Lamentations," in *God's People in Crisis: Amos & Lamentations*, by Robert Martin-Achard and S. Paul Re'emi, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 90.

[17] Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 72–73; Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary*, 60–61. Berlin, noting the connections between Lamentations and Deutero-Isaiah, states that this plea was fulfilled by the depiction of weeping Babylon in Isa 47.

[18] Paul R. House, "Lamentations," in *Song of Songs & Lamentations*, by Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, WBC 23B (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 324–28; Robin A. Parry, *Lamentations*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 65. For justice as an intrinsic component of imprecations in biblical laments, see Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, SBLDS 127 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 125–26.

[19] Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Voices of Ruin: Theodicy and the Fall of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 319.

[20] Robert B. Salters, *Lamentations: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, ICC (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010), 106.

unconditional curse. The text calls for punishment for deeds already committed and is not contingent upon any future actions on the part of the enemies.

Lamentations 3:64–66

Translation

> 64 May you return to them their recompense, O Yahweh,
> according to the work of their hands.
> 65 May you give to them hardness of heart;
> may your curse be upon them.
> 66 May you pursue in anger, that you may destroy them
> from under the heavens of Yahweh!

Like the imprecation of chapter 1, Lamentations 3:64–66 constitutes a series of petitions to Yahweh, here involving a vocative address to him. As such, it has been translated as a prayer, with subjunctive imperfects of various stems (תַּשִׁיב, תִּתֵּן, תִּרְדֹּף, וְתַשְׁמִיד; *hiphil*, *qal*, *qal*, and *hiphil*, respectively) dominating the verse. While the verses may be taken in the style of a statement of confidence that Yahweh will indeed work vengeance, with the imperfect verbs translated as futures, it is in keeping with the prayerful nature of the verse and the standard style of imprecation to render them as subjunctives.[21]

Context

Of the five chapters comprising the book of Lamentations, chapter 3 has received the most scholarly (and pastoral) attention. It has been described as, among other things, "an impressive example of the fusion of individual thanksgiving and communal lament";[22] the structural model

[21] So Gottlieb, *Study on the Text*, 60; contra ASV, RSV, and NASB.

[22] Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 161.

for the other poems of the book;[23] the crux of the book which changes the overall tone "from despair to hope";[24] and the statement of the "central theology" of the book.[25] According to Assis, chapter 3 raises the possibility of Zion's salvation wrought through prayer, a possibility seemingly attempted in subsequent chapters.[26] Whether or not the prayer is efficacious is a matter for the latter chapters of Lamentations, but it is certain that, with Assis, it is best to view the final segment of the central chapter (vv. 43–66) as a prolonged prayer culminating in a cry for vindication.

Chapter 3 is sung by the גֶּבֶר, a literary persona whose identity has been the subject of no small amount of speculation. The term itself denotes a strongman or hero (as opposed to the more generic noun אִישׁ), possibly stemming from the Akkadian *gabru*, "strong."[27] This has led to a wide array of possible identities being proposed across the literature.[28] The traditional position is that the גֶּבֶר is Jeremiah, recording his own experiences amidst the ruin in first-person using a third-person persona.[29] Others, noting the association of גֶּבֶר with strength, believe him to be a

[23] Johan Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations (I-IV)," in *Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, LHBOTS 74, ed. Willem van der Meer and Johannes C. de Moor (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1988), 391.

[24] Elie Assis, "The Alphabetic Acrostic in the Book of Lamentations," *CBQ* 69, no. 4 (2007): 722.

[25] Elie Assis, "The Unity of the Book of Lamentations," *CBQ* 71, no. 2 (2009): 312.

[26] Ibid., 311–12.

[27] BDB, s.v. "גֶּבֶר"; *HALOT*, s.v. "גֶּבֶר"; Victor P. Hamilton, "גֶּבֶר," *NIDOTTE* 1:816–17; ALCBH, s.v. "גבר"; *CAD* 5, s.v. "gabru."

[28] Only the most common/plausible possibilities are listed here. For a full treatment of the vast range of options, see House, "Lamentations," 404–8; Parry, *Lamentations*, 94–96.

[29] Magne Saebø, "Who Is 'The Man' in Lamentations 3? A Fresh Approach to the Interpretation of the Book of Lamentations," in *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, LHBOTS 152, ed. A. Graeme Auld (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 298.

Davidic king, either Jehoiachin or Zedekiah.[30] Lanahan, noting the prevalence of military imagery throughout the chapter, posits a corresponding identity for the גֶּבֶר, believing he may be a defeated soldier who survived the siege.[31] Perhaps the best conclusion is that of Kraus and Delbert R. Hillers, who state the גֶּבֶר is simply a poetic construct designed to be an "everyman" and express the communal laments of fallen Judah from a collective, first-person perspective.[32] Ultimately, however, as rightly (and amusingly) observed by Mintz, the identity of the גֶּבֶר does not impact interpretation one way or another; it is an academic and textual curiosity, but the exposition of the chapter does not rely upon a concrete identification of the speaker.[33]

More than the identity of the גֶּבֶר, the important exegetical issue for the present study is that of the *Gattungen* present in Lamentations 3. Chapter 3 initially continues the descriptive nature of its predecessor, detailing the suffering of the גֶּבֶר in typical lament terms.[34] The central section, vv. 19–39, comprise perhaps the only message of joy and one of the two main statements of hope in the book.[35] Indeed, if one knows any passage from Lamentations, it is

[30] Saebø, "Who Is 'The Man,'" 302–4; Mayer I. Gruber and Shamir Yona, "A Male Speaker's Obsession with the Feminine: The Strange Case of Lamentations 3," in *Megilloth Studies: The Shape of Contemporary Scholarship*, HBM 78, ed. Brad Embry (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2016), 78.

[31] Lanahan, "Speaking Voice," 45–46.

[32] Kraus, *Klagelieder*, 54–59; Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations: A New Translation and Commentary*, AB 7A, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 122–23.

[33] "The preoccupation with this issue has not always been helpful in understanding the poem. Proposing historical identities for the speaker is the kind of speculation which is not only destined to indeterminacy but is also of doubtful relevance to literary analysis." See Mintz, *Ḥurban*, 32.

[34] Goldingay, *Lamentations*, 121; Walter C. Bouzard, "Boxed by the Orthodox: The Function of Lamentations 3:22–39 in the Message of the Book," in *Why?... How Long? Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, LHBOTS 552, ed. LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 82.

[35] Mark Preston Stone sees in these verses a refutation that sin is responsible for the present evil, even though it remains inherently the fault of the people and not the capriciousness or maliciousness of Yahweh. They have forced his hand in some way, and Yahweh is simply acting in accordance with his covenant with his people. They may have hope, then, that he will relent once the covenant punishment has been fully executed. See Mark Preston Stone, "Vindicating Yahweh: A Close Reading of Lamentations 3.21–42," *JSOT* 43, no. 1 (2018): 87–106.

3:22b–23: "his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."[36] Such praise does not last long, however, and vv. 40–54 comprise a lament depicting the piteous state of the גֶּבֶר. Chapter 3 ends with an extended prayer, with vv. 55–59 being a plea for deliverance, vv. 60–62 a description of the enemies, v. 63 a cry to Yahweh to see the enemies, and vv. 64–66 an imprecation against them.[37] The overall shape of chapter 3, then, is a move from description to praise, from praise to lament, and from lament to curse. Various non-imprecatory petitionary elements are interspersed throughout, and chapter 4 begins with a return to the description of Zion's woes, perhaps in the voice of the narrator of chapters 1 and 2.[38]

Exegesis

The imprecations of chapter 1 are directly connected to those of chapter 3, and thus one expects to see similar structure and theology here.[39] However, it is important to let the text speak for itself, so it is necessary to accept Lamentations 3:64–66 on its own terms. Exegesis begins, then, with the place of the verses in the triple acrostic of chapter 3. Verses 64–66 comprise the *tav*

The explicit refer to חָטָא in v. 39, however, partly contradicts him. Yahweh may be acting according to the terms of the covenant, but it is nevertheless a response to the sin of the people.

[36] The *Zaqeph qaton* in the verse has been taken here as a semicolon (instead of a colon) to better preserve its disjunctive nature. See Sung Jin Park, *The Fundamentals of Hebrew Accents: Divisions and Exegetical Roles beyond Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 11–20, 109–31.

[37] Others have extended the description of the enemies to include v. 63, ignoring the imperative which opens the verse. See Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, TOTC 21 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 362–63. Conversely, Thomas F. McDaniel finds the enemies of vv. 64–66 far earlier in v. 52. See McDaniel, "Philological Studies in Lamentations. *I*," *Bib* 49, no. 1 (1968): 45.

[38] Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 129–32; Goldingay, *Lamentations*, 166; Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations & the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 58.

[39] Plöger, "Die Klagelieder," 153; Federico Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing': A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament*, VTSup 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 221, 242.

triplet, completing the acrostic which has spanned all sixty-six verses of the chapter.[40] The chapter navigates its various *Gattungen* from *aleph* to *sin*, ending with the triple-imprecation in the *tav* verses—a jarring conclusion to the chapter which offers the first notes of hope in the book.

The verses, like those of Lamentations 1:21c–22, form a prayer to Yahweh for retribution upon the enemies who have destroyed Jerusalem. Earlier, the prayer called for justice by petitioning that the enemies become like devasted Zion. Here, however, the reciprocal nature of the petition is expressed only by reference to the work of the enemies. Zion is absent in this imprecation, and the plea is that Yahweh punish the enemies "according to the work of their hands" (v. 64b). After the explicit call for retribution comes an explicit call for curse (v. 65b) expressed via a *hapax legomenon*, תַּאְלָה (here with the suffix, תַּאֲלָתְךָ). The precise meaning of the word is disputed. It seems clear to some that it is related in some fashion to curse vocabulary.[41] Herbert Chana Brichto, however, disputes this semantic categorization. For Brichto, the word is not a variation of אָלָה but of אול/יאל; the word thus refers to foolishness, not cursing.[42] Such a

[40] Whereas chs. 1, 2, and 4 are simple alphabetical acrostics, each with twenty-two verses, the acrostic in ch. 3 has been tripled, with each letter of the alphabet beginning three contiguous verses. Chapter 5, while returning to the standard twenty-two verses, is not an alphabetical acrostic. Some have claimed to find a message acrostic in that chapter composed of the first letters of each of the twenty-two verses; Siegfried Bergler, for example, sees the initial letters spelling out "zōnīm ʿam ʾāʿīb ʿōnēš būz šāēnāhāh ʾælohāēkā," which he translates as "Die Abtrünnigen, (nämlich) das Volk verschmähe ich, (es) strafen mit Verachtung, wie dein Gott klagt." See Siegfried Bergler, Threni V – nur ein alphabetisierendes Lied? Versuch einer Deutung," *VT* 27, no. 3 (1977): 317. It is best, however, with John F. Brug and Jannie Hunter, to see the acrostic form as ultimately failing in any fashion in the final chapter of Lamentations. See John F. Brug, "Biblical Acrostics and Their Relationship to Other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics," in *The Bible in Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8, ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 289; Jannie Hunter, *Faces of a Lamenting City: The Development and Coherence of the Book of Lamentations*, BEATAJ 39 (New York: Peter Land, 1996), 60.

[41] Salters, *Lamentations*, 279; Gideon R. Kotzé, *Images and Ideas of Debated Readings in the Book of Lamentations*, *Orientalische Religionen in der Antike* 38 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 67.

[42] Herbert Chana Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible*, SBLMS 13 (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 1963), 69. Brichto writes that אָלָה "is an adjuration of conditional curse addressed to another in the second or third person, for the purpose of evoking a desired action of precluding an anticipated action; or it is a conditional imprecation, basically a prayer-form, addressed to the deity, and asking for

gloss, however, would make the verse unintelligible. Yahweh lacks any foolishness to impart, so the presence of the second-person masculine singular suffix on the word makes it preferable to associate the word with אָלָה and gloss it as "your curse."[43]

The first colon of v. 65 explains the curse via parallelism: it is a "hardness of heart" (מְגִנַּת־לֵב) given to them by Yahweh.[44] The phrase itself, מְגִנַּת־לֵב, is an unusual one. The initial word of the construct, מְגִנַּת (מָגִנָּה in the absolute), is another *hapax legomenon*; the verse thus contains two *hapax legomena* in close proximity. Like the meaning of תַּאְלָה in the second colon, the exact meaning of מָגִנָּה is a matter of debate. Kotzé takes the word to refer to "hardness" or "obstinacy," seeing a parallel with terms in the Babylonian poem *LUDLUL BĒL NĒMEQI*.[45] While Kotzé's preferred gloss is supported by various lexica, his etymology is not.[46] None of the three primary BH lexica offer a link to Akkadian, and the word is omitted from two studies of related BH/Akkadian vocabulary and biblical *hapax legomena*.[47] It is therefore possible the word

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punishment of a malefactor whose guilt cannot be proved…. In a few instances, ʾālā stands for the material curse (misfortune) itself, or the person suffering a curse, by metonymy of cause for effect." See ibid., 70–71. In his estimation, it is impossible for the word to thus be present in Lam 3:65. However, as this dissertation has demonstrated, imprecatory vocabulary includes both conditional and unconditional curses; there is therefore no barrier to the word being used here in an imprecatory petition to Yahweh which is inherently retributive in nature.

[43] This conclusion is supported by the work of Frederick E. Greenspahn in his published dissertation on *hapax legomena* in BH. Greenspahn lists תַּאְלָה with the non-absolute *hapax*, indicating its root is easily discernible and shared with other BH vocabulary. See Frederick E. Greenspahn, *Hapax Legomena in Biblical Hebrew: A Study of the Phenomenon and Its Treatment Since Antiquity with Special Reference to Verbal Forms*, SBLDS 74 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 198. It is therefore safe to conclude the triconsonantal root is indeed אלה instead of positing an etymology requiring a II-guttural or II-ו root.

[44] It is therefore possible to render מְגִנַּת־לֵב and תַּאְלָה synonymous via parallelism (for surely "hardness of heart" can be "foolishness"), but for the reasons previously stated, the preferred gloss of תַּאְלָתְךָ as "your curse" remains the superior one.

[45] Kotzé, *Images and Ideas*, 68–76; for the text of the poem, see "*LUDLUL BĒL NĒMEQI*, 'I WILL PRAISE THE LORD OF WISDOM'," trans. W. G. Lambert and E. Leichty (*ANET*, 596–600). Kotzé is supported here by *Lamentations Rabbah*, which takes the word as either "hardness" or "breaking." See A. Cohen, trans., *Midrash Rabbah Lamentations* (New York: Soncino, 1983), 212.

[46] BDB, s.v. "מָגִנָּה"; *HALOT*, s.v. "מָגִנָּה"; *DCH* 5, s.v. "מָגִנָּה."

[47] מָגִנָּה is absent from both ALCBH and Harold R. (Chaim) Cohen, *Biblical* Hapax Legomena *in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic*, SBLDS 37 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978).

has a sense more closely related to "covering."[48] The weight of the evidence, however, is in favor of a gloss of "hardness," particularly given its use in the construct of Lamentations 3:65 (מְגִנַּת־לֵב). The enemies, therefore, will be cursed by Yahweh with hardness of heart, a punishment seen elsewhere throughout the OT, most notably in the plague narrative (Exodus 7–10).

The final verse of the chapter, v. 66, continues (and concludes) the imprecation. The enemies, already cursed in retributive terms, are cursed in such a way once more: just as they have pursued the people of Zion, so now Yahweh is petitioned to pursue them, ultimately destroying them utterly. The poet here borrows language from the imprecatory psalms to describe both the enemies and the reciprocal actions of Yahweh. Frequently throughout those psalms, the enemies are termed "pursuers" (רדפים and associated forms; Psalm 7:2; 69:27). The same root is used here in Lamentations 3:66 as the גֶּבֶר prays that Yahweh will pursue (תִּרְדֹּף) the enemies, a request also made in Psalm 7:6; 83:16. Here, however, the pursuit is to be one of rage (אַף). The anger of Yahweh is to result in their complete destruction, and the גֶּבֶר prays he will obliterate them from under the heavens—a total annihilation.[49]

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[48] BDB, s.v. "מְגִנָּה"; *HALOT*, s.v. "מְגִנָּה"; *DCH* 5, s.v. "מְגִנָּה." *HALOT* prefers an Arabic etymology which relates the word to covering in the sense of "shamelessness" or "insanity." Like תַּאֲלָה, מְגִנָּה is listed with the non-absolute *hapax* in Greenspahn's study, so the simpler etymology is preferred. See Greenspahn, *Hapax Legomena*, 191. "Covering" is the sense of the LXX here, however, which glosses the term with ὑπερασπισμός.

[49] The phrase מִתַּחַת שְׁמֵי יְהוָה has caused grief to numerous translators and scholars. The literal gloss "from under the heavens of Yahweh" is contradicted by the text of the LXX, which omits "of Yahweh" and instead takes the divine name as a vocative, resulting in the translation ὑποκάτω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, κύριε (LXX Lam 3:66). House, following the LXX, takes the Hebrew in a similar fashion, ignoring the construct state of שְׁמֵי. See idem, "Lamentations," 429. He is not alone in his preference for the LXX over the MT; Rudolph had earlier taken the phrase as "unter <deinem> Himmel weg, Jahwe," thus noting the possibility of a possessive but preferring the vocative. See Rudolph, "Die Klagelieder," 230. Likewise, Kraus offers both glosses in his own translation of Lam 3:66, providing "unter 'deinem' Himmel, Jahwe!" as his preferred reading. See Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)*, 52. Others, such as Parry and Gottlieb, prefer a wooden gloss of the MT, rendering the phrase "from under the heavens of Yahweh." See Parry, *Lamentations*, 91; Gottlieb, *Study on the Text*, 55–56. While the LXX better preserves the sense of prayer and petition present in the verse, it is best to follow the MT, which better showcases the sovereignty of Yahweh, a necessary presupposition of imprecations.

As in the earlier imprecation, the verbs are taken as subjunctive imperfects; rather than the curse being a statement of confidence that Yahweh will act in the future, the imprecation is a prayer to Yahweh to carry out the requests of the גֶּבֶר. Notably absent from Lamentations 3:64–66 are any perfective state verbs. Accordingly, there are no precative perfects within the segment.[50] Such an omission is easily explicable, however, given the form of the larger poem. With the verses forming the *tav* section of the alphabetical acrostic, the poet most likely chose second-person imperfect forms for their initial *tav*. Grammar, therefore, has been accommodated to fit the acrostic pattern/form, and such accommodation indicates the careful composition of the poem. The songs of Lamentations are not the spontaneous cries of the anguished; rather, they are the planned, deliberate responses to the tragedy of 587.[51]

The imprecations of chapter 3 are therefore both grammatically similar to and distinct from those of chapter 1. In terms of content, however, they are nearly identical. The גֶּבֶר, like Daughter Zion, cries out to Yahweh for retributive justice he himself is powerless to enact. The devastation has removed any ability of the גֶּבֶר to avenge himself; Yahweh alone owns the heavens, and he alone has the power to curse the destroyers of Zion. It must be noted, however, that the call of the גֶּבֶר for the complete destruction of the enemies goes beyond the call for retribution of Daughter Zion in 1:21c–22. Daughter Zion asks Yahweh for the enemies to "become like me"—and she remains alive, no matter how traumatized, ruined, and defeated. The

[50] Miriam J. Bier does advocate for precative perfects earlier in the chapter, most notably from vv. 55–63. See Miriam J. Bier, *'Perhaps There Is Hope': Reading Lamentations as a Polyphony of Pain, Penitence, and Protest*, LHBOTS 603 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 131. If precatives are indeed the mood of prayer, then she is most likely correct in her observation.

[51] Albertz rightly states that the acrostic form is not a result of later redaction of orally-composed poems but evidence for a written origin; the songs were intended as acrostics from the outset. See idem, *Israel in Exile*, 154–55. Jill Middlemas agrees, stating, "There is an artificiality to the poems of Lamentations themselves that suggests a conscious and theological or ideological design in their composition." See Jill Middlemas, *Lamentations: An Introduction and Study Guide*, T&T Clark Study Guides to the Old Testament (New York: T&T Clark, 2021), 46. The acrostic form therefore indicates careful composition designed to convey theological truths.

גֶּבֶר has no such leniency; the destruction is so complete in his eyes that proper recompense must likewise result in utter obliteration.[52] In sum, however, the imprecation of 3:64–66 aligns itself with canonical and ANE definitions of cursing even as it extends the petitions of the earlier imprecation within Lamentations.

Excursus: Lamentations 4:21–22

The text of Lamentations 4:21–22 varies significantly from other curse texts in Lamentations, and, as will be shown, does not function structurally within the larger book in the same way as Lamentations 1:21c–22 and 3:64–66. Given the similarities of 4:21–22 and the other curses, however, it is still necessary to treat the segment here, if only to provide rationale to distinguish it from the other passages.

Translation

> [21] Rejoice and be glad, Daughter Edom,
> dwelling in the land of Uz!
> To you also will pass the cup;
> you will become drunk and make yourself naked.
>
> [22] Your punishment has come to an end, Daughter Zion;
> he will not add to your exile.
> May he observe your iniquity, Daughter Edom;
> may he expose your sins!

The final verses of chapter 4 involve significantly different grammar than those of chapters 1 and 3. The imperfects of v. 21cd are glossed as standard futures in accordance with their relationship to the imperatives of v. 21a. The command to rejoice controls the sense of the real-mood verbs,

[52] As Mintz phrases it, the prayer of the poet (and Israel) is "let our chastisement be vindicated by their destruction." See Alan Mintz, "The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe," *Proof* 2, no. 1 (1982): 16.

shifting them into a definite or absolute (instead of conditional or expected) state, thereby becoming a sort of prophetic imperfect. In contrast, the perfects of v. 22cd are taken as precatives, wishes that Yahweh will indeed take future action against Edom. The syntagm בת + geographic name appears again, and it is glossed here in the same way: "Daughter Edom" (בַּת־אֱדוֹם) now stands together with "Daughter Zion" (בַּת־צִיּוֹן).

Context

The fourth chapter of Lamentations returns to a description of the devastation of Jerusalem, opening with the same word as chapters 1 and 2: אֵיכָה. Whereas chapters 1–3 were concerned primarily with the buildings and people of the city, chapter 4 describes the collapse of the society, depicting economic, cultural, and social collapse in addition to the suffering of the people. Images invoking wild animals (vv. 3, 19), famine (vv. 4–5, 8–10), uncleanness (vv. 14–15), and reversal (vv. 1–2, 7–8, 21–22) abound, climaxing in the horrific description of cannibalism—mothers boiling and eating their own children—in v. 10.[53] For these reasons, it has been proposed that the speaker of chapter 4 is an upper-class citizen of Jerusalem, someone who would naturally be more interested in the fall of society and station than the average individual.[54]

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[53] Some scholars take the acts of cannibalism depicted in Lam 2:20; 4:10 as hyperbole, stock images for ancient depictions of siege. However, there is no textual reason to do so other than the fact the chapter is a song which employs figurative language and poetic devices to create its depiction of the fallen city. See Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 92; Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 323–24; Alan Cooper, "The Message of Lamentations," *JANES* 28, no. 1 (2001): 6; Hugh S. Pyper, "Reading Lamentations," *JSOT* 26, no. 1 (1995): 61. Moreover, the curses of Deut 28:53–57 make explicit mention of the cannibalism of children as a punishment for covenant infidelity. It is unnecessary to assume the poet of Lamentations would contradict his source material or understand/render it hyperbolically.

[54] Lanahan therefore calls the speaker "the bourgeois," stating, "The speaker is describing the total collapse of the state as a nation, as people, and as a culture…. His present world is, therefore, a wreck of shattered perspectives." See idem, "Speaking Voice," 47–48. Gottwald, however, maintains the speaker is a generic observer, possibly the same as the narrator of chs. 1 and 2, with a separate female voice delivering any lament portions of the chapter. See Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible in Its Social World and in Ours*, SemeiaSt (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 166–67.

Some concerns and images overlap with those of earlier chapters. If chapters 1 and 2 rely upon the imagery of the abused woman, so does chapter 4—albeit with a shift in how the image is portrayed. In the earlier chapters of Lamentations, Daughter Zion is a victim of rape and abuse, violated and beaten. Here she is both daughter and mother, and the concern becomes primarily for the fate of her children rather than Zion herself.[55] The broken bodies of her sons in v. 2, the starving children of vv. 3–4, and the cannibalism of v. 10 all provide one of the most emotionally impactful images of all: a mother who has been forced to watch her children suffer and die, sometimes at her own hand.

The focus of chapter 4 is thus on the description of the devastation itself, but a shift in underlying emphasis occurs at v. 11. Throughout the first ten verses, the chapter bewails the state of Jerusalem without assigning cause; the only statement which borders on positing a reason behind the trauma is "For the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the sin of Sodom" (v. 6). The verse is textually ambiguous, and the term glossed here as "iniquity," עָוֹן, could just as easily be rendered "punishment."[56] Such a translation would omit any parallelism with חַטָּאת, however, so it is best to retain a sense of sin or iniquity with עָוֹן. If this is indeed the correct gloss, then v. 6 becomes the only verse in the first half of the chapter which assigns a reason to the destruction: the people have sinned worse than the paradigmatic sinners, and they now face the consequences of their actions.[57]

The second half of the chapter offers extended contemplation on the motive for the devastation of Zion, and it accords with the rationale posited in v. 6. Yahweh is angry with Zion

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[55] Pyper, "Reading Lamentations," 61.

[56] BDB, s.v. "עָוֹן"; *HALOT*, s.v. "עָוֹן."

[57] See also 2 Kgs 21:9; Ezek 16:47–52.

(v. 11), for her priests and prophets led the people astray into uncleanness (vv. 12–15). Because of their great sin and rebellion, Yahweh has rallied the nations against the people of Zion so that they were destroyed and led into exile regardless of any attempt to save themselves (vv. 16–20). No other nation came to their aid (v. 17); they faced the wrath of Yahweh alone.

Exegesis

Even though Yahweh himself is ultimately responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and the leading away of the people into exile, his wrath was executed by very human agents and other mortal instruments; the speaker of chapter 4, at the end of the chapter, focuses his attention on these enemies of the people and utters a curse against them—but it is a very different sort of curse than previously encountered throughout the book of Lamentations or, indeed, any other canonical or ANE imprecation. Indeed, it is so different that K. C. Hanson prefers to think of the text as an "announcement of salvation" instead of a curse.[58] Those distinctives will be addressed in the next section; it is first necessary to exegete the passage itself to see what it says—not what it does *not* say.

The text begins with an imperative, calling Daughter Edom to rejoice (v. 21ab). It is an ironic command, for the text which follows is nothing over which to rejoice.[59] Edom will drink from the cup (כּוֹס) of Yahweh's wrath, becoming drunken and naked—a thing of shame and reproach (v. 21cd). The phrase as written simply uses כּוֹס without additional clarification. It is assumed the cup is Yahweh's wrath at sin based on a similar use of the expression in Psalm 75:9 and Jeremiah 25:16–17; 49:7–13; however, Lamentations 4:21 itself does not specify the exact

[58] K. C. Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics: A Form Critical Study" (PhD diss., The Claremont Graduate School, 1984), 278.

[59] Ibid.; Berlin, *Lamentations*, 113.

contents of the cup nor associate it with anything besides drunkenness and nakedness in the final strophe of the verse.[60] Without parallelism as an interpretive aid, the intertextual connections to the Psalter and Jeremiah must hold sway in exposition.[61]

Edom is not mentioned again until the second colon of v. 22. There Daughter Edom resurfaces as the object of Yahweh's scrutiny: the speaker offers wishes that Yahweh would see (פָּקַד) the iniquity of Edom and expose (גִּלָּה) its sins. Because of the tone of the verse and its implicit threats, many commentators view the verse as a standard curse or imprecation against Edom.[62] The text certainly contains some sense of reciprocity, although the element of retribution is absent.[63] The cup has passed to Edom, and she will now suffer the same woes as Zion, even though her deeds against Jerusalem are not mentioned or alluded to in the verse in any fashion; only her general iniquity and sin are mentioned. Grammatically, the oracle against Edom is expressed by two precative perfects, aligning it with other curses in mood if not in content.[64] It could conceivably, therefore, be classified with other curses throughout the canon. Others disagree, however, calling it anything from a threat to a command.[65]

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[60] O'Connor, *Lamentations*, 68; John N. Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach Us about Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 90.

[61] The significance of parallelism for the interpretation of biblical poetry as well as its various forms and nuances is explored in Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

[62] House, *Lamentations*, 436–50; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, BibOr 44 (Rome: Editrice Pontifico Istituto Biblico, 1993), 154; Homer Heater, Jr., "Structure and Meaning in Lamentations," *BSac* 149, no. 585 (1992): 310; F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NAC 16 (Nashville: B&H, 1993), 484.

[63] Calvin, *Jeremiah & Lamentations*, 316; Hillers, *Lamentations*, 152–53. Contra Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 548.

[64] Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 138; Hillers, *Lamentations*, 78; Elizabeth Boase, *The Fulfilment of Doom? The Dialogic Interaction between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early Exilic Prophetic Literature*, LHBOTS 437 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 188–89;

[65] Hillers, *Lamentations*, 152–53; Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)*, 83; Salters, *Lamentations*, 283; Steinberg, *Die Ketuvim*, 381; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, FOTL 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

Regardless, Edom is promised a negative future. Daughter Zion, on the other hand, receives "the only real note of unrestrained hope in Lamentations."[66] Her exile and suffering, according to the poet, are now over; Yahweh will no longer punish the people for their sins (v. 22ab). The verse therefore juxtaposes the images of Yahweh as divine warrior and divine savior: he will save his covenant people, but he will oppose those who oppose them.[67] This becomes the primary source of hope for the book, as no other verse explicitly declares an end to the sufferings Zion has endured at the hands of her enemies. It is important, however, to note what the verse does *not* say: punishment may be at an end, and the exile may be over, but a full restoration is never promised nor proffered. The trauma may be over, but Yahweh makes no guarantee his people will be restored to their former glory among the peoples of the ANE.

Differences from Lamentations 1:21c–22 and 3:64–66

The differences in the imprecations of chapters 1 and 3 and the curse of chapter 4 are marked, evident at both the grammatical/structural and theological levels. Structural and grammatical differences are perhaps the most numerous. First, the acrostic of chapter 4 as a whole is different from those of the earlier chapters. Whereas chapters 1–3 were composed of tricola (three lines per stanza), chapter 4 is comprised of bicola (two lines per stanza). Moreover, the typical stanza in earlier chapters features on average thirty-nine syllables; the stanzas of chapter 4 are shorter, with an average of only fourteen to fifteen syllables.[68] These changes are evident throughout vv.

2001), 499–500; William D. Reyburn, *A Handbook on Lamentations* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 127–28. See the discussion below.

[66] Heim, "Personification," 166.

[67] Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, 227.

[68] David Noel Freedman, "Acrostics and Metrics in Hebrew Poetry," *HTR* 65, no. 3 (1972): 374–78.

21–22 as well, although the curse passage remains the *sin* and *tav* verses of the acrostic as in the previous texts. Second, while the passage features precative perfects (as noted above), it lacks any subjunctive imperfect verb forms. Petitionary elements are therefore at a comparative minimum.[69] Third (and relatedly), the verses lack any direct address to Yahweh. Each stanza addresses Daughter Edom and Daughter Zion without any statement aimed toward Yahweh in any fashion.[70] Indeed, this is the only chapter of the book of Lamentations which lacks any sort of direct address to Yahweh. Fourth, the verses lack any curse or curse-adjacent vocabulary. The mentions of the cup (כּוֹס) and the iniquity (עָוֹן) and sins (חַטּאֹת) of Edom are as close as the verses come to explicit calls for retribution, curse, or other necessary imprecatory elements. Fifth, the curses of Lamentations 1:21c–22 and 3:64–66 lack parallelism but display adjunct enjambment, whereas the curse of 4:21–22 lack enjambment but makes use of parallelism.[71]

Theological differences similarly abound. First, as previously noted, there are no direct calls for retribution, indicating that, while Edom has sinned in ways which deserve the wrath of Yahweh, they are left to the imagination. That the cup will pass to them "as well" (גַּם) denotes a reciprocal punishment—what has happened to Zion will happen to Edom—but that punishment is left unlinked to any transgression of Edom against Zion in the context of the verse, whereas it

[69] Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 59; Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, 499–500; Reyburn, *A Handbook on Lamentations*, 127–28.

[70] Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 153; Goldingay, *Lamentations*, 185; Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 59. As Boase rightly notes, however, Yahweh is nevertheless implied by the verbs of Lam 4:21–22. See Boase, *Fulfilment of Doom*, 189. It is also possible, with Yitzhaq Feder, to posit that "the absence of explicit reference to a deity may stem from the scribe's taking divine orchestration for granted." See Yitzhaq Feder, "The Mechanics of Retribution in Hittite, Mesopotamian and Ancient Israelite Sources," *JANER* 10, no. 2 (2010): 120. Yahweh may therefore remain in the mind of the poet, but he is never called upon directly in the text of Lam 4:21–22.

[71] Dobbs-Allsopp observes adjunct enjambment "when the *rejet* consists of an adjunct phrase, which in Lamentations usually entails either a prepositional phrase or a temporal adverbial." See F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "The Enjambing Line in Lamentations: A Taxonomy (Part I)," *ZAW* 113, no. 2 (2001): 224–25. For a treatment of the distinctions in parallelism and enjambment across the pertinent texts of Lamentations, see ibid., 224–26, 236–38.

is explicit in the other imprecatory texts. Second, because there is no prayerful petition to Yahweh, the verse is more akin to the theology of judgment oracles than imprecations.[72] It states woes will come to Edom as a future certainty; it does not petition that Yahweh heed a request to pass the cup. To be sure, v. 22 ends with wishes that Yahweh will see (and, implicitly, that he will act), but v. 21 takes his future action against Edom as an inevitability. The verses are therefore more closely aligned with the messages of the prophets than the imprecations of Lamentations.

Without an address to a deity, petition, or demonstrated appeal to retributive justice, it is impossible to classify Lamentations 4:21–22 as an imprecation. The verses may be considered, as noted above, a threat, a command, a wish statement, a judgment oracle, or even an ironic gloat, but it fails to meet the criteria of ANE and canonical imprecations. As such, it will be omitted from the remainder of the discussions of the imprecations of Lamentations and the structure of the book (although, it must be mentioned, it varies significantly from them in its role in the composition of the book as well).

Compositional Usage of Imprecatory Texts

The two primary imprecatory texts of Lamentations, 1:21c–22 and 3:64–66, function structurally as textual hinges, compositional seams, in the wider collection of poems. Such seams serve to unite discrete units of text into a larger, coherent whole—in this case, the entirety of the (admittedly short) book of Lamentations. A unit of text appears, with its own particular concerns, followed by a seam passage which stitches it to the next similar unit of text. Such compositional seams thus establish orderly patterns across books and collections, revealing the careful

[72] Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)*, 83; Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," 278.

composition (or even redaction) of the larger work or corpus.[73] In order to adequately establish this function of the curse passages within the book of Lamentations, the existence of compositional seams across the OT canonical books will first be demonstrated, then the use of the imprecations in Lamentations will be analyzed to show sufficient similarities in function.

Compositional Seams in the Canonical Books

Before a defense of the primary thesis of this dissertation—that the imprecations function as compositional seams within the book of Lamentations—it is necessary to demonstrate "proof of concept," as it were, and highlight the existence of compositional seams across the OT canon. This analysis will consider seams which appear in the Pentateuch, Judges, Kings, Jeremiah, Amos, and the Psalter.

[73] It is the position of the present work that no later redaction of Lamentations has occurred, as the structure presented here precludes it and there is no need to assume such editing has changed the text into its canonical state. The caveat of Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala is salient here: it is best to presume textual integrity without simply assuming redaction has occurred without sufficient evidence to reconstruct the precise changes. See Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala, *Editorial Techniques in the Hebrew Bible: Toward a Refined Literary Criticism* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022), 15–17.

This position is somewhat bolstered by the various DSS featuring the text of Lamentations. The book never appears in complete form; at most, the contents of the four scrolls containing excerpts (3Q3 [3QLam], 4Q111 [4QLam], 5Q6 [5QLam^{a}], and 5Q7 [5QLam^{b}]) comprise some two-fifths of the text of the canonical form of the book. See John Jarick, "The Bible's 'Festival Scrolls' among the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Scrolls and the Scriptures: Qumran Fifty Years After*, JSPSup 26, ed. by Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 174. Additionally, one scroll (4Q241 [4QFragments citing Lamentations]) features citations of Lam 2 and 3 without containing continuous text from the book. Significantly, none of the imprecatory passages are contained in the DSS aside from the unique curse of Lam 4:21–22, which appears in 5Q6 1 iv (*DSSSE*, 2.1130).

Between these five scrolls, however, each chapter of Lamentations is present in a fragmentary way among the DSS. Critically for the point at hand, contiguous columns of individual fragments feature contiguous verses as found in the HB. 4Q11, for example, moves straight through Lam 1:1–16 across three columns of a single fragment; see 4Q111 1 i–iii (*DSSSE*, 1.290). Similarly, 5Q6 moves across Lam 4–5 in canonical order, beginning at Lam 4:5 and ending with Lam 5:16; see 5Q6 1 i–vi (*DSSSE* 2.1130). Given that each chapter is present in the DSS and that both the verses of individual chapters and the chapters themselves appear in canonical order, it is therefore likely the entirety of the canonical form of Lamentations was known in its current form prior to the Second Temple period.

Pentateuch

The standard work for considering the compositional strategy of the Pentateuch has become John H. Sailhamer's magnum opus *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation*. Beginning with the premise that the composition and compilation of the Pentateuch was "more than just the making of a scrapbook" and instead was deliberately formed by the author, Sailhamer's study establishes first the existence of canonical compositional seams and then discovers such seams within the collection of the books of the Pentateuch.[74] The canonical seams are influenced in part by the overall shape of the canon, and Sailhamer finds meaning (and structural intent) in the location of a book within the larger canonical corpus and its subdivisions.[75]

Sailhamer's primary focus, however, is not on canonical composition, but on the structure of the Pentateuch within the OT corpora. With the existence of compositional seams established, he discovers several such seams within the books of Moses. The primary seams are revealed to be the various poems which appear in four of the five books of the collection.[76] Additional poems act as seams which stitch together subunits within the larger segments already demarcated by the longer poems.[77] For Sailhamer, the Pentateuch is thus comprised of discrete blocks of narrative and law which are joined together by four major poems; Moses—Sailhamer's preferred author for the Pentateuch—wrote his books "by attaching and linking the written

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[74] John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 23.

[75] Ibid., 168–74, 216.

[76] Sailhamer considers these "seam poems" to be Gen 49:2–27; Exod 15:1–19; Num 23–24; and Deut 32–33. Genesis 3:14–19 is also considered a seam if the creation narrative is taken as a separate unit from the remainder of the primeval history narrative. See ibid., 277–78, 323–48.

[77] Ibid., 313–23. See particularly here his analysis of the poems of Gen 1–11 which stitch together the various blocks of the primeval history materials.

narratives in a theologically meaningful way" through the use of repeated blocks of poetry.[78] Other compositional strategies abound in the Pentateuch which likewise unite the material, including repeated phrases, particularly "in the last days," which is frequently coupled with "beginning" language.[79] These two strategies combine, as the poetic seams highlight "God's future work 'in the last days' and his promise to send a king from the tribe of Judah," a king Sailhamer links to the coming Christ; the seams are therefore messianic in nature.[80]

Sailhamer's observations are largely accepted and confirmed within the OT guild. Joshua Berman, himself a student of the Pentateuch and *Formgeschichte*, notes what he calls "lemmatic citation" across the Pentateuch, stating the books are bound together through shared material and vocabulary.[81] Furthermore, the very notion of canonical seams has found wide acceptance. H. G. L. Peels, for example, in an attempt to re-create the OT canon in the time of Jesus, discusses the "redactional glue" which binds together segments, books, and corpora to create the full canon.[82] Likewise, Ched Spellman finds evidence for what he variously terms "conceptual glue" and "canonical glue" which combine units and books into the larger canon, finding within that "glue" the compositional strategy and overarching meaning of the books, corpora, and canon of the OT.[83] Sailhamer's theses regarding the poetry, vocabulary, and composition of the Pentateuch seem therefore plausible if not outright proven.

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[78] Sailhamer, *Meaning of the Pentateuch*, 464.

[79] Ibid., 333–43.

[80] Ibid., 467.

[81] Joshua Berman, "Supersessionist or Complementary? Reassessing the Nature of Legal Revision in the Pentateuchal Law Collections," *JBL* 135, no. 2 (2016): 202, 212–22.

[82] H. G. L. Peels, "The Blood »from Abel to Zechariah« (Matthew 23,35; Luke 11,50f.) and the Canon of the Old Testament," *ZAW* 113, no. 4 (2001): 600–1.

[83] Ched Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon*, New Testament Monographs 34 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 46–51.

Beyond both Sailhamer and the Pentateuch as a whole, other scholars have discerned similar seams within individual books of the collection. Moshe Kline finds twenty-two units within Leviticus, each bound together in concentric rings connected by "intercourse/birth and death-warning/death pairings."[84] Kline sees threads of family/covenants motifs binding together the book of Genesis, and Klaus Koch gives the now-familiar theory that the *toledot* function as transitional points/seams in the first book of the Bible.[85]

Former Prophets

Judges

Such compositional seams may also be found within the book of Judges. It seems an obvious observation to make, but the refrain of Judges—"the people of Israel (again) did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh"—serves as a seam throughout the book to bind together the various blocks of narrative comprising the cycle of judges.[86] Moreover, the phrase is a temporal marker, allowing the material to skip forward a significant period of time in order to reach the next narrative. Webb notes the repetition of vocabulary, images, plots, and other literary devices/elements across the narratives of Judges, ultimately finding a downward spiral across the book: each story is told in the same manner, but each judge is progressively worse than the one

[84] Moshe Kline, "Structure Is Theology: The Composition of Leviticus," in *Current Issues in Priestly and Related Literature: The Legacy of Jacob Milgrom and Beyond*, RBS 82, ed. Roy E. Gane and Ada Taggar-Cohen (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 259.

[85] Ibid., 259; Koch, "Die Toledot-Formeln als Strukturprinzip des Buches Genesis," in *Recht und Ethos im Alten Testament: Gestalt und Wirkung: Festschrift fur Horst Seebass zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Stefan Beyerle, Günter Mayer, and Hans Strauß (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999), 184–91.

[86] Judges 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1; etc. Consider also the repetition of the phrase which closes each narrative, "and the land had rest X years" (Judg 3:11, 30; 5:31; etc.). See Barry G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 34, 123–25, 175–79.

who preceded him/her.[87] Each of these repetitions bind the stories together, and the refrains function as the seams which delimit the individual narratives.

Kings

Continuing with an analysis of the Former Prophets, the twin books of Kings (taken here collectively) demonstrate compositional seams. Much like the book of Judges, the book of Kings uses a standard refrain as a compositional seam: the regnal formula, the brief biographical statement detailing how many years a king reigned, information regarding his successor (optional), and a reference to the Chronicles of the Kings of the pertinent nation, whether Israel or Judah.[88] The regnal formula may vary across narratives, and the precise text also occasionally differs (particularly vis-à-vis placement) between the MT and LXX, but the formula itself appears to demarcate the boundaries between kings, indicating a shift in the narrative and timeline.[89] According to Trebolle, the formula guided later redactors, who only inserted additional material along "the seam points," seeing them as the logical point to add excurses and clarification: "A global vision allows us to notice how the narrative from the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the stories of the Aramean wars are inserted in a different way in MT and LXX into the 'synchronic history' which constitutes the primary structure of the book of Kings…It is at the seam points between the different literary pieces where the most important variants and duplicates [occur]."[90] Clearly, then, the refrain of the regnal formula functions as a compositional

[87] Webb, *Judges*, 76–78, 162–74.

[88] Julio Trebolle, "Textual Criticism and the Literary Structure and Composition of 1–2 Kings/3–4 Reigns. The Different Sequence of Literary Units in MT and LXX," in *Die Septuaginta–Entstehung, Sprache, Geschichte*, WUNT 286, ed. Siegfried Kreuzer, Martin Meiser, and Marcus Sigismund (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 59–77.

[89] Ibid., 55–76.

[90] Ibid., 74–75.

technique within Kings, demonstrating a conscious compositional strategy entailing its use across the work.

Latter Prophets

Jeremiah

Perhaps most important for the study of the structure of Lamentations is the analysis of the structure of the book of Jeremiah. That Jeremiah includes both prose and poetry is well-established, and commentators seem to frequently favor one over the other with little regard for the linkages between the two.[91] William L. Holladay, however, notes the common vocabulary between the prose and prophetic oracles, ultimately determining the two forms share a number of sources which were later collated into the single work.[92] T. R. Hobbs identifies four primary tradition complexes within the book: chapters 1–24; 25, 46–51; 26–35; and 36–45.[93] Of these, the second primary tradition complex, chapters 25 and 46–51, is almost entirely poetry; very little narrative material is present. By contrast, the majority of the remaining complexes are primarily prose.[94] With such clear units demarcated, it is logical to theorize some sort of compositional seam to distinguish the tradition complexes and *Gattungen* from one another. Indeed, each complex begins with a temporal marker akin to the regnal formula of Kings—Jeremiah

[91] Consider, for example, the extensive treatment of the poetic sections to the relative neglect of the literary analysis of the prose elements by J. A. Thompson in his contribution to the NICOT series. See J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 120–24.

[92] William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 26–52*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 15–24; William L. Holladay, *The Architecture of Jeremiah 1–20* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University, 1976), 13–26.

[93] T. R. Hobbs, "Some Remarks on the Composition and Structure of the Book of Jeremiah," *CBQ* 34, no. 3 (1972): 267.

[94] Ibid., 267–69.

prophesies in X year of the reign of Y king—and each features the standard prophetic formula "the word (of Yahweh) came to Jeremiah." However, both of these refrains are common across the material of Jeremiah and are not limited to these specific junctures. It is preferable, therefore, to see the seams of Jeremiah as shifts from poetry to prose or controlling shifts in content (audience of the oracles, etc.).

Amos

According to Robert Gordis, the book of Amos displays "evidence of a clear-cut, careful organization."[95] Introductory formula are frequently repeated, as in Jeremiah, and the book features an overall movement from judgment to hope.[96] However, these refrains and trajectory are not the primary compositional strategy of the book. Instead, the structure of Amos is dependent upon the historical segment which functions as a compositional seam or hinge. The book's two collections of prophecy, 1:1–7:9 and 8:1–9:15, are separated by the historical narrative of 7:10–17. The prophetic collections on either side of the lone narrative segment comprise different prophetic visions and possibly different redactional layers.[97] Gordis likewise finds a compositional strategy of Corpus A + Historical Narrative + Corpus B in the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, but those books, particularly Isaiah, feature more complex compositional strategies as well.[98] Still, for the book of Amos, the central historical section serves as a seam which unites the two prophetic corpora on either side of it.

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[95] Robert Gordis, "The Composition and Structure of Amos," *HTR* 23, no. 4 (1940): 239.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid., 247. M. Daniel Carroll R. prefers a tripartite structure to Amos which differs from that of Gordis, but he nevertheless admits the structure offered by Gordis has the advantage of supporting/preserving authorship by Amos. See M. Daniel Carroll R., *The Book of Amos*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 37–54.

[98] Gordis, "Composition and Structure," 247–48.

The Psalter

The theology and structure of the Psalter has been treated previously, but it is necessary to briefly return to the Psalter and analyze its compositional seams. In that earlier discussion, the prevalence and domineering nature of the royal psalms was examined.[99] Their theology and imagery serve as a skeleton for the macrostructure of the Psalter as a whole, and this has been explored in detail by Gerald H. Wilson. The various collections/books of the Psalter shift between *Gattungen* and authors repeatedly, although less so in Books IV and V. For the first three books, these changes can be dramatic, but they are kept in check by the unifying presence of the royal psalms.[100] In his analysis of Books I–III, Wilson observes that royal psalms appear at the beginning or end of each collection; Psalms 2, 72, and 89 are classified as royal psalms, and each bounds its respective book in some fashion. According to Wilson, "The appearance of 'royal' psalms at three out of four of these significant junctures cannot be accidental and demands some explanation in our quest for understanding of the Psalter arrangement."[101] Following each royal psalm, the theology of the psalms shift; Book I, following Psalm 2, moves from torah to kingship, and Book III abandons Davidic concerns as a primary motif.[102] The royal psalms therefore function as seams to create "an apparent thematic or theological development observed in the sequential arrangement of these psalms," namely the narration of the rise and fall

[99] See ch. 3 of this dissertation.

[100] Gerald H. Wilson, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *JSOT* 35 (1986): 85–86.

[101] Ibid., 87. At the fourth juncture—the conclusion of Book I—comes Ps 41, which, per Wilson, cannot be considered a royal psalm due to its lack of true concern for kingship. As such, he considers Books I and II a unified Davidic collection, citing Ps 72:20 as support. See ibid., 87–88.

[102] Ibid., 88–92. Books IV and V, lacking such royal psalms, are attributed by Wilson to later redactors in the last century BC or later. See ibid., 92–93.

of the Davidic covenant.[103] The seams of the Psalter therefore focus the collections on their central theological concern: the Davidic monarchy.

Synthesis

It is apparent, then, that the use of compositional seams appears in a number of books spanning the entire OT canon. Various authors do indeed use discrete blocks of text, changes in genre, or other features to demarcate segments and unite them into composite wholes. Some seams are more obvious than others—those of the Pentateuch and Judges, for example, seem beyond controversy, whereas those posited for the Latter Prophets are debatable—but their canonical presence in some books cannot be disputed. This raises the question: are such compositional seams present within the book of Lamentations? The answer is yes: in the imprecations.

Imprecations as Compositional Seams in Lamentations

The majority of Lamentations scholars deny any overarching macrostructure to the book, seeing the poems as discrete songs later compiled into the current collection. The question of authorship is usually linked to the question of unity, and as most believe Lamentations is the work of multiple authors, it is therefore the majority opinion they lack an intrinsic literary unity. [104] Increasingly, however, scholars are beginning to recognize the unity of the book, either arguing for a single author or uncoupling the dual problems of authorship and unity from one another altogether.[105] As David Marcus opines, "Of all the books of the Bible perhaps none displays such

[103] Wilson, "Royal Psalms," 88–92, here at 88.

[104] See, for example, Plöger, "Die Klagelieder," 129; Westermann, *Lamentations*, 57–58. Westermann provides an excellent survey of positions on the issue in ibid., 24–53.

[105] See, for example, Assis, "Unity," 308–9; Bergler, "Threni V," 310; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 20–23; Hunter, *Faces of a Lamenting City*, 91; O'Connor, *Lamentations*, 13; David Noel Freedman, "The Structure of

intentional artificial compositional structure as the Book of Lamentations."[106] Goldingay concurs: "Together, the poems manifest a tight formal unity unparalleled by any other work in the Scriptures."[107] It is the thesis of this dissertation that this latter group is correct: the book of Lamentations exhibits an obvious macrostructure which exists independently of the acrostic forms of the individual songs, and, moreover, that structure is dependent upon the employment of the imprecations as compositional seams. As Middlemas writes, the poems are in a deliberate order; all that remains is to demonstrate the unity which creates that order.[108]

Lamentations 1:21c–22

The first chapter of Lamentations, as noted above, consists of two sections divided after v. 11, each featuring a different speaker (first the narrator and then the personified Daughter Zion). The chapter correspondingly moves from a description of the destruction in third person to the first-person suffering of Zion, but it nevertheless presents a unified vision of the trauma and devastation suffered by the city.[109] In so doing, it incorporates elements of lament in the second half (vv. 12–22), including the final imprecation of vv. 21c–22.[110]

Chapter 2 begins the cycle anew, even beginning with the same word as chapter 1, the wail of אֵיכָה. The chapter depicts the destruction of the city in a mix of first-person and third-

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Psalm 119," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. by David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 730.

[106] David Marcus, "Non-Recurring Doublets in the Book of Lamentations," *HAR* 10 (1986): 177.

[107] Goldingay, *Lamentations*, 5.

[108] Jill Middlemas, "War, Comfort, and Compassion in Lamentations," *ExpTim* 130, no. 8 (2019): 351.

[109] Robert B. Salters, "Structure and Implication in Lamentations 1?" *SJOT* 14, no. 2 (2000): 298–99.

[110] See the description of the context of Lam 1:21c–22 above.

person language, variously referring to "Daughter Zion" (v. 13b) and "my young women and my young men" (v. 21).[111] The description itself, however, remains consistent throughout; chapter 2 is a horrific vision of the current state of the city, amplifying the emotionality of chapter 1.[112] Significantly, however, it does not end with an imprecation. The *tav* verse, v. 22, does make mention of "my enemy" (אֹיְבִי), but it simply describes that enemy as inflicting terror and violence; it does not call upon Yahweh for retribution in any fashion.[113]

Ultimately, the two chapters are a cycle of dirge and complaint, repeating after the curse of chapter 1.[114] The imprecation of Lamentations 1:21c–22 thus functions as a hinge upon which the material of chapters 1 and 2 turn. It is not a crux or chiastic center; rather, it marks the end of one unit of material and the beginning of another unit which is nearly identical in form and function to the first.[115] The two poems are thus stitched together by the single curse; the vision of the destruction gives way to sorrow which in turn is replaced by anger, an anger which abates as the speakers once again view the state of Jerusalem and its attendant horror.

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[111] Jill Middlemas, "The Violent Storm in Lamentations," *JSOT* 29, no. 1 (2004): 87; Xuan Huong Thi Pham, *Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 302 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 39–53, 111–18.

[112] As Albertz states, Lam 2 is a "long reproachful description" of the carnage. See idem, *Israel in Exile*, 158; Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 169; Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 48–49.

[113] Indeed, Lam 2:22 sees the death of children at the hands of the enemy, a stock image of siege descriptions and laments; unlike Ps 137, however, Lam 2:22 does not seek retribution or vengeance for those deaths. See Bosworth, "Daughter Zion," 236; Edward L. Greenstein, "The Wrath at God in the Book of Lamentations," in *The Problem of Evil and Its Symbols in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, JSOTSup 366, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 36–37.

[114] Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," 288.

[115] That such a pivot occurs at the twenty-second verse is in keeping with Hebrew poetic techniques. The number eleven is poetically significant, and the reader should expect significant transitions at multiples of eleven—which is precisely what one finds throughout Lamentations, but most notably after Lam 1:22 and 3:66. See Casper Labuschagne, "Significant Compositional Techniques in the Psalms: Evidence for the Use of Number as an Organizing Principle," *VT* 59 (2009): 588–601.

Lamentations 3:64–66

Chapter 3 initially continues the narrative description of chapter 2 before ultimately ending in another imprecation.[116] Moreover, many of the theological themes contained in chapter 2 carry over into the following chapter as well, particularly theodicy and punishment.[117] Crucially, chapter 3 begins with a continuation of the individual complaint which ends chapter 2; there is no narratival or poetic disjunction, merely the seamless flow of one complaint into the next.[118]

The torah segment of Lamentations 3 (vv. 19–39) is unique within the book. The speaker (the גֶּבֶר, as throughout the remainder of the chapter) temporarily deviates from lament to provide a series of instructions to the reader, all of which exhort the audience to submit themselves to the ways of Yahweh and find hope within their suffering.[119] While this segment of Lamentations is certainly the most memorable and the most famous—many know "great is your faithfulness" (v. 23b) if no other phrase from the entire book—it is certainly out of place in the larger structure of the book. The initial complaint is expected to transition into lament or else be sustained throughout the chapter, but it is instead interrupted by this central section of instruction in the paths of Yahweh. The lament does eventually reappear, however, in the final section of chapter 3, immediately prior to the concluding imprecation of vv. 64–66.

Chapter 4 is a significant shift from the final curse of 3:64–66. Lamentations 4:1 transitions to yet another new speaker, this time a former member of the upper class of Jerusalem, and thus many of the concerns which follow center on the cultural devastation of the

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[116] Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 163.

[117] Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 169.

[118] Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," 288.

[119] Westermann, *Lamentations*, 227–29. House, however, sees no fewer than four speakers in Lam 3, all of which have some part of the torah segment; see idem, "Lamentations," 404–5.

city instead of the death of the people per se.[120] Like the first two chapters, however, Lamentations 4 begins with אֵיכָה and initially takes the form of a descriptive dirge.[121] As such, 4:1 marks the return to the first stage of the pattern evident across the major divisions of the poems taken as a unified collection: the lamenting cry of אֵיכָה, a dirge/lament, and a subsequent (or concurrent) depiction of the horrors of the destruction of the city. A shift thus occurs following the imprecation of 3:64–66, a transition seemingly identical to that which occurs on either side of 1:21c–22: the entire cycle of description, lament, and imprecation has begun anew at 4:1 just as it did in 1:1 and 2:1. The collection is thus stitched together by imprecation at both junctures.

Contrast with Climax of Lamentations 5:21–22

Significantly, the final chapter of Lamentations does not begin with אֵיכָה; indeed, it matches none of the prior patterns evident in the first four songs of the book, dropping even the acrostic form itself.[122] As expected, however, the speaker shifts once more, now morphing in a polyphonic choral voice which acts as the collective cries of the people of Zion.[123] These changes paradoxically provide continuity: the ending of Lamentations 4 lacks a true imprecation, despite its words against Edom; therefore, it is to be expected that chapter 5 will simply continue the descriptive lament of chapter 4, which is precisely what it does. It has no need to begin the compositional cycle anew; its task is to complete that cycle.

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[120] Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 170; Lanahan, "Speaking Voice," 47–8.

[121] Hanson, "Alphabetical Acrostics," 288–89.

[122] Salters also believes Lam 5 abandons the *qinah* meter of previous chapters; lament has run its course completely. See Robert B. Salters, "Searching for Pattern in Lamentations," *OTE* 11, no. 1 (1998): 96–97.

[123] Lanahan, "Speaking Voice," 48–49.

In a way, this is precisely what does *not* happen in the final chapter of the book. Instead of offering a final imprecation to bound the book (or even ending with a final אֵיכָה to create an inclusio), Lamentations 5:21–22 ends the book with a plea for restoration coupled with a statement of skepticism or doubt that the desired restoration will necessarily follow. The conditional כִּי אִם which begins the final verse of the book is the subject of no small exegetical controversy, but it is best to take it as introducing an element of doubt into the final prayer of the poet; the book thus concludes with "Restore us to you, Yahweh . . . unless you have utterly rejected us and are exceedingly angry with us" (vv. 21a, 22).[124] What is absent is any sense of curse or mention of the enemies; anger spent, the poet exchanges his curses for a prayer for healing and restoration.

In this, Lamentations 5:21–22 subverts the expectations of the reader who may expect either curse or closure. The compositional cycle of Lamentations, limited to two chapters at its longest, should feature its typical conclusion at the end of the book, two chapters since the cycle began for the final time. In short, given that it is an odd-numbered chapter, chapter 5 should contain the same sort of imprecation as chapters 1 and 3. This is precisely what does not happen, and the absence of imprecation here serves to highlight its presence earlier in the book.

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[124] The element of doubt is common regardless of preferred glosses, the majority of which follow the one given here or take the form of "even though/even if/although." See Gordis, "The Conclusion of the Book of Lamentations (5:22)," *JBL* 93, no. 2 (1974): 289–93; House, *Lamentations*, 470–72; Parry, *Lamentations*, 154–57; Salters, *Lamentations*, 373–75; Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, 236; Wright, *The Message of Lamentations*, 161–62. Such a gloss is supported by the prevalence of כִּי אִם taken as exceptive. See Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 155, 165; Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. by A. E. Cowley (Garden City, NY: Dover, 2006), 500; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 603; BDB, s.v. "כִּי אִם־."

Berlin, however, in agreement with Hillers, takes the final כִּי אִם as a definite adversative or restrictive, glossing it "but instead." See Berlin, *Lamentations*, 125–26; Hillers, *Lamentations*, 160–61. Such a gloss finds support in Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 671.

Linafelt disagrees with any sense of true resolution, regardless of doubt or certainty, seeing the כִּי אִם as introducing "*a protasis without an apodosis*," having the verse simply trail off without a concluding clause; the gloss becomes "for if you have utterly rejected us." See Tod Linafelt, "The Refusal of a Conclusion in the Book of Lamentations," *JBL* 120, no. 2 (2001): 342–43 (emphasis original).

Lamentations 5, instead of following the established pattern, draws attention to that pattern and creates a climax for the book by its very anticlimax. The poet's anger has run its course; he has no more tears to shed. All that remains is his petition, a prayer which dares to hope for restoration even as he doubts it can truly come to pass.

Summary: The Compositional Cycle of Lamentations

The poems of Lamentations do indeed form a unity, and it is one which was carefully planned by the poet. Indeed, the book shows evidence of a structural plan or compositional cycle beyond even the concentric design posited by Renkema.[125] Whereas Renkema's concentricity highlights the praise poem of chapter 3, the structure revealed through the analysis of the imprecations at the compositional seams of the book demonstrates a repetition of *Gattungen* across all five chapters: observation is followed by (or occurs within) a lament which ends in imprecation, and the cycle begins anew in each even-numbered chapter. This is a most human strategy, cohering with the experience of grief and trauma of the poet. As he describes the devastation of Jerusalem, the poet weeps in sorrow—but that sorrow inevitably gives way to tears of anger in any grief cycle.[126]

This structural cycle allows the grief process to play out across the poems while still cohering them to standard lament and imprecatory patterns throughout both the canon and the

[125] While Renkema's proposal has been criticized at a number of levels (see ch. 1), it is generally sound. However, he ignores the importance of grammatical/morphological features which also contributes to structure—the focus of the present study—a lacuna observed by Hendrik Jan Bosman. See Hendrik Jan Bosman, "Two Proposals for a Structural Analysis of Lamentations 3 and 5," in *Bible et Informatique: Interprétation, Herméneutique, Compétence Informatique: Actes du Troisième Colloque International* (Paris: Champion-Slatkine, 1992), 77–98.

[126] Paul Joyce, "Lamentations and the Grief Process: A Psychological Reading," *BibInt* 1, no. 3 (1993): 304–20; Paul Joyce, "Sitting Loose to History: Reading the Book of Lamentations without Primary Reference to its Original Historical Setting," in *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements*, JSOTSup 300, ed. Edward Ball (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 246–62.

larger ANE. The final verses of the book highlight the compositional strategy of the collection, subverting the expected conclusion and instead offering a very different sort of plea, a prayer for restoration rather than retribution which serves to complete the cycle by demonstrating it has served its purpose: no anger is left in the heart of the poet, only the core belief Yahweh can save them if he chooses. The imprecations thus become the most structurally significant verses of the book—and perhaps carry the greatest compositional weight of any curses in the canon.

CHAPTER 6: IMPRECATION AS THEOLOGICAL KEY

Before considering the biblical theology of Lamentations, it was first necessary to establish its literary unity; as Michael S. Moore states, a unified theology of the book is contingent upon a unified structure.[1] Happily, the keys to the structure and the theology of the book are one and the same: the imprecations contained in the ends of the first and third chapters. The sum of the biblical theology of Lamentations is contained within the imprecatory texts lying at the compositional seams of the book, and their prominence in structure only serves to underscore their theological significance.[2] This chapter thus explores the biblical theology of Lamentations, beginning with a brief recapitulation of previously posited theological keys before moving into the theology present in the book as encapsulated in the imprecations.[3] Finally, the theology of Lamentations will be put into the context of canonical theology.

Previously Treated Theological Keys

Norman K. Gottwald birthed the initial foray into the biblical theology of Lamentations, proposing a backdrop of the Deuteronomic covenant and attendant concerns.[4] Gottwald later expanded his thesis to include a variety of other covenantal data as well, most notably Davidic/Zionist traditions, though the influence of the Davidic covenant/monarchy on the

[1] Michael S. Moore, "Human Suffering in Lamentations," *RB* 90, no. 4 (1983): 536.

[2] "In a word, structure is theology," and the structure of Lamentations highlights its particular theological emphases. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, AB 3B (New Haven: Yale, 2001), 2129–30.

[3] A more robust discussion of potential theological keys for the book of Lamentations appears in ch. 1 of the present work; however, a brief summary is necessary here to continue the conversation.

[4] Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, SBT 14 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1954), 50–118.

thought of Lamentations was first observed by Bertil Albrektson in his critique of Gottwald's initial Deuteronomic argument.[5] More recent critics have abandoned strict biblical-theological methodology or grammatical-historical exegesis in favor of contemporary critical lenses such as trauma theory and its attendant search for hope.[6]

The lack of scholarly consensus on the underlying theology of Lamentations has led some researchers to despair of finding a single key—and rightly so, for the book is a complex web of manifold theologies. With that said, however, the imprecations of Lamentations incorporate each of the proposed keys and rely upon their beliefs in order to craft their petitions to Yahweh. These texts will now be examined in this light.

Theological Themes of Lamentations

While each of these theological foundations finds expression within Lamentations, none of them dominates the songs; the poems are an amalgam of all of these covenants, systems, and concerns, as well as others which find short shrift in the academic literature but are nevertheless fundamental to the theology of the book. The Hebrew conception of the nature and character of Yahweh is critical to the theology of the text, as are the Abrahamic, Deuteronomic, and Davidic covenants. Each of these combines to become the basis for a stalwart belief in hope for future

[5] Gottwald's list included political theology, prophetic thought, and wisdom traditions in addition to Davidic/Zionist concerns. See Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible in Its Social World and in Ours*, SemeiaSt (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 172–73; Bertil Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology of the Book of Lamentations, with a Critical Edition of the Peshitta Text*, Studia Theologica Lundensia 21 (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1963), 219–30. Albrektson is joined in this by both the later work of Gottwald (as noted above) and Claus Westermann. See Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, trans. Charles Muenchow (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 95.

[6] Elaine Theresa James, "The Aesthetics of Biblical Acrostics," *JSOT* 46, no. 3 (2022): 319–38; Paul Joyce, "Lamentations and the Grief Process: A Psychological Reading," *BibInt* 1, no. 3 (1993): 304–20; Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*, 60–62.

blessing amidst the ruins of Jerusalem. The imprecations contain each of these theological motifs, and they will be addressed in turn.

The Nature and Character of Yahweh

A fundamental premise of the present work is that imprecations, both those in the canon and those of the wider ANE, conform to a standard definitional matrix: an imprecation is a petition for retributive justice by a powerless party addressed to a deity or another divine agent. This tripartite matrix includes specific criteria regarding deity. First, the divine agent in question must have sufficient power to intervene in human affairs. Second, the agent must be capable of being petitioned (i.e., to hear prayers offered by human beings). Third, the agent must be sufficiently benevolent to respond favorably to those petitions. Fourth, this benevolence must necessarily entail a dedication to justice, the retributive punishment of those who would first punish the petitioner. In sum, the divine agency must possess at least a modicum of power and compassion/justice as well as supernatural senses or knowledge (necessary to become aware of the petition).

The imprecations in Lamentations 1:21c–22 and 3:64–66 make it clear that the poet's conception of Yahweh includes these characteristics. First, the sovereignty of Yahweh is assumed throughout the book of Lamentations. He has acted in human history before, and he will continue to do so in the future. Indeed, the entire crisis of Lamentations—the catastrophe of 587—is presented as the act of Yahweh in the human world, and reference is made to earlier historical acts of Yahweh.[7] The imprecations, by default, consider Yahweh to remain capable of such acts. Were he unable to exert influence in the human sphere, cursing would be meaningless;

[7] Lam 1:12–15, 17–18, 21c–22; 2:1–8, 17, 22; 3:1–18, 31–33, 37–39, 43–45; 4:6, 11.

only an agent who can work his will on earth is able to curse one's enemies. The sovereignty and power of Yahweh are thus assumed in the imprecations as well as demonstrated elsewhere in the poems.[8]

Second, Yahweh possesses divine ability to hear prayers and to be petitioned by human beings. Again, this is a fundamental assumption of imprecations, but it is also present in the larger book of Lamentations. As F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp writes, "One of the major aims of Lamentations, as well as other city laments, is to elicit divine compassion"; the entire work, then, is one grand plea to Yahweh by those who believe both that they have standing to make the petition and that the deity can hear their prayers.[9] This point seems basic, perhaps even obvious, but it is nevertheless necessary to the theology of Lamentations. Should Yahweh prove incapable of being prayed to and hearing those prayers, the book falls apart, becoming nothing more than a collection of poems without any sense of hope or restoration.

Third, because Yahweh cares for his people Israel, he responds to their prayers, even those against the enemy uttered from a place of perceived abandonment; indeed, the curses offer no sense of doubt that Yahweh will in fact answer the prayers of the poet.[10] It is clear, then, that

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[8] "Yahweh is said to work violence that belongs to the enforcement of sovereignty…. Every government must maintain a monopoly of force in its sphere of influence, and Yahweh is no exception." See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Disputes, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 381.

[9] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology in the Book of Lamentations," *JSOT* 74 (1997): 56.

[10] That Yahweh cares for his people is fundamental to Lamentations and evident throughout the book. Jill Middlemas is quite correct when she declares, "One of the themes that winds through the poems like a red thread is that of compassion or the lack thereof." The presence of Yahweh's compassion is viewed as the default state, and its absence in Lamentations results from the sins of the people. See Jill Middlemas, "War, Comfort, and Compassion in Lamentations," *ExpTim* 130, no. 8 (2019): 353. The relationship of compassion and sovereignty in the context of cursing is further explored by John N. Day, who writes that, as a result of the theological distinctions of biblical imprecations contra those of the ANE, OT imprecations feature "a sovereign, just, and compassionate covenant God." See John N. Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach Us about Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 45. Moreover, Yahweh is depicted throughout Lamentations as "a God of steadfast love and hope," with such hope found in his very attributes. See Elizabeth Boase, "The Characterisation of God in Lamentations," *ABR* 56 (2008): 34–39.

the poet expects to receive the attention of Yahweh, and the imprecations rely on that belief for their efficacy. If Yahweh were negligent toward his people, the curses would be meaningless, mere empty rage. The poet, however, calls for curses upon the enemies with the expectation Yahweh will hear and respond; the notion that Yahweh both can and will respond is presupposed in the uttering of the petition. Moreover, the repeated petitions in the wider book for Yahweh to see (ראה) the suffering of the various speakers (1:9, 11, 20; 2:20; 3:50, 59–60) echo language of the exodus; just as Yahweh heard the cries of the suffering Hebrew slaves, so, too, will he hear the cries of the suffering speakers of Lamentations.[11] The poet thus relies upon the past actions of Yahweh to buttress his belief that Yahweh will continue to act similarly in the present.

Finally, the imprecations are a plea for retributive justice, indicating a belief that Yahweh cares for his people and will punish those who attack them. Indeed, as Walter C. Bouzard states, "Whatever else the Judge might do, he must act justly."[12] While such justice could be eschatological in nature, the nature of imprecation as well as the present need of the poet brings the desire for retribution into the here-and-now.[13] Such justice is "an intrusion of consummation

[11] Exod 2:23–25; 3:7–8.

[12] Walter C. Bouzard, "Boxed by the Orthodox: The Function of Lamentations 3:22–39 in the Message of the Book," in *Why?... How Long? Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, LHBOTS 552, ed. LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 71. See also Kit Barker, *Imprecation as Divine Discourse: Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Theological Interpretation, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement* 16, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 135; Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Lamentations: Honest to God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 126. Consider also Gen 18:25.

[13] Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology," 57; Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, SBLDS 127 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 125; John Shepherd, "The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture — Part I," *Chm* 111, no. 1 (1997): 44.

principles," the natural result of Yahweh's sovereignty in the present world; what is to be corrected forever in the eschaton is righted in the present as well.[14]

Theodicy

Yahweh in Lamentations is thus a God of justice, sovereignty, and compassion, capable of working in human history on behalf of his people—and willing to do so. He is also more than that, acting as the ultimate and only source of both good and evil for the poet. Yahweh is able to curse and bring about perceived evil because he alone possesses that power; similarly, blessing and restoration are solely the domain of Yahweh, and Israel's prayers for relief can only be answered by him. Such beliefs are evident across the poems, but they find their most explicit expression in Lamentations 3:38: "Do not evil and good go forth from the mouth of the Most High?" The state of Jerusalem is the result of the work of Yahweh, and only he can undo that work and restore it to its former glory; as such, the question of theodicy is close to the heart of the theology of Lamentations.[15]

Both Johan Renkema and Mark Preston Stone reject this conclusion, stating explicitly in their respective works that, while theodicy is indeed a central topic of Lamentations, Yahweh is not the source of evil and therefore cannot be portrayed as such within the poems. For Renkema, the theodical questions are numerous: the fate of women, famine, warfare, and general human

[14] Allan M. Harman, "The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter," *RTR* 54 (1995): 71. Harman lists events such as the conquest of Canaan and moral/justice principles such as the death penalty as other examples of the intruding eschaton. See ibid., 71–72.

[15] The treatment of theodicy in Lamentations was the focus of many earlier scholars, particularly those from 1950 to 1990. See Paul R. House, "Outrageous Demonstrations of Grace: The Theology of Lamentations," in *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Heath A. Thomas (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 28–30.

suffering all make an appearance on the lips of the poet.[16] However, in Renkema's view, Lamentations assigns evil strictly to the actions of the false prophets who led the people astray (Lamentations 4:13–14); human beings are thus the ultimate source of evil within the book.[17] His final conclusion is worth quoting at length:

> Current exegesis tends to associate the origin of evil (in the broadest sense) with the Most High himself, thereby obviating the need for further justification of YHWH's deeds and leaving human persons resigned to their fate. Such a rational explanation of the problem, however, does not only clash with the foundational Old Testament notion that God is good, it also clashes significantly with the emotional experience of distress and the lament it engenders, which are ultimately addressed to YHWH, in the remainder of the songs of Lamentations.[18]

Stone, in his own analysis, agrees entirely with Renkema's work. For him, Lamentations continues in the traditions of both the Wisdom literature and the Deuteronomic covenant, relying upon the latter for a definition of evil and upon the former for its view that evil can be retributive as well as educational (e.g., the punished are expected to learn from the consequences of their mistakes).[19] For Stone, Lamentations 3:37–39 is an example of "extravagant hyperbole," for it is impossible that Yahweh perform evil deeds; all evil lies with the people.[20]

While both scholars are correct in their emphasis on the presence of theodicy in Lamentations, they are misguided in their conclusions about Yahweh's role in evil. The work of Gottwald, Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, Tod Linafelt, Hugh S. Pyper, and Christopher R. Seitz, among others, has firmly established intertextual connections between Lamentations and Deutero-Isaiah,

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[16] Johan Renkema, "Theodicy in Lamentations?" in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible: The Goodness of God and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 411–14.

[17] Ibid., 425–26.

[18] Ibid., 426.

[19] Timothy J. Stone, "Vindicating Yahweh: A Close Reading of Lamentations 3.21–42," *JSOT* 43, no. 1 (2018): 88–100.

[20] Ibid., 100–6, here at 100.

demonstrating the relatedness of their theologies to such a degree that the latter may be a prophetic answer to the former.[21] Both are tales of the exile, along with other books such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and it is to be expected they share similar vocabulary and theological motifs, which is indeed the case.[22] It is therefore relevant to consider the words of Deutero-Isaiah concerning theodicy, and it is significant that the author there espouses the same view as the poet of Lamentations: "I shape light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil. I, Yahweh, do all these things." (Isaiah 45:7). Whatever the witness of the larger OT, the exilic (and post-exilic) corpus ascribes all divine actions, both good and evil, to Yahweh, and it is this theology and theodicy which is found within Lamentations.[23]

Yahweh is the source of good and evil; how, then, should one react to experienced evil? Boase believes that "this notion of theodicy as an existential struggle against the practical realities of lived experience which most often lies behind the discussion of theodicy in the

[21] Gottwald, *Studies*, 44–46, 107; Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "Lamentations in Isaiah 40–55," in *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Heath A. Thomas (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 55–61; Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 49–72; Hugh S. Pyper, "Reading Lamentations," *JSOT* 26, no. 1 (1995): 67; Christopher R. Seitz, *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 131–48. With the connections between Lamentations and Deutero-Isaiah granted, however, it is still needful to observe both that Isaiah did not compose his prophecy concerning the exile and return from the period of the exile itself, but some 150 years beforehand, and that the division of the book into discrete segments based upon authorship and historical context is unnecessary given a sufficient conception of biblical prophecy. Isaiah's depiction of the exile is thus not from firsthand experience but solely from the divine revelation of Yahweh and therefore antedates the composition of Lamentations despite its resolutions of the concerns of the latter book. See John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3–6.

[22] Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 161; Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 95–96. For a delineation of the use of Lamentations by other OT texts, see Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 604–612; Gottwald, *Studies*, 44–46.

[23] As Boase affirms, Yahweh is thus behind the suffering experienced by the poet in every chapter. See Elizabeth Boase, "Constructing Meaning in the Face of Suffering: Theodicy in Lamentations," *VT* 58 (2008): 457.

Hebrew Bible," and Lamentations is no exception.[24] Because of this, the imprecations of Lamentations inherently have something to say about theodicy.[25] The imprecations may see the present punishment of the people as beyond justification and therefore call for a divine act against the enemy as a means to alleviate their own suffering.[26] Conversely, the curses may simply entail the belief that Yahweh can cause such devastation where he will, and the petition for him to do it elsewhere may thus speak to a firm faith that he will ultimately act in favor of his covenant people.[27] The second of these options seems more likely. The poet acknowledges the sins of the people which brought about their punishment, and there is a sense to the poems that any argument concerning the severity of that punishment is futile (e.g., Lamentations 3:37–42). Both the imprecations in particular and Lamentations in general thus deal concretely with theodicy, ultimately displaying a belief both in Yahweh as the cause of the destruction (without downplaying the human element) and that Yahweh's wrath can (and will) be redirected towards those who earn it by attacking his covenant people.

[24] Boase, "Constructing Meaning," 454.

[25] Ibid., 457–59; Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms," in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 90.

[26] Boase, "Constructing Meaning," 459; Denise Flanders, "The Covenant Curses Transposed: Allusions in Lamentations to Deuteronomy 28–32 and Leviticus 26," in *Megilloth Studies: The Shape of Contemporary Scholarship*, HBM 78, ed. Brad Embry (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2016), 96–97, 106–8.

[27] Elna K. Solvang, "Can the Unrighteous Lament? Lament Speech and Reconciliation," in *Why?...How Long? Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, LHBOTS 552, ed. LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 163–64.

Covenant

Abrahamic Covenant

Lamentations assumes the terms of three OT covenants, both in the imprecations and in the wider text. The first of these, the Abrahamic covenant, is of primary importance as the basis for imprecation itself. Jace Broadhurst, in his discussion of the imprecatory psalms, summarizes the connection well:

> The imprecations are a response to a covenantal God. God said he would curse those who cursed Abraham's children; that is his statement. The people sing with the desire of vindication in the hearts of the singers—a desire for God's justice to prevail; that is their response to his statement. In this, they respond in agreement to the Suzerain (God) involved in the treaty…. The imprecations are covenantal confessions and serve as the vassal's ratification response.[28]

The words of Yahweh to Abram in Genesis 12:1–3 mark the beginning of the covenant relationship between the two, and a crucial component of this covenant is blessing and curse. Yahweh declares he will bless those who bless Abram, and he will curse those who curse him (v. 3).[29] The covenant people thus have standing to petition Yahweh to fulfill his part of the treaty; they are well within their rights to call upon him to curse their enemies, for this is precisely what he said he would do.[30]

The wider text of Lamentations is likewise built upon Abrahamic theology. Yahweh remains a God of חֶסֶד throughout, even as he sends enemies to destroy Jerusalem (Lamentations 3:22–25). Such covenant love toward the people of Israel began with Abraham and Sarah,

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[28] Jace Broadhurst, "Should Cursing Continue? An Argument for Imprecatory Psalms in Biblical Theology," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 23, no. 1 (2004): 83.

[29] Interestingly, Yahweh's declaration of curse uses two distinct terms: he will ארר those who קלל Abram. The latter term has lighter connotations, perhaps concerning only dishonor, but Yahweh will fully curse those who offend Abram even in such a slight manner. See BDB, s.v. "קָלַל"; *HALOT*, s.v. "קלל."

[30] This also forms the basis of the imprecatory psalms. See J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *BSac* 138, no. 549 (1981): 41.

continuing in their line throughout the age of the Patriarchs. It is this God to whom Lamentations cries for relief and restoration, and it is him whom the poet believes to remain powerful enough to continue to act in history in favor of his people.[31] Without this foundational belief in an unconditional, ongoing Abrahamic covenant, the text of Lamentations falls apart, for the poet would no longer belong to a chosen people to whom Yahweh has promised protection and love.[32] The Abrahamic elements may be implicit and understated, but they are crucial.

Deuteronomic Covenant

Gottwald's early work on Lamentations alerted readers to the presence of Deuteronomic thought within the poems, a theological background which has never been in serious dispute since the publication of his original study.[33] Noting the reliance upon the poet on the Deuteronomic principle of retribution, Gottwald writes, "the situational key to the theology of Lamentations [is] in the tension between Deuteronomic faith and historical adversity."[34] While the precise force of that tension has been called into question (see ch. 1 of the present work), its existence is nevertheless clear, and the theology of Deuteronomy is one of the key factors influencing the biblical theology of Lamentations.

The Deuteronomic covenant creates several core beliefs which find expression within Lamentations. First, the status of the Hebrew people as the elect of Yahweh is explicitly stated in

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[31] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 30.

[32] Yahweh alone is responsible for upholding the covenant; it is therefore a certainty (Gen 15:12–21).

[33] One of the few voices of dissent, Erhard S. Gerstenberger, writes that Lamentations does not depend upon the Deuteronomic covenant, but, rather, "seems to presuppose a close (marital?) relationship of YHWH to Zion and Jerusalem," and the poet seeks to understand his experience of trauma in those terms. See Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Elusive Lamentations: What Are They About?" *Int* 67, no. 2 (2013): 131. This, however, seems more akin to the thought of ANE literature such as the SCL than to the theological milieu of Lamentations.

[34] Gottwald, *Studies*, 50–53, here at 52–53.

Deuteronomy and presupposed by the poet of Lamentations (Deuteronomy 7:6–8). Second, as rightly observed by Gottwald, the principle of retributive justice is found in each text (Deuteronomy 31:30–32:46 [the Song of Moses; see esp. 32:35–36]; Lamentations 1:21c–22; 3:64–66; 4:21–22). Third, and crucially for the present study, the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 27–28 and Leviticus 26 form the backdrop for the imprecations of Lamentations, providing model curses upon which the poet crafted his own.[35] Finally, the covenant curses themselves, according to Deuteronomy 30:1–10 (esp. v. 7), will be reversed and visited upon the enemies of Israel if the people will repent and return to covenant fidelity following any breach which would cause those curses to befall the nation.

The imprecations demonstrate each of these core Deuteronomic tenets, but their theology is found across the entirety of the book. Indeed, the poet's grief is at least partly Deuteronomic in origin. The people broke covenant with Yahweh, and they now stand cursed. The punishment, however, has been excruciating, and the poet wonders if they have been utterly cast off by Yahweh (Lamentations 5:21–22) or if they can ever be restored. Still, Yahweh is a just God, and he will fulfill the remainder of his word in the covenant: the nations which oppress his people will themselves face his wrath once his people repent and turn to him once more.

Davidic Covenant

A final covenantal motif running throughout the poems of Lamentations is the Davidic covenant. As observed by Albrektson, Gottwald, Westermann, Miriam J. Bier, Alan Mintz, William D. Reyburn, and Magne Saebø, the poet relies no less upon the Davidic covenant, political thought,

[35] Indeed, Flanders finds no fewer than twenty-five substantive affinities/parallel motifs between Lamentations and the covenant curses. See idem, "Covenant Curses," 100–3.

and Zionist traditions than the Deuteronomic and Abrahamic covenants.[36] The poems, then, are a constellation of covenantal concerns, not merely the expression of a single pact made with Yahweh at a punctiliar moment in the history of Israel.

Like the elements of the Abrahamic covenant, the beliefs arising from the Davidic covenant are not explicit within Lamentations, but they are nonetheless foundational for the poems, both in terms of their theology and in their very existence: the poet mourns the loss of Zion, the city of David—and the accompanying Davidic monarchy—first and foremost.[37] Without a king and a king-city, the people of Judah are cast adrift to contemplate their place among the nations and as the covenant people of Yahweh. He had promised a king from the line of David would reign upon the throne of Israel in perpetuity (2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 2:1–4; 1 Chronicles 17), and without that monarchy, the people were forced into a crisis of identity.[38]

This crisis entailed fresh expressions of grief and public outworking of trauma which mirrored earlier Davidic forms. The imprecatory psalms, as noted earlier, are almost entirely Davidic in origin, and a number of other imprecations and curses throughout the Psalter are

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[36] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 219–30; Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 171–72; Westermann, *Lamentations*, 95; Miriam J. Bier, *'Perhaps There Is Hope': Reading Lamentations as a Polyphony of Pain, Penitence, and Protest*, LHBOTS 603 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 10–11; Alan Mintz, *Ḥurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, Jewish Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art (New York: Columbia University, 1984; repr., Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1996), 20; William D. Reyburn, *A Handbook on Lamentations* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 1; Magne Saebø, "Who Is 'The Man' in Lamentations 3? A Fresh Approach to the Interpretation of the Book of Lamentations," in *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, LHBOTS 152, ed. A. Graeme Auld (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 304.

[37] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 219–30; Westermann, *Lamentations*, 95. According to Albrektson, the "theological tradition of inviolability of Zion" forms "the background to the theology of the Book of Lamentations, to the intense struggle with the problem of how one should make sense of the catastrophe and find the key to it." See idem, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 223.

[38] To be sure, the hope of a restored monarchy was pervasive, as is evident in other texts (Jer 30:9; Ezek 34:23–24, 37:24–25; Ps 89:4–5, 35–38). Nevertheless, the present catastrophe was cause indeed for doubt and thoughtful reflection upon the conditions of the Davidic covenant.

likewise ascribed to his hand.[39] Both the theology and the forms of the poems of Lamentations, then, are Davidic. They reflect both Israelite (or, more precisely, Judahite) belief in the significance and promise of the continued Davidic monarchy and the types of poetry which David himself composed, including lament and imprecation.

This Davidic inclination also finds life in the underlying Zionist traditions of Lamentations. The Davidic monarchy itself is only half of the equation of the Davidic covenant in this later work; by the time of the composition of Lamentations in the exilic era, Jerusalem itself was linked inextricably to the monarchy, and Zion was considered inviolable.[40] The imprecations, relying upon the goodness of Yahweh toward his people, also depend upon the "election of Zion," and the poet struggles throughout the songs to come to terms with the destruction precisely because of that election.[41] Zion belongs to Yahweh—it is, after all, "Daughter Zion" (בַּת־צִיּוֹן)—but it lies in ruins. This was not what Yahweh had promised David, and the survivors of the city of David underwent no small theological crisis in grappling with the destruction commanded by Yahweh himself. The personified city is thus a testament to the significance of Zion and Zion traditions in the thought of the poet, and the imprecations cement this Davidic foundation.

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[39] Psalms 7, 12, 58, 59, 69, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137, 139, and 140 constitute the imprecatory psalms, and Pss 5:1; 10:2b, 15; 11:6; 17:13; 31:18; 35:4–8, 26; 40:15–16; 55:16, 24; 70:4; 71:13; 74:11; 104:35; 119:78; and 143:12 are standalone imprecations. Of these, eight (Pss 7, 12, 58, 59, 69, 109, 139, and 140) are attributed to David in the MT, although the LXX attributes Ps 94 (LXX Ps 93) and Ps 137 (LXX Ps 136) to David as well. See ch. 3 of this dissertation for a treatment of the imprecatory psalms.

[40] Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology*, 223–30; F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NAC 16 (Nashville: B&H, 1993), 446.

[41] Jože Krašovec, "The Source of Hope in the Book of Lamentations," *VT* 42, no. 2 (1992): 230.

Hope and Blessing

A final core component of the theology of Lamentations is the twin concern of hope and blessing. The book itself is not one of optimism (or positivity in any fashion), and statements of hope are scant. Chapter 3 is most frequently touted as the primary locus of hope for the book, particularly its central passage declaring anew the mercies and faithfulness of Yahweh (vv. 21–33).[42] However, both Lamentations 4:22 and 5:21–22 offer hope for restoration.[43] The former couches its expression of hope as a veiled curse, and the latter surrounds its hope with skepticism.[44] Nevertheless, hope is present in both places, and the poet clings to that hope as he ends his book hoping for true restoration to both the land and the covenant with Yahweh.[45]

Hope is also encapsulated in the imprecations, even if it assumes there a darker character. As Assis writes, the imprecation of Lamentations 1:21c–22 features an almost malevolent optimism for the future: "The only hope expressed in this chapter is that the enemies will suffer like Zion (v. 22)."[46] Boase concurs, seeing in the first imprecation a "hope for Zion" expressed as

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[42] Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 2–4; Elie Assis, "The Unity of the Book of Lamentations," *CBQ* 71, no. 2 (2009): 311–12; John F. Brug, "Biblical Acrostics and Their Relationship to Other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics," in *The Bible in Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8, ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 286; Federico Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing': A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament*, VTSup 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 230–36.

[43] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, BibOr 44 (Rome: Editrice Pontifico Istituto Biblico, 1993), 93–4. Heath A. Thomas refers to Lam 4:21–22 as "the most explicit statement of hope in the book," marking a "significant shift in tone." See Heath A. Thomas, *Poetry and Theology in the Book of Lamentations: The Aesthetics of an Open Text*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 47 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 227. Similarly, Adele Berlin describes those verses as "the most hopeful note in the entire book of Lamentations." See Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 114.

[44] "Der letzte Vers de Leidens enthält keine verzweifelte und verbitterte Frage, sondern ein eindringliches, hoffnungsvolles Nachfragen." See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)*, 2nd ed., BKAT 20 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), 91.

[45] Assis, "Unity," 310–11.

[46] Ibid., 310.

a prayer wish.[47] The imprecation of Lamentations 3:64–66 is likewise darkly hopeful, with an expectation for the future judgment of the enemies through the retributive justice of Yahweh.[48] That the enemies of Israel—and thus the enemies of Yahweh—could and would be ultimately destroyed just as they had destroyed Zion is fundamental to the imprecations, and that truth is expressed as hopeful petitions that such retribution would come swiftly.

The hopeful expectation of the judgment of the enemies is intrinsically connected in Lamentations to the Day of Yahweh.[49] Yahweh functions in Lamentations akin to Enlil in Mesopotamian laments: he is "the divine warrior who goes into battle" to avenge his people.[50] As such, the poet calls upon him, not only to end the suffering of Israel, but also to enact retributive justice which will act as final judgment upon those mortals who have caused that suffering. Throughout the poems, the Day of Yahweh appears in that context, with its fullest expression and development appearing in the imprecations' direct call for justice and vengeance.[51] Indeed, the retribution of the imprecations "is to take the form of a 'day' of judgment on the enemies. The assumption made is that Yahweh's sway is universal, and what he has already brought on Israel, 'the day of his anger' (v [1:]12) should also come on those who laughed at her fall."[52]

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[47] Elizabeth Boase, *The Fulfilment of Doom? The Dialogic Interaction between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early Exilic Prophetic Literature*, LHBOTS 437 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 235. See also Joyce, "Grief Process," 306.

[48] Boase, "Characterisation," 38.

[49] Gottwald, *Studies*, 60.

[50] Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep*, 55–61, here at 55.

[51] Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)*, 34; Otto Plöger, "Die Klagelieder," in *Die Fünf Megilloth*, HAT 18 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 139; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth—Das Hohe Lied—Das Klagelieder* (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1962; repr., Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1970), 216.

[52] Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations: A New Translation and Commentary*, AB 7A, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 91.

Outside of the imprecations, chapter 2 features the largest exposition of the Day of Yahweh, describing as it does the judgment already faced by Zion as the result of false prophets (v. 14).[53]

The timing of the Day of Yahweh is thus a past, present, and future event. Retribution is called for in the present age, but final judgment may not come until the eschaton, rendering the satisfaction of the poet in the far (unknown) future. With that said, however, there is also a sense in Lamentations, particularly ch. 2 (as noted above), in which the Day of Yahweh is a past event, corresponding with the destruction of Jerusalem.[54] The poet both describes the horrors of living through the Day of Yahweh even as he longs for its wrath to be turned against the enemies which brought such destruction to the walls of Zion. All of human history—indeed, time itself—is distilled by the poet into that single moment when Yahweh turns his fierce anger upon the humans he created in his own image, and the punishment will be past, present, and future.

Synthesis

The book of Lamentations features several prominent theological motifs, each of which speaks to the experience of suffering and tragedy during the catastrophe of 587. The poems have much to say about the character of Yahweh and his relationship with his chosen people through various covenants, and it is in the framework of those covenants that the poet also engages in theodicy while exploring a hope for future vindication. Each of these themes appear in the imprecations as well, and the curses refine some of the motifs beyond the rest of the text (particularly future hope for vindication and Yahweh's inherent justice). As such, anyone who seeks the theological core

[53] Bo Johnson, "Form and Message in Lamentations," *ZAW* 97, no. 1 (1985): 64–65.

[54] The correlation of the Day of Yahweh to the past is unprecedented in Scripture: "Uniquely in the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations identifies a past event with the Day of Yahweh as the time of judgment." See Gottwald, *Hebrew Bible*, 169.

of Lamentations need look no further than the imprecations of 1:21c–22 and 3:64–66. They do not promote a single "theological key" in terms of delineating a unified theological background, but they are nevertheless summary statements of the larger theology of the book and its author.

Canonical Theology: The Place of Lamentations

Lamentations in the Canon

Ched Spellman, in his monograph on canonical theology, reminds scholars to ask a fundamental question when assessing any biblical book: why did the compilers of the canon include the text?[55] In the case of Lamentations, that question may be more difficult to answer than for other books. After all, Lamentations is a series of mournful dirges and laments over the destruction of a single city; surely to the average reader it has a minor place in the warp and woof of ancient Israelite history and theology. Clearly, however, the compilers of the OT canon disagreed with that assessment. The weeping poems of Lamentations showcase the human dimension of the loss of the Judahite capital, adding emotional context to the historical depictions of the fall across the narrative books of the OT. Without it, the destruction of Jerusalem lacks emotive force within the pages of Scripture; it remains a significant historical event, but it does not become a truly devastating, personal loss to the covenant people.

Because of the emotional dimension of the poems, the Tanakh has featured Lamentations in a variety of places within the canon, typically grouped with the other Megilloth, which, on the whole, offer more human insight than other books of the OT, which tend to focus more on pure history. When the Megilloth are positioned in the beginning of the Ketuvim in a given codex,

[55] Ched Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon*, New Testament Monographs 34 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 46–48.

Lamentations typically falls toward the beginning or center of the Scrolls; when they are placed at the end of the Writings, the book is usually in the center but occasionally the end of the collection. However, the Megilloth typically fall in the middle of the Ketuvim, and Lamentations is usually found in fourth position within those books.[56] In that place, Lamentations serves to prepare readers for the exilic book of Esther while continuing the emphasis of Song of Songs on the love of Yahweh.[57] The MT establishes a chiasm among the Megilloth, placing Qoheleth in the center and pairing Ruth and Esther (A and A′) and Song of Songs and Lamentations (B and B′). The collection thus revolves around prominent female characters as well as the experience of the perceived absence of Yahweh; for Lamentations, these themes are present in spades.[58] That Lamentations is set opposite the Song may be due to considerations of length—the two are of comparable size—or their status as the two poetic books of the Megilloth.[59] Regardless, Lamentations forms the opposite of Song of Songs: instead of poetry of love, it is comprised of songs of death.[60]

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[56] J. Andrew Dearman and Sabelyn A. Pussman, "Putting Ruth in Her Place: Some Observations on Canonical Ordering and the History of the Book's Interpretation," *HBT* 27 (2005): 76–77; Timothy J. Stone, *The Compilational History of the Megilloth: Canon, Contoured Intertextuality and Meaning in the Writings*, FAT 59 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 182–202.

[57] Stone, *Compilational History*, 182–202. In the words of Stone, Lamentations "begins [the] national-historical series" of texts which includes Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. See ibid., 201–3, here at 203.

[58] Ibid., 205–7. The MT order also reflects the liturgical year, mirroring the use of the Scrolls during their respective festivals. Arranging books according to use and chronology is common across the OT. See Dearman and Pussman, "Putting Ruth in Her Place," 74–75.

[59] Stone, *Compilational History*, 206–7. If Stone's proposed chiasm in the Megilloth is correct, however, another potential reason for the pairing emerges based on the female presence of the five books. Both Ruth and Esther have explicit, central female characters. The Song and Lamentations, however, have a variety of speakers, only two of whom are overtly female (discounting the choral voice of the daughters of Jerusalem in the Song) and who are in dialogue with other male speakers. Qoheleth, for its part, lacks a female speaker, and the feminine presence is implied only via a borrowing of Lady Wisdom of Proverbs. The feminine emphasis thus fades as one journeys toward the center of the collection and strengthens at either end.

[60] Greg Goswell, "The Order of the Books in the Hebrew Bible," *JETS* 51, no. 4 (2008): 675–85. Goswell, along with Stone, further note that the order of Jeremiah–Lamentations stems from the assumption of the

Lamentations in Canonical Theology

Despite its somewhat fluid placement among the Scrolls and the Ketuvim as corpora, the canonicity of Lamentations has never been questioned.[61] It may be, as some have it, one of the "forgotten books of the Bible," but it is part of the Christian canon nonetheless and has always been accepted as such.[62] It is therefore necessary to engage in the task of canonical theology, connecting the biblical theology of Lamentations with that of the larger OT canon.[63] Such a study reveals many commonalities and intertextual links across the various books and collections of the OT, solidifying the canonical status of Lamentations.[64] Each of the theological motifs mentioned above are found in both Lamentations and the wider OT canon, and it is important to observe that Lamentations speaks with the same voice as the rest of the canon on each issue.

The nature and character of Yahweh is a primary concern of the entire OT. His nature as preexistent is established in the first verse of the first book, and his character is described from that point until the last verse of the last book. Perhaps the most explicit statements concerning Yahweh appear in credal form in Exodus 34:6–7. There Yahweh describes himself as relational,

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translators/compilers of the LXX that the two books share common authorship; shared theological motifs were not considered. See ibid., 674; Stone, *Compilational History*, 201.

[61] Hillers, *Lamentations*, 8; Robert B. Salters, *Lamentations: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, ICC (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010), 3.

[62] Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible: Recovering the Five Scrolls for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).

[63] Interestingly, it is precisely this endeavor which is disparaged by Alan Cooper, who writes that, in light of the similarities between Lamentations and ANE literature such as the SCL, "there is no longer any intrinsic reason to read the book of Lamentations in the light of the biblical canon, or to fit it into the frame of some 'biblical theology.'" See Alan Cooper, "The Message of Lamentations," *JANES* 28, no. 1 (2001): 15. Cooper is mistaken here. Any book included in the canon is worthy of study from a canonical perspective, and Lamentations is no exception.

[64] There has been in recent years a backlash against the inclusion of Lamentations in the Christian canon, primarily because of its use of imagery involving violence (particularly sexual violence) against women. See Pyper, "Reading Lamentations," 55–68; Paul M. Joyce and Diana Lipton, *Lamentations through the Centuries*, Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 28–29. However, these attempts have not been taken seriously by either the academic guild or the wider church.

faithful, concerned with justice, and a God of love, compassion, and covenant fidelity.[65] Those verses also depict Yahweh as wrathful, a God who hates sin and will punish it accordingly, even showing his anger to the descendants of the original transgressors. Such hatred of sin expressed in judgment and wrath is a result of Yahweh's intrinsic nature as a holy, righteous God who demands the same of his people.[66] That Yahweh is a creator who seeks to dwell among his creations is evident in his presence in the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle, and the temple, with the last being described using creation imagery in the Former Prophets, the Psalter, and the Latter Prophets; Yahweh is truly a relational God.[67] The holiness, love, and justice of Yahweh depicted in each of these texts are stressed throughout in the canon in innumerable texts which follow this initial self-revelation, including the poems of Lamentations.

Moreover, the OT as a whole is also concerned with theodicy. Nowhere is this more evident than the book of Job, the greatest theodical text of either Testament. Job's questioning of his current state of suffering and loss opens the door to a variety of possible answers, each of which is (inaccurately) offered by one of his three friends.[68] In the end, however, Job does not receive a direct answer; instead, Yahweh "gives Job something far better: himself."[69] Yahweh's extended response to Job (Job 38–41) is part rebuke and part self-disclosure. Job has no standing to question him, Yahweh says, because he alone is God and controls the cosmos. The solution to

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[65] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 215–28.

[66] Ralph L. Smith, *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method, and Message* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 205–223; James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 104–6.

[67] Hamilton finds such imagery in 1 Kings 6–8; Pss 23, 29, 104; and Hag 2:7. The ark of the covenant is linked to both the temple and the cosmos in Isa 66; Pss 99, 132; Lam 2; and 1 Chr 28. See James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 225–238.

[68] Hamilton, *God's Glory*, 301–5.

[69] Ibid., 303.

the theodicy of Job, then, is to abandon questions for faith in Yahweh. Such cries of faith in the midst of suffering are likewise found in Lamentations (see above).[70]

Next, it is undeniable that a major emphasis of the OT is the various covenants which span the story of Israel. While the precise nature of covenants in the OT, including both the terminology and the number of covenants made, is disputed, the idea of a formal agreement or treaty governing Yahweh's relationship with humanity is found across the entire canon.[71] Each of the five covenants Yahweh makes with his people creates a framework for both the composition and later redaction of the OT corpus, with texts being composed or edited to accommodate the presuppositions of Yahweh's covenants with Noah, Abra(ha)m, Moses, and David (with the Latter Prophets speaking of a final new covenant in the future).[72] These covenants are primarily concerned with promises concerning the land and the monarchy, but they nevertheless feature strict demands of obedience and fidelity, with curses promised if the covenant terms are violated by the human party. Lamentations, for its part, does not incorporate the Noahic covenant, nor is it concerned with the forthcoming new covenant spoken of by the prophets, but its emphases on

[70] Significantly, as Yahweh answers him, Job engages in expressions of humility and self-deprecation (Job 40:3–5; 42:1–6). Similar language is used to describe the self-perception of the people amidst their suffering in Lam 3:45, the only verse of Lamentations to find quotation (or, at the very least, allusion) in the NT, appearing almost verbatim in 1 Cor 4:13b. Theodical concerns are thus shared across the entire canon. See Anthony T. Hanson, "1 Corinthians 4:13b and Lamentations 3:45," *ExpTim* 93 (1982): 214–5.

[71] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 413–19; Smith, *Old Testament Theology*. 139–63. Smith identifies five covenants, including the prophesied new covenant, in the OT: the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the new; he dismisses any proposed Adamic covenant. See idem, *Old Testament Theology*, 151–63. John H. Walton agrees, seeing the various covenants as a type of progressive revelation of Yahweh to the people, culminating in his presence with them. Such a process precludes Yahweh's relationship with Adam on the basis it required no special revelation or covenantal terms. Significantly, however, Walton also omits the Noahic covenant from his discussion. See John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 114–28.

[72] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 419; John Barton, *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature and Theology: Collected Essays of John Barton*, SOTSMS (New York: Routledge, 2007), 269–78.

the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants nevertheless place it in good canonical company in its treatment of the agreements governing Yahweh's relationship with his people Israel.

Finally, the Day of Yahweh is a particular concern of the Latter Prophets and appears prominently throughout the Book of the Twelve.[73] The Day of Yahweh motif envisions the final vindication of Israel, a day on which the wrath of Yahweh will be poured out against her enemies while she herself is restored to her previous relationship with him. This may include a special outpouring of grace (Joel 3:1–5), a judgment of the nations (Joel 4:1–21; Amos 1:2–2:3; Malachi 3:1–24), and full restoration to the land and of the Davidic monarchy (Amos 9:11–15; Malachi 3:4).[74] Lamentations, particularly its imprecations, speaks of the Day of Yahweh in similar language, although, as previously noted, there is a degree to which the Day is associated with the destruction of Jerusalem itself, as the devastation of Zion is the exemplar of the wrath of Yahweh.

Lamentations thus shares its primary theology with the wider OT canon, and each motif of the poems appears in larger segments and other collections throughout the corpus. It is significant to note that the theology remains constant across the OT. Lamentations does not offer a disparate voice in the canon; rather, the poet sings with the unified voice of the remainder of Scripture, echoing what has come before him and connecting that network of beliefs with the voice of the prophets which comes after him.

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[73] Blessing Onoriode Boloje and Alphonso Groenewald, "Malachi's Eschatological Day of Yahweh: Its Dual Roles of Cultic Restoration and Enactment of Social Justice (Mal 3:1–5; 3:16–4:6)," *OTE* 27, no. 1 (2014): 53–54.

[74] Ibid., 66–76; Barton, *The Old Testament*, 280–87.

Summary

As Michael Anthony Abril observes, "the task of theology is not to say *better* what Scripture already says, but to allow Scripture to speak in a new way and to new situations."[75] The poems of Lamentations speak on particular subjects in particular ways, but they nevertheless speak with the unified voice of Scripture. Their treatment of the nature and character of Yahweh, theodicy, the covenants, and the hope for future vindication found on the Day of Yahweh all echo the theology of the canon as a whole. The poet of Lamentations thus engages in a truly canonical theology even as he crafts the biblical theology of his own particular book.

The place of Lamentations in the canon is testimony to its orthodoxy. It may be among the more emotional books of the OT—if not the most emotional outright—but its emotive content reinforces the orthodox message of its songs. The people are suffering in the aftermath of 587, but they suffer as the people of Yahweh, bound to him through the covenants and hopeful that he will one day restore and reinstate them to their proper place as his chosen, blessed people. In this, the book provides a balance to the rest of the Megilloth and the Ketuvim. As part of the Ketuvim, it restates themes of the Psalter and Wisdom books while focusing on the singular event which forms its *Sitz im Leben*. As the fourth Scroll, it moves the collection forward in time, moving beyond the conquest of Canaan (Ruth) and the days of Solomon (Qoheleth and Song of Songs) and prepares the reader for the exile and the deliverance of the Jews (Esther). All the while, it reminds the reader of the hope of Israel in Yahweh: even amidst devastation, Yahweh will hear the prayer of the people and work for their good if only they will turn to him.

[75] Michael Anthony Abril, "Lamentations 5:21 within the Development of Thomas Aquinas' Theology of the Grace of Conversion," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 3 (2014): 272, emphasis original.

These themes, so prevalent across both the OT in general and Lamentations in particular, find their clearest expression within the book in the imprecations of Lamentations. It is impossible to pray for curses upon one's enemies without first holding a constellation of beliefs concerning who Yahweh is and his relationship with his people, and each of these foundational theological principles are present in the imprecations. Yahweh must be good; he must be just; he must answer prayers; he must be capable of bringing both salvation and destruction; and he must work for the good of his chosen people. Without these beliefs, the imprecations collapse—as does, not only Lamentations, but the entirety of the Old Testament. The imprecations thus express both a biblical theology of Lamentations and an OT canonical theology.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Conclusions from the Present Study

Structure of Lamentations

The initial focus of the present study has been on the structure of the book of Lamentations. Previous scholars have focused primarily on the form and function of the alphabetical acrostic which dominates the first four chapters of the book to such a degree that the aberrant fifth and final chapter has become the object of scrutiny precisely because of its deviation from this acrostic pattern. Attempts to discern a unifying macrostructure across all five of the poems have been extremely limited and thoroughly indebted to the concentric design posited by Johan Renkema in his landmark analysis.[1] While Renkema's concentricity has been met with both approval and opprobrium, his emphasis on the larger structure of Lamentations is commendable both for its novelty among the literature and its magisterial scope.

With that said, however, Renkema does not find connections between the poems beyond a roughly chiastic organizational pattern and shared vocabulary and theological motifs.[2] This dissertation has moved beyond the work of Renkema and others to demonstrate another macrostructure to the book of Lamentations. As demonstrated here, the poems repeat a cycle of description/observation, lament, and imprecation, with the curses at the end of the first and third chapters functioning as compositional seams or hinges to bind together the songs. Lamentations is thus composed of three major sections which ultimately end with an inversion of the pattern:

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[1] Johan Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations (I-IV)," in *Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, LHBOTS 74, ed. Willem van der Meer and Johannes C. de Moor (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1988), 294–396.

[2] See ch. 1 of the present study for an analysis of Renkema's work.

chapter 5 lacks the alphabetical acrostic, and it also lacks the expected final imprecation. Instead, the poet ends on a note of tentative hope for restoration which serves as the climax of the book. The poet thus moves from tears of sorrow to tears of anger and back again as he speaks in a variety of voices across the songs, and the imprecations become an integral feature of the book as a whole.

Theology of Lamentations

The words of Jacob Milgrom, quoted in the previous chapter, bear repeating here: "In a word, structure is theology."[3] Similarly, Paul D. Hanson notes the connection of structure and cognitive environment; texts are strategically composed to reflect the worldview of the author, and such reflection includes the structure of the text.[4] Lamentations presents just such a text: the poet has interwoven his lived experience and the language of divine justice in a particular structure, ultimately crafting a unified work which remains thoroughly poetic in every sense and which emphasizes imprecatory elements and their accompanying theological motifs.[5]

Given that the structure of Lamentations highlights the imprecations, serving as they do as compositional seam points, it is no surprise to discover the imprecations are as significant theologically as they are structurally. The theology inherent in the imprecations includes beliefs from the Abrahamic, Deuteronomic, and Davidic covenants; concerns of theodicy; the Day of Yahweh; and the very nature and character of Yahweh. Without a proper backing from and

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[3] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27,* AB 3B (New Haven: Yale, 2001), 2129–30.

[4] Paul D. Hanson, "Compositional Techniques in the Book of Haggai," in *Exploring the* Longue Durée: *Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager*, ed. J. David Schloen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 167–69.

[5] Carleen Mandolfo, "Talking Back: The Perseverance of Justice in Lamentation," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, SBLSS 43, ed. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 51.

treatment of each of these theological foundations, the imprecations fall apart. Similarly, the book of Lamentations as a whole is concerned with each of these areas of theology; rather than being a book written from a single theological vantage point, Lamentations offers five poems which incorporate each of these motifs and concerns. Moreover, each of the songs offers something on each of these points, and the imprecations serve as summary statements of the wider beliefs presented in the collection.

Lamentations presents such theological musings from a place of darkness and pain; the poet offers little in the way of hope or joy, but his God is no less central to him than to any psalmist of praise. With that said, the book does conclude on a note of questioning, uncertain hope, demonstrating that the compassion of Yahweh is to be found even amidst the deepest of sorrows. In the end, one must agree with Walter C. Bouzard: "For this poet, lament proceeds as it does for all of us: a cry in the enveloping darkness, at the beginning of the watches (2:19) and continuing until we are at long last met with the joy of Easter dawn."[6] Lament and imprecation have a checkered history in the church of Jesus Christ, but they always, for those of faith, give way to hope, just as they do for the poet of Lamentations.[7]

[6] Walter C. Bouzard, "Boxed by the Orthodox: The Function of Lamentations 3:22–39 in the Message of the Book," in *Why?... How Long? Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, LHBOTS 552, ed. LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 82.

[7] By way of example, for an overview of the use and prohibition of imprecatory texts in the Reformed tradition, see Christian Grosse, "Praying against the Enemy: Imprecatory Prayer and Reformed Identity from the Reformation to the Early Enlightenment," *French Historical Studies* 40, no. 3 (2017): 409–23.

Contribution of Research

This dissertation offers contributions to various areas of scholarly inquiry. First, the primary contribution lies in its analysis of Lamentations. As stated above, the conclusions of the present study revolve around two main foci: the structure of Lamentations and its biblical theology. This work offers an overview of the macrostructure of the book and the significant segments within that macrostructure, delineating *Gattungen* and syntactic features which figure prominently into the compositional strategy of the text. This is a lacuna in current Lamentations scholarship, and no present study emphasizes the imprecations of the poems. Likewise, the study of the biblical theology of Lamentations has waned in recent research, and contemporary studies have sought to interpret the poems through the lenses of various modern critical theories instead of grammatical-historical exegesis or other inductive methodologies. The analysis of the biblical theology of the poems and the connection of that theology to canonical theology is another central contribution of the present work.

Additionally, a robust survey of ANE imprecations is largely absent in existing scholarship. While diverse texts analyze the belief systems undergirding the curses of particular cultures (with ancient Egypt a perennial favorite), a comparative study of the curses of cultures across the ANE is lacking in the literature. This dissertation fills that gap, performing an analysis of imprecatory theology and grammar across canonical, Egyptian, Mesopotamian (especially Sumerian), Hittite, Phoenician, Luwian, and postexilic Jewish curses. Ultimately, this examination of these imprecations establishes a definitional matrix for the future evaluation of other ANE curses, both imprecations proper and other curses, with imprecations identified by the inability of the petitioner to enact justice; a petition to a deity or other divine agent who can and

will answer prayers; and an emphasis on retributive justice. This dissertation thus contributes to ANE and comparative studies as well as to biblical studies.

To the area of biblical studies outside of Lamentations, this dissertation makes its final contribution. Chapters 3 and 4 establish a canonical theology of imprecation through the investigation of OT curses, particularly those of the imprecatory psalms. This analysis upholds the proffered definition of imprecation found across ANE curse texts and firmly places the OT canon in its cultural and cognitive environments. A brief analysis of NT imprecations establishes the validity of that definition across the entirety of the canon. While the imprecatory psalms themselves are the objects of no small amount of scrutiny, the remainder of the canonical curses have largely been neglected in the literature, and this dissertation provides a remedy to that oversight. Ultimately, the canonical curses are shown in this dissertation to serve a deeply theological purpose: they establish a series of implicit beliefs about Yahweh, including his power and agency, and place humanity and its petitions within that context. The relationship between God and his creation is therefore on full display in the canonical imprecations, and the imprecatory pleas demonstrate the expectations of both parties for each other.

Areas for Further Study

The present study offers several contributions to the field and broaches a variety of topics, but future research may expand upon the conclusions presented here in a number of ways. To conclude this dissertation, five possible areas for further study will be discussed below: the examination of ANE curse texts; the comparison of Lamentations with the imprecatory psalms; the comparison of Lamentations with the wisdom psalms; the examination of the role of Yahweh in Lamentations; and the analysis of compositional seams across the canon.

Examination of ANE Curse Texts

First, while this work contributes to the overall study of ANE curse texts, it is necessarily a cursory survey. Future research into ANE imprecations is needed.[8] Such research, like the present work, should include (at a minimum) the grammar and theology of such curses. Imprecations are extant in a variety of languages, as demonstrated by the present work, and future research could delve more fully into inscriptionary and literary curses present in Akkadian, Hittite, Ugaritic, Aramaic, and other related languages. Such linguistic consideration must take into account both comparative grammar and the various nuances of a given language in order to fully treat the theology of the imprecation. Moreover, given the magical essence of some ANE curses, future work should also take pains to properly differentiate between curses and imprecations proper, as the latter is more theological than magical in nature. Such work could create categories of curses beyond what exists at present, and these categories could then be applied to canonical curses in additional comparative studies.

Comparison with Imprecatory Psalms

The imprecatory psalms are natural dialogue partners with Lamentations. While some work has been done to compare the poems of the latter with those belonging to the category of the former, it remains an area which could yield fruitful results in future research. As observed in the present study, the two share a number of features and theological motifs, and these similarities deserve exploration in more depth. Moreover, the differences between the two require cataloging and

[8] The present work has primarily focused on Babylonian and Sumerian curse texts with some consideration of imprecations from other sources, but additional literature from other cultures could be a focal point for additional study. Future research could, for example, expand its scope to treat more fully the various Assyrian curse texts found in *ARAB*, among other such imprecations.

classification. Lamentations is not a collection of formal lament psalms, despite its obvious affinities with that *Gattung*, and an analysis of the distinctions between the poems of Lamentations and the material, structure, and vocabulary of the imprecatory psalms would illumine both texts.

Comparison with Wisdom Psalms

Similarly, Lamentations shares many affinities with the wisdom psalms. The third chapter in particular expresses manifold wisdom themes, with concerns ranging from Torah to the praise of Yahweh. Lament is not a standard feature of the wisdom psalms, nor is imprecation, but the poet of Lamentations nevertheless incorporates all three traditions in the songs of his book. Like a future comparison of Lamentations to the imprecatory psalms, additional research into the similarities and differences between Lamentations 3 in particular and the wisdom psalms would provide greater insight into the poetic wisdom genre as well as the biblical/canonical theology of such wisdom expressions.

Role of Yahweh in Lamentations

Yahweh never appears in the book of Lamentations, but he is far from absent. The poems have much to say about Yahweh, and this dissertation has demonstrated that theology proper is a central concern of the book as a whole and its imprecations in particular. Yahweh is both destroyer and savior within the poems, a source of both blessing and curse. His role in the book is an area for further scrutiny, especially as illumined by comparative studies. The part and place of Yahweh in enacting curses, creating covenants, protecting his chosen people, etc. could be analyzed in comparison to other ANE deities in similar literature, especially the SCL. Does

Yahweh act like every other ANE deity? Does he comparatively vary in his attitude toward his people as evidenced in Lamentations? These questions and others warrant additional exploration.

Compositional Seams across the Canon

Another area for further research is the existence and function of canonical compositional seams. As discussed in chapter 5 of this study, canonical seams are found in a number of books across the OT. The structural analysis of each book in both Testaments would bear great fruit and could serve to further confirm the presence of compositional seams in a number of books as well as sundry corpora. The OT Writings in particular merit further scrutiny in this area, but all collections and books of the Bible should be examined for their compositional strategy and the function of discrete segments within the larger text.

Imprecation in the Church Age

A final area for future study is the role of curse/imprecation within the life of the church. While Grosse has provided a brief survey of imprecatory prayer in the period from the Reformation to the Enlightenment, such research can be extended.[9] Given the fundamental theology of imprecations and curses, the question of their role in worship, including private and corporate prayer as well as hymnody, should be revisited. Lamentations remains inspired Scripture, as do the other canonical imprecations, and this fact alone should merit consideration for greater use in the life of the church.

[9] Grosse, "Praying against the Enemy," 409–23.

APPENDIX 1: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF IMPRECATORY PASSAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Gospels: Matthew 10:14–15//Luke 10:10–12

The first imprecation of the NT is found, either interestingly or horrifyingly depending on one's perspective, on the lips of Jesus Christ. The account of Matthew 10 is the narrative of the sending of the Twelve and recounts Christ's instructions to the apostles before they went into the cities of Israel to conduct ministry after the pattern he himself had established (i.e., preaching, healing, and deliverance; Matthew 10:7–8). The first set of these instructions appears in Matthew 10:5–15//Mark 6:10–11//Luke 9:3–5 and includes a command to "shake off the dust of your feet" should anyone reject the message of the apostles or deny them hospitality (Matthew 10:14//Mark 6:11//Luke 9:5). The order is repeated at the sending of the seventy-two in Luke 10:10. There, however, Luke adds the remainder of the command from Matthew 10:14–15, and it is here in Matthew 10:14–15//Luke 10:10–12 that the first NT imprecation appears.[1]

The "enemies" are those who reject the apostles' message, a fundamentally NT proclamation—but the curse such rejection earns echoes OT prophetic actions and imprecations from beginning to end. The very act of shaking off the dust of one's feet is prophetic and signifies judgment; those who reject the gospel have no connection to Christ or his followers

[1] The verses in question are completely absent from the Markan account. If Matthew antedates Luke, then two possibilities emerge: the pronouncement of curse and judgment may have originated in Matthew and been adapted by Luke, or the verses in question may have been part of Q and thus come from a source common to both Gospels. See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 424.

whatsoever and will face the consequences.[2] The curse itself is simple: the wrath of God when he presides as judge at the eschaton (Matthew 10:15//Luke 10:11b–12). Indeed, such will be the judgment poured out upon those cities (and individuals) that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) will pale in comparison.[3] Darrell L. Bock asserts that the punishment will increase because knowledge has increased: whereas Sodom and Gomorrah had only partial revelation and rejected the morality of Yahweh, the cities which refuse the apostles reject a fuller revelation of Jesus Christ and centuries of Torah. Their sin is greater because their knowledge is greater—therefore their punishment will be greater as well.[4]

The reference to the paradigmatic judgment of the OT in addition to the prophetic action places the words of Christ firmly in OT territory.[5] Moreover, the declaration of judgment echoes the calls of Jeremiah for naked vengeance. With the curse being uttered by Christ himself, however, it is more difficult to assess the correlation between this and the appeal to divinity to enact the curse found in OT imprecations. The verb phrase makes use of the future indicative of ἐιμί, so it lacks any sense of the subjunctive or volitional moods.[6] Jesus is not making a petition to his Father; he is simply stating a fact about the impending eschatological judgment on those

[2] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, WBC 33A (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 272–73; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 387; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 420.

[3] Luke mentions only Sodom; Matthew gives both cities.

[4] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1002.

[5] Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "Embracing the Psalter's Imprecatory Words in the 21st Century," *AcT Supplementum* 32 (2021): 275–92. By invoking Sodom and Gomorrah in the same way as other OT texts, Christ follows a tradition of imprecation which prevails from the Psalter forward. See Day, *Crying for Justice*, 89–90.

[6] While it is possible for the future tense of Koine Greek to have a subjunctive equivalence, as in the use of the deliberative future, it requires specific constructions (such as emphatic negation, indefinite relative clauses, and some ἵνα clauses) which do not appear in any of the NT imprecations considered in this study. Moreover, there is no overlap whatsoever between the future tense and the optative mood. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 461–84, 571.

who reject his message. Given his own status as the Son, however, the curse still relates divine knowledge and relies upon divine power.

It is perhaps best to see the imprecation in the Gospels as making use of the standard form to the extent logical given the unique status and identity of the imprecator.[7] It is not a perfect structural analog to the curses of the OT, but it nevertheless resembles them to a large degree. The underlying theology is similarly analogous: Christ does not rely on the covenant curses, as he himself has fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17), but the curse remains contingent upon the rejection of the word of God in its current, more complete revelation.[8]

History: Acts

Acts 13:10–11

Acts 13:10–11 is the first standard imprecation within the NT corpus.[9] Paul and Barnabas have arrived on Cyprus and worked their way to the city of Paphos, where they have been summoned

[7] As previously noted, imprecations are only possible when the imprecator is human. Christ, of course, is an interesting exception even as he follows the rule. Being fully divine, he can pronounce judgment; being fully human, however, he may still curse others by invoking his own divinity.

[8] There are many other quasi-imprecations throughout the Gospels. The most obvious candidates are the woe oracles of Matt 11:20–24//Luke 10:13–16 and Matt 23:13–36//Luke 11:42–52. Like the woes of Habakkuk and other prophets, however, they are not full imprecations but instead pronouncements of judgment. Interestingly, like the current imprecation of Matt 10, the woes to the scribes and Pharisees appear only in Matthew and Luke and most likely share the same provenance.

A true curse appears in Matt 21:18–22//Mark 11:12–14, 20–21. Here Jesus curses the barren fig tree, which consequently withers and dies to the amazement of the apostles. The curse is closer to a prophetic action than an imprecation; no appeal is made, and clearly the offended party is able to respond to the hurt he has suffered. It is retributive—a lack of fruit results in the inability to ever bear fruit again—but that is the only component of the cursing of the fig tree which resembles OT imprecations. Nevertheless, Day classifies the fate of the fig tree as a "curse of utter desolation," the unique imprecation available to Christ alone in the NT. See idem, *Crying for Justice*, 100–3.

[9] It is true that Acts 1:20 is a quotation of Ps 69:26 [MT] and Ps 109:8, but, like the similar quotations of Ps 69:5, 10 [MT] in John 2:17, 15:25, the NT text does not use the imprecatory psalms in imprecatory ways. John applies the quotations to the life and person of Jesus (he is both zealous and rejected), and Acts 1:20 applies the psalms to the fate of Judas Iscariot. The quotations are therefore noteworthy but ultimately without direct relevance to the present study.

by Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul (Acts 13:1–7).[10] Now they face opposition from Elymas the magician (the Bar-Jesus of v. 6). Elymas actively tries to subvert the efforts of the missionaries, attempting to keep the proconsul from converting (v. 8). In response, Paul—Luke here uses his Roman name given the Roman context of the narrative—curses Elymas with temporary blindness (vv. 10–11).[11] The curse mirrors that which befell Saul on the road to Damascus and brought about his conversion; it is possible Paul therefore intended the curse to bring about a similar repentance on the part of Bar-Jesus.[12] Paul has therefore cursed the magician in an attempt to convert both Sergius Paulus and Bar-Jesus.

Like the imprecation said by Jesus in Matthew 10:14–15//Luke 10:10–12, the curse is expressed using future indicative of εἰμί; it therefore expresses a future certainty instead of a prayer or other petition or matter of volition (as is obvious from the immediate fulfillment of the curse in v. 11). Paul acts while being "filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 9); the power of the curse thus belongs to God, not Paul.[13] Furthermore, the imprecation is retributive in nature. Bar-Jesus sought to blind the proconsul to the truths of the gospel; he is therefore blinded himself. The imprecation therefore varies from OT curses grammatically, but not theologically.

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[10] The proconsul is described as "a man of intelligence" or "a man of understanding," indicating both his own mental faculties and that "he was not taken in by the magician but was open to hearing the gospel." See I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, TNTC 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 233.

[11] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 559; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 249. Bock sees the change in name, not as contextual, but as an indicator Saul/Paul is now at the forefront of the missionary group. See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 445.

[12] Marshall, *Acts*, 233; Bock, *Acts*, 446; Schnabel, *Acts*, 560.

[13] So Bock, *Acts*, 446.

Acts 23:3

Ten chapters later, Paul finds himself on trial before the Sanhedrin, having been seized in the temple and then required to give an account for his arrest (Acts 21–22). Acts 23 begins with Paul attempting to address the council before being struck on the mouth at the command of Ananias the high priest (vv. 1–2). In response, Paul curses the high priest, saying that he has violated the law in having him struck and, as a result, he will now be struck down by God (v. 3). The imprecation echoes Deuteronomy 28:22: those who disobey the words of Yahweh will be stricken with sundry ills until they are destroyed completely.[14]

Already, then, Paul's imprecation against Ananias aligns with OT tradition, featuring as it does a direct link with the covenant curses of Deuteronomy. Moreover, Paul clearly calls for retribution, but also recognizes that such punishment must come from God, not his own hand—which, in any case, is powerless to act in the present moment. Morphologically, the imprecation is then time expressed by a present (active) indicative with a fronted complementary infinitive (τύπτειν...μέλλει).[15] The curse thus has a future sense even as it is expressed by a present-tense verb. In terms of both theological content and grammatical form, then, the imprecation uttered by Paul against Ananias resembles those of the OT (and earlier NT) curses.

Pauline Epistles

1 Corinthians 16:22

As the canon moves from narratives into epistles, imprecations continue, and Paul once again becomes the primary imprecator of the NT. It is here for the first time in the NT imprecatory

[14] Schnabel, *Acts*, 926; Bock, *Acts*, 669–70.

[15] That the infinitive is fronted indicates the emphasis Paul places on that verb; the retributive aspect of the imprecation receives prominence in the curse.

texts that curse vocabulary is used to craft the imprecation. At the conclusion of his first (extant/canonical) epistle to the Corinthians, Paul declares that all who do not love Jesus are to be ἀνάθεμα.[16] The predicate adjective/subject complement follows εἰμί in the imperative mood, indicating the definiteness of the curse. As Richard B. Hays notes, anyone who fails to love the Lord will naturally fall outside of the community of faith; the imprecation here, then, "is a thinly veiled threat" to those who love themselves and their ungodly ways more than Christ, denying his lordship—and their salvation.[17] Such a curse pronouncement stands in the tradition of the OT covenant curses; disobedience to and rejection of God led to curse then just as it does in Paul's day (and the present).[18]

The curse language itself is thus in the traditions of canonical cursing, as is the basic theology.[19] With that said, the simple pronouncement of ἀνάθεμα makes any connection to retribution tenuous at best. It is possible the retributive nature of the curse lies in the essence of eschatological judgment: just as the proud Corinthians reject the love of Christ now, so, too, will Christ reject them later.[20] Regardless, the power to curse for Paul, as observed above, remains solely in the hand of God, so the imprecation retains the basic elements of canonical cursing throughout.

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[16] See ch. 2 of this dissertation for a treatment of ἀνάθεμα in the vocabulary of imprecation. The city of Corinth was well-acquainted with a variety of curses and curse texts, and Paul himself was (clearly) familiar with imprecation; his use of the term is therefore both logical and effective within that context. See John Fotopoulos, "Paul's Curse of Corinthians: Restraining Rivals with Fear and *Voces Mysticae* (1 Cor 16:22)," *NovT* 56, no. 3 (2014): 291–309; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 925.

[17] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 292.

[18] Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, ZECNT 7 Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 751

[19] Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 925–27.

[20] Stephen C. Barton, "Eschatology and the Emotions in Early Christianity," *JBL* 130, no. 3 (2011): 579.

Galatians 1:8–9

Like 1 Corinthians 16:22 before it, Galatians 1:8–9 is a Pauline imprecation featuring a declaration of ἀνάθεμα. The verses form a pair of parallel conditional statements, each with their own protasis and identical apodoses. Should anyone, including an angel, preach a gospel which is not the same as Paul's kerygma, then he/she ἀνάθεμα ἔστω. The clause follows the same general structure of the curse of 1 Corinthians 16:22— ἀνάθεμα + imperative εἰμί—but here inverts the word order. The emphasis is on the declaration of the curse itself, not the one so accursed. That Paul repeats the phrase verbatim (the two words form the apodosis in both v. 8 and v. 9) underscores the seriousness of the curse. The gospel cannot be changed, and anyone who would attempt to twist it into something novel (and thus deformed) can only be cursed by God for their blasphemy and receive ultimate punishment at the eschaton.[21]

The two clauses differ in their outlook, however. Verse 8 contains a subjunctive in the main clause in order to convey a hypothetical situation which is possible but not certain, making it a third class conditional. Verse 9, however, is purely in the indicative mood, a first class conditional; it therefore "assumes the reality of what is stated."[22] Paul begins by expressing a purely hypothetical situation, but, realizing how possible and even likely it is that it should come to fruition, repeats the curse with vehemence.[23] Taken together, then, Paul with great force curses anyone who alters the gospel in any way or proclaims a different one altogether, a situation which he foresees to be an inevitability.

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[21] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 87–88.

[22] Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 16. See also Schreiner, *Galatians*, 88. For a breakdown of the various conditional sentence types in Koine Greek, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 687–712.

[23] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 83–84.

The grammar of these Pauline imprecations follows that of his earlier curse in 1 Corinthians 16:22, and the theology mirrors that of the earlier imprecation as well.[24]

Galatians 5:12

The covenant of Deuteronomy with its declarations of curse is not the only one Paul has in mind in Galatians, however. Throughout the epistle, he makes continuous reference to Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant, and this motif intersects with imprecation in Galatians 5:12.[25] The verse itself is an enigmatic vulgarity: Paul expresses his desire that the troublers of the church at Galatia should "cut off themselves" (ἀποκόψονται), which, given the context of circumcision, can only refer to their complete emasculation.[26] Commentators have variously interpreted Paul's tone (and therefore intention) as sarcasm, irony, a joke, or a serious curse.[27] While sarcasm appears the most common explanation for the verse, none can deny the sobriety with which the curse is uttered; Paul's vehemence is almost palpable, and he truly wishes the doctrine of circumcision as a condition for the covenant (and those who preach it to the Galatians) would die out completely.[28]

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[24] Bruce, Longenecker, and David A. deSilva also note the connection between the Pauline ἀνάθεμα declaration here and the Deuteronomic declaration of חרם in Deut 7, 13, and elsewhere. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 83; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 17; David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 127–28.

[25] P. Adam McClendon, *Paul's Spirituality in Galatians: A Critique of Contemporary Christian Spiritualities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 12, 135.

[26] Longenecker, *Galatians*, 234; Schreiner, *Galatians*, 327. Longenecker refers to the verse as "the crudest and rudest of all Paul's extant statements, which his amanuensis did not try to tone down." See idem, *Galatians*, 234.

[27] See the survey in D. F. Tolmie, "The Interpretation and Translation of Galatians 5:12," *AcT* 29, no. 2 (2009): 90.

[28] James R. Edwards posits a background the verse which has in mind the eunuch-priests (*galli*) in the service of the cult of Cybele in Pessinus in Roman Galatia. The comment thus becomes one with polemical force as well as imprecation. See James R. Edwards, "Galatians 5:12: Circumcision, the Mother Goddess, and the Scandal of the Cross," *NovT* 53, no. 4 (2011): 319–37. It is better, however, to agree with Bruce, who sees no reason for Paul to

The verb, ἀποκόψονται, is a future middle indicative, hence its usual translation in a reflexive sense. That it is both in the future tense and the indicative mood places it alongside other NT imprecations morphologically; any sense of volition is absent from the verb and present in the verse only through the mitigating adverb ὄφελον. The presence of ὄφελον, however, places the entire clause in the realm of wish or desire, a domain adjacent to the volitional petitions of OT imprecations. As Bruce observes, "Ὄφελον with the future indicative expresses an attainable wish," much like the petitions of OT curses.[29] This imprecation is therefore deeply similar grammatically to other canonical imprecations. Its content, crude as it may be, is not beyond the pale for other curse texts, and therefore may be seen as sufficiently similar to canonical curses so as to merit its imprecatory classification.

2 Timothy 4:14

The final Pauline imprecation appears in 2 Timothy 4:14.[30] At the conclusion of the epistle, Paul issues his final instructions to Timothy, and these include a warning. A metalworker named Alexander "did much harm to [Paul]," and he wishes to tell Timothy to be prepared for his opposition to the proclamation of the gospel. (vv. 14–15).[31] The precise nature of the harm is

bring the pagans into what is essentially an internecine dispute. The arc of Galatians is Abrahamic and covenantal, and the discussion of circumcision in those contexts is sufficient to explain Paul's comments here. See idem, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 238.

[29] Ibid., 238.

[30] The subject of authorship of 2 Tim is an area of ongoing debate, but one that ultimately lies outside the scope of the present study. For the sake of simplicity, Pauline authorship of the epistle is assumed, following the excellent arguments of Stanley E. Porter. See Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 156–84, 409–31.

[31] The term χαλκεύς is used to refer to metalworkers generally in later writings but initially denoted coppersmiths particularly. Alexander is thus given either appositive in various English versions of the Bible. See George W. Knight, III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 467.

unknown beyond the blanket statement of opposition. It is possible, as Andreas J. Köstenberger theorizes, that Alexander was instrumental in the arrest of Paul (taking ἐνεδείξατο [ἐνδείκνυμι] in a legal sense).[32] Regardless of the precise nature of the opposition, whether legal or otherwise, it is certain that Alexander was vehement in his hostility toward Paul's preaching, and it is on this basis Timothy is cautioned concerning him.

In the midst of this warning against Alexander comes a curse: "the Lord will repay him according to his works" (v. 14b). The verb (ἀποδώσει) is a simple future active indicative; Paul is certain God will indeed work some sort of retribution on Alexander as payment for his opposition to the gospel. As with the other NT imprecations, this curse is therefore more a statement of fact than a petition or plea. The uncertain nature of the retribution, however, is striking; Paul does not give a specific punishment God will visit upon Alexander for his sins, simply stating that whatever the consequences will be will correspond to what he has done to Paul (κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ). It is therefore both a retributive and indefinite imprecation, but it is also one which coheres to the others in the NT.

Apocalypse: Revelation 6:9–10

The final canonical imprecation is the most unusual, for it is the only one uttered by the dead, and it is the only one phrased as a question. It is clear that by the composition of the conclusion of the canon, martyrdoms in the name of Jesus Christ had already been won. That these are truly Christian martyrs is evident from the text itself: they were slain "because of the word of God"

[32] Andreas J. Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 283–84. See also Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 467; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 631. Raymond F. Collins, for his part, raises the possibility Alexander was a silversmith (his take on the range of χαλκεύς, even as he glosses it "coppersmith") and thus part of the riot of silversmiths and associated tradesmen in Ephesus in Acts 19:21–41. The open rebellion constituted his opposition to Paul. See Raymond F. Collins, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 284–85.

and their testimonies (v. 9).[33] Such executions were primarily sporadic and local; systematic persecution under Nero was only now unfolding when John recorded his apocalyptic vision.[34] Still, martyrs had died for the sake of the gospel, and it is their souls underneath the heavenly altar which John sees and hears when the fifth seal is broken in Revelation 6:9–11.

The martyrs shout their question and their curse, wondering how long the Lord will wait to avenge their blood (v. 10).[35] The verse is grammatically interesting for several reasons. First, it begins with the construction ἕως πότε, "how long," a clear echo of the cries of OT laments and the imprecatory psalms.[36] Second, it expresses the imprecation—here the twin cry for judgment and vengeance—in present indicatives. Indeed, both of the primary verbs of the curse, κρίνεις and ἐκδικεῖς, appear as presents, not futures; the negative particle οὐ fronts both, and a wooden gloss with the initial phrase is "how long…are you not judging and [not] avenging." To clean up the phrase in English requires the deployment of English future tenses or the addition of an adverb: "how long…will you not judge and not avenge," "how long…until you judge and avenge," or a similar construction.[37] The use of present indicatives in imprecation is confined to this verse alone among the curses of the NT. Third, the imprecation is phrased as a question, not a command, prayer, or plea. The certainty of the vengeance is not questioned; rather, the timing

[33] διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον.

[34] Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 38–39.

[35] The vocative is ὁ δεσπότης, and it may refer to Christ (so 2 Pet and Jude) or Yahweh (throughout the LXX, Jewish literature, and Luke 2:29 and Acts 4:24). This is the only occurrence of the word in Revelation, but it most likely refers here to Yahweh, not Jesus. See David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 407; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 147.

[36] Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 407.

[37] Note, however, that the inclusion of "until" or a similar temporal adverb necessitates the removal of the negative particle present in the Greek text. Such removal is only avoided by rendering the presents as futures.

of God's wrath is the focus of the interrogative.[38] The martyrs are assured God's justice will be done eventually, but they cry out to know when God will end earthly martyrdoms and judge those who have murdered his people.

Despite these unique grammatical features, the imprecation of Revelation 6:9–10 remains in-line with other NT and OT curses. The cry for judgment and vengeance is a petition for vindication and retribution. The identity of the enemies is obvious: the murderers of the martyrs who are therefore the enemies of God. Finally, the martyrs, being dead, are obviously unable to work vengeance on their own. They can only rely on the power of God on their behalf to bring about retribution against their murderers.[39]

[38] Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 147–48; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 125–26.

[39] This is in contrast to some ANE curses, particularly Egyptian tomb curses, which see the spirits of the dead become their own avengers. See Jan Assmann, "When Justice Fails: Jurisdiction and Imprecation in Ancient Egypt and the Near East," *JEA* 78 (1992): 151–53.

APPENDIX 2: PARSING OF VERBS IN SELECT OLD TESTAMENT IMPRECATIONS

Verse	Verb	Stem	Tense/aspect/mood	Person/number/ gender (if applicable)	Root
Numbers 10:35	יָפֻצוּ	*Qal*	Jussive		פוץ
	יָנֻסוּ	*Qal*	Jussive		נוס
Deuteronomy 27:15–26; 28:16–19	אָרוּר (16x)	*Qal*	Passive participle		ארר
Judges 5:31	יֹאבְדוּ	*Qal*	Jussive		אבד
	כְּצֵאת	*Qal*	Infinitive construct		יצא (with כ prefixed)
Jeremiah 11:20	אֶרְאֶה	*Qal*	Imperfect (subjunctive)	1cs	ראה
Jeremiah 15:15	הִנָּקֶם	*Niphal*	Imperative		נקם
Jeremiah 17:18	יֵבֹשׁוּ	*Qal*	Jussive		בוש
	יֵחַתּוּ	*Niphal*	Jussive		חתת
	שָׁבְרֵם	*Qal*	Imperative		שׁבר
	הָבִיא	*Hiphil*	Imperative		בוא
Jeremiah 18:21	מֻכֵּי	*Hophal*	Participle		נכה
	תֵּן	*Qal*	Imperative		נתן
	הַגִּרֵם	*Hiphil*	Imperative		נגר (with 3mp suffix)
	תִּהְיֶנָה	*Qal*	Imperfect (subjunctive)	3fp	היה
	יִהְיוּ	*Qal*	Jussive		היה
	הֲרֻגֵי	*Qal*	Passive participle		הרג
Jeremiah 18:22	תִּשָּׁמַע	*Niphal*	Imperfect (subjunctive)	3fs	שׁמע
	תָּבִיא	*Hiphil*	Imperfect (future)	2ms	בוא
Jeremiah 18:23	מֻכְשָׁלִים	*Hophal*	Participle		כשׁל
	תְּכַפֵּר	*Piel*	Imperfect (subjunctive)	2ms	כפר
	תֶּמְחִי	*Hiphil*	Imperfect (subjunctive)	2ms	מחה
	עֲשֵׂה	*Qal*	Imperative		עשׂה
Jeremiah 20:12	אֶרְאֶה	*Qal*	Imperfect (subjunctive)	1cs	ראה
Habakkuk 2:7	הָיִיתָ	*Qal*	Perfect (prophetic)	2ms	היה
Habakkuk 2:8	יְשָׁלּוּ	*Qal*	Imperfect (future)	3mp	שׁלל (with 2ms suffix)

Verse	Verb	Stem	Tense/aspect/mood	Person/number/ gender (if applicable)	Root
Habakkuk 2:16	שָׂבַעְתָּ	*Qal*	Perfect (prophetic)	2ms	שׂבע
Habakkuk 2:17	יְכַסֶּךָּ	*Piel*	Imperfect (future)	3mp	כסה (with 2ms suffix)

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