

(8)

ENEMIES AND CURSES IN THE LAMENTS

No doubt there are many culturally influenced images in the Psalter that have appeared strange and even incomprehensible to many readers over the centuries. Such an image as 'oil running down Aaron's beard' (Ps 133) to express well-being and unity or the image 'to be feasted as with bone marrow and fat' (Ps 63) to express the super-abundant love of God hardly convey to those with contemporary sensibilities the feelings that they had once elicited for the Israelites at a given point in their history. On one level we have a difficulty of reading the psalms because of these culturally imbedded images. In order to understand the meaning of such images or phrases we have to enter at least partially into the culture that gave rise to such images in order to transpose their message into our culture and into our own symbolic imagery.

The presentation of enemies in dehumanized terms and the presence of curses against one's enemies in the psalms certainly demand a study of their function within Israelite culture in order to understand the import they bring to the dynamic of prayer in the psalms. These are the two images quite defused in the Psalter that as Christians we find difficult to pray. We are often uneasy because they apparently contradict unequivocally a supreme tenant of Christians, namely to love one's enemies, to do good to those who hate you, to bless those who curse you, to pray for those who abuse you (Mt 5:43, Lk 6:27-28, Lev 19:18).

Often a quick assertion made on the part of some Christians is that the New Testament has superseded the old. Such an assertion would claim that the vindictive psalms are not to be prayed. Even worse is the assertion that was made at the dawn of Christianity, and perhaps often tacitly held through the centuries, that the God of the OT is a God of vengeance, the God of the NT is a God of love. Such a position would base itself on a theory of an evolutionary progression of the Hebrew/Christian religion as a movement from fear to love. These are hardly tenable positions. Remember that loving one's neighbours and even one's enemies is proclaimed in the OT writings. Christ assimilated these profound insights from the Torah, the Prophets and the other writings. This does not mean that there has not been an evolution or a development of ideas discernible in the biblical writings. But certainly the proclamation of Christ to love one's enemies is a crystallizing of a piety and a moral position put forward at various stages of OT writings.

- care for the sojourner in your midst for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.
- give food to your enemies (Prov 25:21-22)
- You shall not hate any of your kin in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against your own people, you shall love your neighbour as yourself (Lev. 19:18).

Conversely, Christians should have open eyes to the many realities regarding enemies that are present in the NT writings. The NT certainly is not devoid of a depiction of enemies or an incantation of their wickedness. The retribution that the OT basically envisages in temporal terms is referred in the NT to the day of Judgment. The day of judgment is depicted in strong images with clear divisions.

Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around the neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (Mt 18:5-6).

- Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, etc. (Mt. 23).
- If anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 15)
- Depart from me you cursed one into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt 25:41).
- Woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better had that one not been born (Mk 14:21).
- Those who do not hate mother and father, their own lives and pick up their cross daily and follow me are not worthy to be my disciples (Lk 14:26).

It is true you might say that each of these quotations must be taken in context, and must be understood as figures of speech in some cases. But is not the same demand to be made for the curses of the psalms and the depicting of one's enemies? In any event, the New Testament does not present Jesus as a lukewarm, morally fuzzy human being. Jesus is not one who minces words. He is presented as one who in certain circumstances can be tenderly compassionate and on other occasions he can be frightfully demanding. If we decide to excise or to extricate sections from the Psalter for being vindictive or insensitive, then I fail to see why the same attitude does not compel us to excise sections from the New Testament. And is not this one of the hermeneutical difficulties? If we start eliminating sections from scripture, what criteria do we use, and where do we stop? We suffer the risk of having merely a comfortable gospel rather than a challenging gospel. It is more important I believe, more useful theologically and certainly more honest intellectually to appreciate the challenging elements in the Psalter from the point of view of the Semitic world and its piety.

Certainly it is possible to read sections in the Psalter with attitudes of revenge and vindictiveness. And the earthy images and polemical stances can in such contexts feed the flame of revenge that Christians are called to master. But to read these psalms in such a light goes against the dynamic of the prayers themselves. It is not unlike the claim that Jesus despaired on the cross when he uttered psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" This statement, detached from the rest of the psalm would indeed tend to express a judgment of despair. But taken within the dynamic of the lament it is an expression of familiarity and trust so strong that it allows both the psalmist and Christ to pour out their bitter soul before God.

One can reverse the accusation somewhat as well. If we as Christians refuse to pray like the psalmists in our own situations of crises and in our perceptions of evil in our society, we are in point of fact divesting the impact and the profundity of Christ's call to love our enemies - to bless those who curse us. How easy will it be for us then to take this challenging call 'love your enemies' and dilute its impact by refusing to admit that we have any enemies. By refusing to look at evil and wickedness and injustice in our society and within ourselves, we do not have to be particularly committed or daring in the building up of the kingdom, especially when we say, "thy kingdom come". Do we know what we are saying when we pray that the Lord's kingdom be spread on earth, when we pray that we be delivered from evil?

What I would hope to show and what I claim is that a Christian can pray the laments fully with their descriptions of the enemy and even with their curses. This prayer in turn will allow the challenge of Christ's call to love one's enemies and to bless those who curse, to be more deeply rooted and grounded in our commitment and love of the Lord. The descriptions of one's enemies and the curses have a definite and precise function within the dynamic of lament prayers. They mobilize a radical commitment of the psalmist and of anyone who prays them to the ways of God and his justice.

The two images in the Psalter that ordinarily embarrass Christians are the detailed description of the enemy in inhuman terms, and the call to God to bring justice and vengeance on this godless enemy. We can immediately locate these images within the structure of laments. The description of the enemy as an attacking army, as malicious court accusers, as heinous animals waiting to devour, forms one of the primordial relations in the psalmist's complaint. This relation describes the psalmist's crisis in terms of the other, the 'they', the world, in distinction from his relationship to God, and the relationship to the self. In his relationship to God the psalmist can go so far as to accuse God of abandoning the psalmist in a situation of injustice. In terms of his own self, the psalmist pours out the bitterness of his human dilemma, of being a victim, of being helpless, of suffering. By describing the source of his suffering in the other, the psalmist places before God the dire situation that cries out for help and deliverance.

The image of the curses follows the petition within the structure of the lament. The two sides of a single request for salvation are presented: deliverance for the psalmist, destruction of the enemy. Salvation entails raising up the oppressed from out of their oppression, and it necessarily involves defeating the opposition of the enemy to liberation. The curses call upon God to lower the oppressor in order to restore justice and goodness. These images that are often so stark and realistic are a challenge and it is important to understand their function in the Semitic mind before we transpose them into our language, or excise them all together.

There are two brief comments I would like to make that should be kept in mind as a general backdrop for our consideration of the challenge of the curses. I want to recall the various manners in which the psalms call us to pray. First they allow us to be at home within the dynamic of the prayer and within the world of images they present. Secondly they call us to authenticity by calling us to return to what we desire to pray, desire to believe, desire to do. Thirdly they face us with the challenge to go beyond what we have up to now discovered or believed. We should not expect a single psalm to be the sum total of the many ways we pray, let alone a single part of a psalm such as the description of the enemy or the curse.

The second comment is a return to Martin Buber's distinction between the two perspectives of homelessness and habitation. The language of crisis is to be expected]o be different from the language of peace and calm. We should understand then that the laments with their cries for help belong to times of crisis which call for an intensification of feeling, a demarcation of positions, a more radical commitment. There is little room for compromise in the prayer of the laments, because out of the perspective of homelessness sides must be taken for decision.

When we consider the presentation of enemies, we should bear in mind Westermann's analysis. Consideration of the oppression meted out by a powerful, wicked enemy is a reflection of one of the three primordial relations of human beings. In the lament proper of the psalms we have the lament cry to God, the outpouring of the individual psalmist and the oppression of the wicked. This third presentation of our "elation to the world in terms of crisis is firmly rooted in the Hebrew conception of the opposition between good and evil, the two ways. The more acute the crisis, the clearer is the demarcation felt between good and evil, between right and wrong. In times of crisis, whether the impending doom lies without or whether it rests within, the consequences are perceived as heading towards good or towards evil. The moment is critical and the images that the Semitic imagination used to articulate the intensity of the moments and of the tensions in the crisis are equally vibrant. The images are meant to sustain for the psalmist the intensity of the crisis in order that the prayer be equally intense, that the choice for good be equally decisive.

The dominant technique in the laments to retain through images the impending threat of evil is the personification of evil. Evil and wickedness are perceived as a personal enemy - as an enemy ready to attack, as enemy accusers plotting the methodical downfall of the psalmist. In turn this personified enemy is dehumanized usually by association to animals. The personified, dehumanized enemy is depicted as reducing the psalmist to an animal-like existence void of humanity. It is precisely in this turn of events in the structure of the psalm that we tend to cringe. The misplaced criticism bases itself on the claim that the psalmist is calling upon the dehumanization, the depersonalizing of real personal enemies.

We observe of course that throughout history a warring faction dehumanizes its opposition precisely so that its side may more easily kill the other. It is easier to kill an animal, to destroy an inanimate object, than it is to kill a recognized person, or to destroy objects with human beings in them. The depersonalizing of an enemy allows for easier killing, in our minds if not in actual life. There is much truth in this observation, but it is misapplied to the psalms of lament. This observation falsely concludes that the enemies

in the laments are presentations of real people in dehumanized language. The psalm writers on the contrary have precisely depicted the enemies in general terms so that they could not be identified with a particular group of persons.

Examples:

Ps 7:12-16,

If one does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and strung his bow; he has prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts. See how they conceive evil, and are pregnant with mischief, and bring forth lies. They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made. Their mischief returns upon their own heads, and on their own heads their violence descends.

Ps 10:2-11,

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor-- let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the LORD.

In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, "God will not seek it out"; all their thoughts are, "There is no God." Their ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high, out of their sight; as for their foes, they scoff at them. They think in their heart, "We shall not be moved; throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity." Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under their tongues are mischief and iniquity. They sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding places they murder the innocent. Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless; they lurk in secret like a lion in its covert; they lurk that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net. They stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might. They think in their heart, "God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it."

Ps 17:10-12,

Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, from the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me. They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly. They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground. They are like a lion eager to tear, like a young lion lurking in ambush.

Ps 22:12-18,

Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.

Ps 35:7-8, 11-14, 20-21,

For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my life. Let ruin come on them unawares. And let the net that they hid ensnare them; let them fall in it-- to their ruin... Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me about things I do not know. They repay me evil for good; my soul is forlorn.

But as for me, when they were sick, I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting. I prayed with head bowed on my bosom, as though I grieved for a friend or a brother; I went about as one who laments for a mother, bowed down and in mourning...

For they do not speak peace, but they conceive deceitful words against those who are quiet in the land.

They open wide their mouths against me; they say, "Aha, Aha, our eyes have seen it."

Ps 36:1-4,

Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts; there is no fear of God before their eyes.

For they flatter themselves in their own eyes that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated.

The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit; they have ceased to act wisely and do good.

They plot mischief while on their beds; they are set on a way that is not good; they do not reject evil.

Ps 37:12-15,

The wicked plot against the righteous, and gnash their teeth at them; but the LORD laughs at the wicked, for he sees that their day is coming. The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to kill those who walk uprightly; their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.

Ps 56:5-6,

All day long they seek to injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil.

They stir up strife, they lurk, they watch my steps.

Ps 57:4-6,

I lie down among lions that greedily devour human prey; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.

They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves.

Ps 58:4-12,

The wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth, speaking lies.

They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear,

so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter.

O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!

Let them vanish like water that runs away; like grass let them be trodden down and wither.

Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime; like the untimely birth that never sees the sun.

Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!

The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. People will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth."

Ps 59:3-4,6-7,

Deliver me from those who work evil; from the bloodthirsty save me.

Even now they lie in wait for my life; the mighty stir up strife against me. For no transgression or sin of mine, O LORD, for no fault of mine, they run and make ready...

Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city.
There they are, bellowing with their mouths, with sharp words on their lips-- for "Who," they think, "will hear us?"

Ps 73:2-12,

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.
Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.
Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.
Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.
And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"
Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

Ps 94:3-7,

O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?
They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast.
They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage.
They kill the widow and the stranger, they murder the orphan,
and they say, "The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive."

Ps 140:1-3,

Deliver me, O LORD, from evildoers; protect me from those who are violent, who plan evil things in their minds and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a snake's, and under their lips is the venom of vipers. Guard me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent who have planned my downfall. The arrogant have hidden a trap for me, and with cords they have spread a net, along the road they have set snares for me.

In their laments during crisis, when they depict their relation to the world, the psalmists are not naive. They know there are forces around them that work for the destruction of their faith and even the annihilation of themselves. They present this intense and desperate awareness before God. The enemies in the psalms are not simply the psalmists' opponents of everyday life. They are always depicted as evil, wicked and godless. They oppress unjustly, they have returned evil for kindness. They mock the laws of the Lord. Clearly then it is a mistake to consider the enemies in the psalms as human opponents and competitors in life. Rather the enemies are the personification of all that is inhuman, oppressive and evil. It is the task of the one praying the psalm to locate and identify the signs of evil in their lives, to identify the courses of inhumanity in their society, the threats against life in their hearts and in those of others. (Note the Two Standards, and the meditation on hell in the Exercises of St. Ignatius).

The fact that the depiction of enemies in the psalms never leads to an action of attack on the part of the psalmist should warn us not to identify the enemies as a personal group of people. The psalmist is led to petition God to save him from this crisis. It would therefore only be a shallow Christian who would borrow from the laments images and words depicting an enemy to relate them to personal opponents in his own life. To associate the enemies in the laments with one's personal competitors in life is a misuse of the psalms. Far

more challenging in the laments is the call to locate the sources of oppression described in the psalms in their many subtle forms masked in one's own heart and in structures. This does not mean that we do not recognize that concrete people in society do in fact participate in promoting oppression. But the focus is on locating the source of the oppression, not the petty concern of placing our competitors or critics of our daily lives in the categories of dehumanized images.

Far from being antagonistic to Christ's call to love our enemies, the laments are a prayer that can help Christians to take this call seriously in its most profound ramifications. The declaration of Christ, "Love your enemies", must not be robbed of its significance. To love one's enemies presupposes first of all that we are aware of the oppressive motives of others, of ourselves, of entire structures, that we know the depths of destruction that have been set in motion. It is this enemy that must be faced with open eyes, without denial. It is this enemy that must be opposed in truth, loved in heart, and transformed in time. In other words, the only way we can truly be loving to any enemy is to be able first of all to look evil straight in the eye and not let its power mesmerize us.

There are three authors in the areas of literature, sociology and psychology who have presented interesting analyses of parallel issues to that of the presence of violent images in Scripture. I would like to give voice to these authors' concerns: Northrop Frye (literature), Bruno Bettelheim (psychology), Ernst Becker (sociology).

In his book, *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye had explored the foundational place of stories and myths for delineating the horizon and circumference of cultures. He understands myths not to be on the periphery of cultural identity but rather as foundational cornerstones of culture. Myths place before the imagination of a people both that which they profoundly desire as well as that which they most desperately fear. In this sense of presenting before the imagination the underlying values of a culture, myths have this concrete function of challenging humans to explore their desires and possibilities but within the parameters of human existence. Myths that would throw before the imagination only optimistic possibilities and not the dire consequences of failure and fear would be unrealistic and ultimately uninspiring. But conversely, myths that would present before the imagination only images conveying the drudgery and burdens of existence without the joy of human life would be intolerable.

The link between Frye's analysis and the Psalter's description of enemies with expressed curses in the laments is the importance both recognize for a people to face their fears and the dark sides of life. Far from being harmful, the description of enemies and the flirting with curse allow a person and a community to face life-threatening realities in their existence within the context of a trusting relationship with the creator. And this is not to be underestimated.

Where Northrop Frye's analysis pertains primarily to adults, Bruno Bettelheim as a psychologist presents an analysis of childhood human development with striking parallels to *The Great Code*. In his book, *The Uses of Enchantment, The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) Bettelheim shows how fairy tales allow children to imagine various emergent possibilities within the horizon of their expanding existence. Similarly, the dark side to any good fairy tale has the remarkable ability to help children within the secure context of a home to face the fears and anxieties which necessarily accompany all children as they negotiate growing up and leaving their family. The fairy tale for children, much like the great myths for religions, presents before the imagination possibilities and fears. Only by attending to both desires and fear do people grow and an entire culture may expand. To ban fairy tales for their violent imagery or unrealistic fantasies actually inhibits the proper growth of a child. We could say that

to excise the enemies from the Psalter as well as any reference to cursing could just as readily inhibit contemporaries from facing their failures and curbing their feelings of revenge.

Ernst Becker in his book, *The Denial of Death* (New York: 1973), has thoroughly analyzed the pervasiveness of denying and avoiding the many shades of human limitations and oppressive systems (see also Ernst Becker, *Angel in Armor* [New York: 1975], *Escape from Evil: a Post Freudian Perspective on the Nature of Man* [New York: 1975], and for the opposite extreme of denial, namely the tendency to emphasize victimization see Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: the Fraying of America*, New York: 1993). The tragic irony is that often the avoidance of facing tragedy and evil is interpreted as Christian forbearance and even as loving of one's enemies. We do not recognize the existence of enemies so then we convince ourselves that we have none. Christ's challenge is to love our enemies, not to deny that we have any. To deny the existence or presence of evil does not even put us on the first step towards loving our enemy and our neighbor. To meditate on personified evil as we have in the laments is done in the presence of God. It is God who is being addressed not the enemy. By facing and addressing the evil in one's life in the presence of God, the psalmist is saved from two extremes, the extreme of denying or suppressing the evil and suffering in life and the extreme of letting suffering reduce the victim to vengeance and hatred. Trust in God accompanies the psalmist along the perilous journey of facing injustice squarely and openly. Trust in God saves the psalmist from the enclosure of victimization.

And this meditation is open to misunderstanding and to misdirection, as mentioned above. But the awareness of evil in one's life, in one's own heart, evokes a choice and a decision of dealing with evil. Either we destroy the other, or we work towards their transformation. To pray the psalms that contemplate evil without taking the side of vengeful anger means that we must pray them from within the context of trusting in God which the psalms so explicitly do. Even more so, we pray them today rooted in Christ and in his victory over death. He who calls us to love our enemies is precisely the one who faced his enemy, he faced the temptations in his own heart, he faced the hypocrisy of those around him and called them to authenticity.

This brings us to the follow up section of laments which moves from the description of one's enemy to the petition for their destruction - the curse. In the lament, the psalmist faces head on the face of evil in his life: a) the evil of his own sinfulness, b) the evil that threatens against his life and his faith. In the petition that the psalmist prays, we have the prayer for deliverance. The pattern of the lament is essentially the pattern of the Exodus event. The people were oppressed, they cried out to the Lord, and the Lord heard their cry. The Lord brought them out from the land of slavery and of hard labour with mighty and terrible deeds. This deliverance involved both the saving of the Israelites and the destruction of the oppressor.

The part of this prayer that we find difficult to consider is the cursing of one's enemy. Is this surely not clearly against Christ's command, "Bless those who curse you" (Lk 6:28). Before we answer this question we must remember that the NT accounts are not altogether void of curses. In fact, Christ never says that we should not curse. It is Paul who says, "Bless and do not curse", Rom 12:14. Christ in facing the hypocrisy of his time declares, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees" (Mt 23:13). He himself curses the fig tree which withers as a result (Mk 11:21). In the commandment to bless those who curse you, Christ is calling forth from his followers a break in the continuum of returning evil for evil. Christ calls for forgiveness. The curses in the psalms are not in opposition to forgiveness. They must be seen in the context of pleading for salvation. In light of this we can say that as Christians cursing the enemy is not a preferred form of prayer. But this does not mean that we cannot pray the curse in the psalms according to the dynamic of the prayer as a whole. This requires an understanding of the role of the curse in the Hebrew world and in the psalms of the lament. Remember Jesus also cursed. So there is a difference between a curse which calls for the transformation of the enemy and a curse which would involve a refusal to forgive.

The curses in the psalms which are an appeal to YHWH to thwart the plans of the enemy express the psalmist's radical commitment to God and to good. There is in this commitment to God a double side - a love for God and the ways of the Lord and a right anger against all that is opposed to God. Not always in the psalms is this anger and radical commitment expressed in terms of a curse. But the curse was one particular image through which Israelites expressed their commitment to God. To understand its function in the laments, it is essential to understand the function of the curse in Israel's culture. In some ways curses are not too distant from us in our own world-view so that we are not able to appreciate their many functions.

In ordinary life, calling down a curse on oneself was a sign of one's commitment or honesty, very much like our own swearing today. Cursing was also an expression of disdain towards one's enemies. Goliath cursed David by his gods. Cursing one's enemy was a sign of one's total separation and opposition to the enemy. To curse one's enemy in the lament has the concrete function of galvanizing one's energy for the sake of God's justice and not one's own.

But in the context of the covenant between YHWH and Israel, we detect a function of the curses which reveals theological features. A treaty or covenant was ratified by a recital of blessings and curses. These blessings and curses were meant to buttress the exchange of rights and responsibilities. It is interesting to note that in most ancient treaties the curses far outnumbered the blessings.

In the book of Deuteronomy we witness the establishment of a formal covenant at Moab, before the final crossing of the Jordan river. The middle part of the book contains the list of obligations that the people are to fulfill, what they must do and what they must refrain from doing. In order to ratify this commitment to the covenant, blessings and curses are proclaimed and accepted by the people with a simple Amen. These curses of chapter 27 are meant as a sign of commitment by the people to the covenant. But Moses in chapter 28 continues to explain the significance of adherence to the covenant or of breaking the covenant. Adherence means life and faithlessness means death. Death is presented in the style of curses familiar to us in the psalms: Cursed will be your home, your fields, your farm, your enemies will defeat you, the plagues of Egypt will come upon you. (Dt 27:16-17)

All the blessings they had been promised will become inverted. In fact all of salvation history becomes inverted and the people will end up in Egypt and there will be no one even to buy them as slaves. So low will they have fallen.

But the Deuteronomist along with the prophets does not consider the curses that God looses on the people as a mere act of retributive justice. The experience of the curses is meant to be an instigator of conversion. In chapter 30 Moses continues: And when all these things come to pass in you, the blessings and the curses, that I have placed before you today, you will remember them in your heart and if you return to the Lord God with all your heart and all your soul, the Lord will show his tenderness and restore you.

The conversion that is envisioned by the Deuteronomist goes deep. It is not merely a whim or change in attitude. The curses are not conceived as mere retributive justice. Rather they are seen as God's final way of turning the people back to himself. The curses have the function of training and teaching the people the ways of God in order that they might participate in God's life. This was an understanding that the prophets continuously put forward. The Deuteronomist integrated this understanding and function of the curse into the entire spectrum of the covenant - a compendium of salvation history. For Ezekiel the curses and sufferings of the people were God's ways of changing hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. (Ez 11:19, 18:31-32, 33:10- 16), Dt 4:29-31, 30:1-10) In a similar way Moses begins his exhortation in Deuteronomy with an

explanation of the positive motive for having wandered in the desert. It was because of their sin that the people suffered the calamity of defeat and failure to enter the promised land. Conversion implies reaching deep down into the heart and turning to God with all one's mind and all one's strength.

The wandering in the desert was the preparation of the people to enter into the covenant with eyes open and with a sincere heart. The justice of God in dealing with human beings, conceived in terms of a covenant implies a commitment on the part of God to continuously lead the people back to himself. Suffering is intimately connected to conversion. The curses in the psalms then should be understood in this context - they call upon God to establish justice. God who vindicates the righteous in history is forever calling people back, even in the midst of tragic events. Perhaps no where is the relationship between the curses and the call to conversion more explicit in the psalms than in Ps 83:13-17 - Fill their faces with shame that they may seek your name O Lord.

Another important backdrop for the understanding of the function of the curses is the notion of retribution in Hebrew theology. It is here that we can readily detect a progression in thought. The curses which tend to cry out for immediate vengeance arise from a context which perceives all of life in its immediate terrestrial existence. Louis Jacquet lists three distinct notions of retribution that can be perceived in the psalms and in the OT in general.

- 1) The first and earliest form of retribution presumes only a vague and uncertain notion of the here and after. This vague notion limited the context of retribution and justice to the time span of one's earthly life.
- 2) The second goes beyond this through a recognition of the power and beauty of interiority achieved in the cult. Punishment was no longer conceived merely in terms of an absence of goods. No longer was bliss limited to long life and material goods. Though to be sure such blessings were always in the foreground. The experience of the fragility of human bliss that depended on material goods lead to situating happiness and blessing in the service of God and in the rectitude of one's own conscience.
- 3) And finally the love of God experienced so profoundly in the cult and in faithfulness led to the hope of the continuation of this relationship for the just beyond death (Ps 49:15)

It is interesting to note the tenacity of the first position in the piety of Israel. Egypt had a thriving belief of the survival of the self in death. Perhaps precisely because of its bitter memories of Egypt, Israel professed a different conception. Egyptian theology had a very optimistic and positive view of life and death, which probably reflected the rather peaceful and secure life about the Nile. For Israel the very being of humanity was unsure, obscure and fragile. On the contrary what was clear and unshakable was God Himself, his goodness and power, and his justice. Israel conceived of a limited and terrestrial existence under the guarantee of divine justice. Life was the good life here below, received in faith and with joy as gifts of God.

But there was the ever emergent problem of evil, the experience of the just one who suffered, the apparent success of enemies and wicked ones. This led to an interiorization of both evil and good, suffering and happiness. The evil one, though living with apparent success is rootless and shallow. At the first calamity he will wither away. The just one in his soul and in his conscience has peace and serenity founded on the justice of God:

73:26 "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart",

73:19-20 "How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away by the terrors. They are like a dream when one awakes",

God of course still recompenses the just and punishes the wicked, but this takes place also within the context of interiority.

37:3-4 "Trust in the Lord and do good, so you will dwell in the land and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desire of your heart.

16:11 You show me the path of life, in your presence is the fullness of joy.

In the NT retribution is clearly set in the context of the after-life. This change in perspective is what renders the same type of curses as those in the psalms somewhat out of place for their emphasis on immediacy. But I would venture that the same dynamic is at play - they express an utter confidence in the power of God, and they convey a warning to those who break the Lord's covenant and reject the life of God.

Finally one last remark on the background of the curses can be made before we synthesize the conclusions. Curses are made from the context of weakness with respect to the enemies and they are made from the context of strength with respect to one's faith in YHWH. The curses go beyond the dictum of an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, Ex 21:24, Dt 19:21. What is truly remarkable in the curses of the psalms is that the psalmist does not pray for strength to take personal vengeance on his enemies. In the prayer of the psalmist, the anger, the bitterness and the hopelessness that is deeply felt is placed before the presence of God. Even here the psalmist is placing complete trust in the ways of God. The curses expound the principle not to exercise personal vengeance, but to place oneself into the hands and ways of God to obtain justice. The indignation and the anger of the psalmist, which excludes personal vindictiveness have their source in a burning zeal for the praise of God's goodness and strength and also for the good of the people.

The hate for one's enemies was never institutionalized into law. The *goel*, the redeemer, the *herem*, the ban, and the curses have a moral objective to discourage evil and to protect people from idolatry. Curses replace the blows. Instead of placing trust in one's own power to retaliate and take vengeance, the curses call for a mobilization of God's power and will.

When the psalmists pray for deliverance from the evil that is about to engulf them we have a range of images that are presented. They range from the positive side - trust in God's deliverance, to the calling of the enemy's destruction. The call for God to defeat the enemy includes the form of the curse. Several psalms of lament that forcefully present a description of the enemies simply call for YHWH to deliver the psalmist from evil. Deliverance from evil implies in some way the defeat of evil, but this double edge is not made explicit in several psalms. (Examples- 13, 14, 22, 27, 38, 41, 56, 74, 142.)

Another common feature in the prayer for deliverance in the laments is the realization that evil bears the fruit of its own destruction. With this awareness the psalmist prays that the enemy be destroyed with its own devious methods. (Examples: 5:10, 7:15, 9:15, 35:8, 37:15, 57:6, 73:15-20, 140:9, 141:10.)

Ps 5:10,

Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of their many transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you.

Ps 7:15-16,

They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made.

Their mischief returns upon their own heads, and on their own heads their violence descends.

Ps 9:15-16,

The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.

The LORD has made himself known, he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.

Ps 35:8,

Let ruin come on them unawares. And let the net that they hid ensnare them; let them fall in it-- to their ruin.

Ps 37:14-15,

The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to kill those who walk uprightly; their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.

Ps 57:6,

They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves.

Ps 140:9-11,

Those who surround me lift up their heads; let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them!

Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise!

Do not let the slanderer be established in the land; let evil speedily hunt down the violent!

Ps 141:8-10

But my eyes are turned toward you, O GOD, my Lord; in you I seek refuge; do not leave me defenseless.

Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me, and from the snares of evildoers.

Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I alone escape.

Perhaps the most frequent image in the prayer for deliverance is the call for the destruction of the wicked, so that the psalmist may live and so that God's justice be shown to be truth.

(Examples: 17:13-14, 35:4-6,26, 55:5, 58:7-11, 59:12-13, 68:22-23, 69:22-28, 73:15, 79:10-13, 83:13-18, 94:1,2,23, 109:26-29, 120:3-4, 125:5, 129:5-7, 137:9, 140:9-11.)

Finally, there is a fourth motif that is present in a few prayers of lament which goes part and parcel with the curses - namely the realization of the curses implies the establishment of God's justice and conversion. The curses represent a final opportunity for the impious to change, to recognize the power of God and the beauty of justice. This function of the curse has its explicit source in covenant theology, namely that of the Deuteronomist, in which the realization of the curses were meant to call Israel back to God with their whole hearts and their whole minds. (Examples: 25:8, 64:7-9, 83:16, 141:6.)

Ps 25:8,

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

Ps 64:5-9,

They hold fast to their evil purpose; they talk of laying snares secretly, thinking, "Who can see us? Who can search out our crimes? We have thought out a cunningly conceived plot." For the human heart and mind are deep. But God will shoot his arrow at them; they will be wounded suddenly. Because of their tongue he will bring them to ruin; all who see them will shake with horror. Then everyone will fear; they will tell what God has brought about, and ponder what he has done.

Ps 83:13-18,

O my God, make them like whirling dust, like chaff before the wind.
As fire consumes the forest, as the flame sets the mountains ablaze,
so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your hurricane.
Fill their faces with shame, so that they may seek your name, O LORD.
Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them perish in disgrace.
Let them know that you alone, whose name is the LORD, are the Most High over all the earth.

Ps 141:6,

When they are given over to those who shall condemn them, then they shall learn that my words were pleasant.
Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol.

