

**Joshua's Covenant-Building Complaint:
an exegesis of Josh 7:6-10**

BIBL 701: Advanced Old Testament Exegesis

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Text and Translation (Joshua 7:6-10)

6 וַיִּקְרַע יְהוֹשֻׁעַ שְׂמֹלֹתָיו
 וַיִּפֹּל עַל-פָּנָיו אֶרְצָה לְפָנֵי אָרוֹן יְהוָה עַד-הָעֶרֶב הוּא וְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 וַיִּעֲלוּ עָפָר עַל-רֵאשָׁם: 7 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶתְהוּ אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה לָמָּה
 הֵעֲבַרְתָּ הָעָבִיר אֶת-הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶת-תִּירְדֹן לְתַת אֶתְנוּ בְּיַד הָאֲמֹרִי
 לְהֵאָבִידְנוּ וְלוֹ הוּאֲלָנוּ וְנִשָּׁב בְּעֵבֶר תִּירְדֹן: 8 בִּי אֲדֹנָי מָה אֹמַר
 אַחֲרַי אֲשֶׁר הִפְּיָד יִשְׂרָאֵל עֶרְף לְפָנָי אִיבִיו: 9 וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְכָל
 יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ וְנִסְבּוּ עָלֵינוּ וְהִכְרִיתוּ אֶת-שְׁמֵנוּ מִן-הָאָרֶץ וּמִה-תַּעֲשֶׂה
 לְשִׁמְךָ הַגָּדוֹל: 10 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-יְהוֹשֻׁעַ קָם לָךְ לָמָּה זֶה
 אֶתָּה נִפֹּל עַל-פָּנֶיךָ:

6	So Joshua tore up his clothes and he fell down upon his face toward (the) earth before the ark of Yahweh until the evening, (both) he and the elders of Israel, and they lifted up dust upon their head.
7	And Joshua said, “Alas! Lord Yahweh, why did you indeed bring this people across the Jordan to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to cause us to be destroyed. If only we had been willing [and](to) dwell on the other side of the Jordan.
8	By me, O Lord, what shall I say after [which] Israel turned (the) back of (the) neck before their [lit. “his”] enemies?
9	For the Canaanites and all of those dwelling in the land will hear and they will close round upon us and they will cause our name to be cut off from the earth. So what will you do for your great name?” ס
10	And Yahweh said to Joshua, “Arise and go. Why is this (that) you are falling upon your face?”

Introduction

Those living by faith sometimes face life circumstances that seem to contradict what faith expects. When those circumstances are dire, a faith crisis may result in questioning formerly assured understandings. Joshua faces such a situation after Israel flees before the army of Ai during the conquest of Canaan in Josh 7. In this paper, we examine Joshua's lament and God's response in Josh 7:6-10. We compare Joshua's reaction to the situation he previously faced at Kadesh-barnea, when he rebuked Israel's faithlessness before the challenge of possessing Canaan. We also compare his speech to the genre of national lament in the psalter. The result of our exegesis and these comparisons is that Joshua's speech is flawed in fact, theology and faith. Yet in Yahweh's rejection of Joshua's lament, Joshua himself is accepted. This acceptance is especially surprising in light of Israel's harsh punishment after her faithlessness at Kadesh-barnea. However, reflection on the role of lament in maintaining covenant reveals that lament, even 'flawed' lament, can be part a covenant relationship with Yahweh.

The Passage in Context

In this section, I introduce the larger context of the book of Joshua and the episode of Israel's battle with Ai. I then examine the details of Joshua's speech and the beginning of Yahweh's response. The book of Joshua opens with Yahweh commissioning Joshua. In the upcoming battles of conquest, Yahweh assures him: "No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you" (Josh 1:5, *NASB*¹). In chapters 3 and 4, God miraculously cuts off the waters of the Jordan River so that Israel can cross on dry land. This mighty deed is not simply the removal of a physical barrier, but a powerful statement of God's presence and purpose. This message is made

¹ All biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* (1977) unless otherwise noted.

explicit in God's word to Joshua² and in the testimony to the future generations³: Yahweh is doing mighty deeds on behalf of Joshua and Israel, and Yahweh will be faithful to his promises, as he was with Moses. In chapter 6, the dramatic fall of Jericho occurs by Yahweh's hand as the Israelite army simply marches and shouts. At the end of the drama, the narrator re-emphasizes God's presence with Joshua: "So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land" (Josh 6:27). Yahweh's presence and faithful promise are thus unquestionably established, even to all of the surrounding nations.

Moving inward from the context of the larger book, the governing narrative unit for this study is Achan's sin and the resulting defeat of Israel before Ai (7:1-26).⁴ The narrative's boundaries are marked by the narrator's *inclusio* concerning Yahweh's anger, which is kindled because of Achan's sin and cooled after Achan's punishment (7:1, 26). The reader is prepared for an ironic situation by being made aware of Yahweh's anger and its cause, while the human characters are uninformed. Joshua, ignorant of the sin in the camp, prepares for battle by sending spies to Ai (7:2) and then commands the abortive battle according to the spies' suggestion (7:4-5). The resulting defeat and loss of Israelite life (the first to occur in the conquest narrative) causes Israel's heart to melt (7:5) with fear. Previously, the Canaanites' hearts had melted in fear of Israel (2:11), but now the situation has reversed. From the perspective of Israel, the entire war for Canaan has turned. Now, the previously psychologically-defeated Canaanites have cause to mount an offensive campaign: Israel *can* be defeated. Moreover, the Israelites truly have cause to

² "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you" (Josh 3:7).

³ "For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the LORD your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, so that you may fear the LORD your God forever" (Josh 4:23-24).

⁴ Nelson and others observe that the extent of this narrative can be seen as 7:1-27 when viewed as Achan's sin or 7:2-8:29 when viewed as the battle against Ai. Since Joshua's lament is more integral to the former, we use this division. See Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 99.

wither away, for something has gone wrong with Yahweh's promise that none will stand before them (1:5). Though the losses are small, the ramifications are huge. Joshua sees this loss as an indication of Yahweh's faithlessness (7:7). Yahweh responds to Joshua with the explanation that it is rather Israel's faithlessness that is the problem, and instructs Joshua on how to discover and deal with Achan's violation of the ban. The result is a restoration of harmony with God (7:26).

We now focus on our passage. Joshua's reaction to Israel's defeat and demoralization consists of mourning actions and a lament speech to Yahweh. His actions include several elements (7:6): tearing his clothes, falling on his face before the ark⁵ of Yahweh, putting dust on his head, and remaining in this posture until evening. Though these actions could represent mourning after Israel's defeat, the small scale of Israel's loss and the content of Joshua's speech indicate otherwise. It is instead a lament ritual, similar to mourning, but expressing dread of an *anticipated* calamity and seeking God's aid in averting it.⁶ The detailed significance of these ancient actions now escapes us, but placing dust on one's head makes an association with the grave, indicating the anticipation of death.⁷ Note that the elders of Israel join Joshua in this symbolic action of dust. Together, the leadership of Israel laments their imminent doom. Note also that they do these symbolic actions before Yahweh: Israel's fate is understood to be in his hands rather than in military strategy. Finally, these actions are part of a recognized, deliberate ritual, and are not simply an uncontrolled eruption of emotion.⁸ The presence of the elders, the public nature of the display, and the temporal extent of it ("until the evening") is consistent with the fact that Joshua's lament is a thoughtful, symbolic statement 'spoken' on behalf of the entire nation of Israel. This is not his personal, impulsive reaction to his own situation as a losing

⁵ LXX omits any mention of the ark.

⁶ J. E. Hartley, "lament; lamentation," *ISBE* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 65.

⁷ R. Zehnpfund, "mourning customs, Hebrew," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religion and Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), VIII.32.

commander, but a considered response to the radically changed situation of the nation.

After sustaining his lament posture until evening, having reflected on the situation, Joshua speaks. His speech to Yahweh reveals his mind plainly. He begins with אָהָה, an interjection of woe and lament (“alas!”). He then invokes the holy name: אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה. This double vocative has only appeared four times previously in the OT, always as part of a plea and in recognition of God’s sovereignty (Gen 15:2, 8; Deut 3:24; 9:26). The structure of his speech is then as follows:

A	לָמָּה “Why?” – Joshua’s lament: an accusation against Yahweh	7:7		
	B	מָה “What shall <i>I</i> say?” – Joshua’s Personal Problem	7:8	
		C	Israel’s Current Problem	
		C’	Israel’s Imminent Disaster (3 clauses)	7:9
	B’	מָה “What shall <i>you</i> do?” – Yahweh’s Personal Problem		
A’	לָמָּה “Why?” – Yahweh’s reply: an accusation against Israel ⁹	7:10-11		

Joshua’s lament asks God why he has brought this people across the Jordan. The hiphil perfect of עָבַר is intensified with the hiphil infinitive absolute of the same root. Joshua focuses on the Jordan crossing as the key moment, but the open question is *why* they were brought across. Yahweh told Joshua that they were to cross so that Yahweh could give the land to them (1:2). But now Joshua claims that Yahweh’s true goal was to give *them* into the hand of the Amorites! Then to remove any ambiguity, Joshua claims with a second infinitive construct of purpose¹⁰ that Yahweh’s purpose was to destroy Israel. Though Joshua does not know the reason, he is quite sure of the end result of their Jordan crossing. Before continuing, he expresses his dismay at Israel’s fateful choice to trust Yahweh: “If only we had been willing to dwell beyond the Jordan”

⁸ “Mourning”, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), II.1500.

⁹ Yahweh’s reply is obviously not part of the structure of Joshua’s speech, but his opening statement balances Joshua’s complaint, so we include it here.

¹⁰ Williams, §197.

(7:7). Joshua's sentiment here questions the wisdom of ever entering into covenant with Yahweh, since he has proven to be an unfaithful partner. In Joshua's mind, it would have been better to live their life apart from Yahweh, safe in trans-Jordan.

Acknowledging the gravity of his words with **בִּי אֲדַבֵּר** ("By me, Lord"; an acceptance of responsibility for intruding upon a superior¹¹), Joshua now explains his understanding of the situation. The fundamental problem is that "Israel has turned their back before their enemies" (7:8). However as previously noted, this is only the beginning because Joshua foresees an ensuing three-step downfall: (1) the Canaanites will hear; (2) they will surround us; and (3) they will cut off our name from the earth. The situation has ironically reversed from the glorious beginning of the conquest. The Canaanites previously heard of Israel's power (2:10; 5:1) but now they will hear of their weakness. As Israel recently surrounded Jericho and conquered it (6:3), Israel will now be surrounded and destroyed.¹² As Joshua completes his prediction of their doom, he closes his lament with the question, "What will you do for your great name?" (7:9, *NRSV*). It is difficult to determine whether this is a serious and devout inquiry in the face of harsh reality or a sarcastic barb at the 'faithless one' whose reputation has already been destroyed. In either case, he links the destruction of Israel's name with the tarnishing of Yahweh's own name.

A detailed examination of Yahweh's reply is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is significant to note that his response is a complete nullification of Joshua's position. Joshua's stance of lament with his face down is reprimanded curtly: "Arise!"¹³ His paralysis is rebuked

¹¹ Butler, 77. (LXX omits this phrase).

¹² Nelson, 104.

¹³ The imperative **קֵם** does not always indicate a command to stand up, but is often linked with **לֵךְ** as a single command: "Go!" However, in our text the subsequent question makes clear that Yahweh is telling Joshua to put off his mourning.

with “Go!” Joshua’s complaint of “why?” (לָמָּהּ) is thrown back at him with Yahweh’s own “why?” (לָמָּהּ) that complains of Joshua’s response to Israel’s defeat. Yahweh’s speech continues by clarifying to Joshua that the cause of the defeat is Israel’s own sin (7:11). They are the faithless ones and not Yahweh.

We should pause here to note the significant point that, though Joshua’s position is completely refuted and Yahweh’s position is vindicated, Joshua himself is not condemned for questioning Yahweh’s intentions. His assumptions, beliefs and logic are wrongheaded and invalid, but he himself is accepted. This conclusion can be justified both negatively and positively. Negatively, the text is silent about Joshua’s lament being reckoned as sin. In the structure of the narrative, Achan’s sin is the one that pervades the plot. Joshua is not found guilty for his lament. Instead, Joshua’s place in the narrative is simply part of the plot development and not an independent component of the plot itself. The narrator uses it as part of a dramatic irony where the reader observes Joshua discovering what has already been revealed. Positively, Joshua is re-affirmed as Israel’s leader. After dismissing Joshua’s lament, Yahweh commissions him with ferreting out Achan and enforcing justice. Furthermore, after the Achan narrative concludes, Yahweh again speaks to Joshua and works through him to effect the continuing holy war against Canaan (8:1). From the point-of-view of the narrative, the only rupture in the relationship with Yahweh is through Achan. Joshua’s status as a faithful covenant partner is never questioned, even though he accuses Yahweh. This fact about the text is curious for those who see beliefs and attitudes as central to faith. Should not Joshua’s attitude have been judged as sinful and faithless? In the rest of this paper, I compare Joshua’s speech with a previous complaint by Israel and then with psalms of national lament. My goal is to understand the role of such lament language in the life of Yahweh’s covenant people.

Models of Complaint from the Pentateuch

Joshua's lament can be compared with a number of previous scenes where Israel and Moses complain in the wilderness (*e.g.*, Exod 16, 17; Num 11, 20). However, the most revealing comparison is the reaction of Israel at Kadesh-barnea to the spies' report on the land of Canaan. In that case, Joshua and Moses had full confidence in God's faithfulness, while Israel's faith faltered. In stunning contrast is the Joshua of Josh 7, who now displays fear and lack of faith.

The significant story of rebellion at Kadesh-barnea is recounted three times: Num 14; Deut 1:19-3:11; and Deut 9:23-29. Note the common elements with our passage. After the twelve spies (including Joshua) deliver their report of the challenging battle ahead, Israel's heart melts (Deut 1:28; cf. Josh 7:5) and they speak a lament and accusation against Yahweh (Deut 1:27-28). As a result, Moses, Aaron, Caleb *and Joshua* mourn – falling on their faces and tearing their clothes (Num 14:5-6; cf. Josh 7:6). The content of Israel's complaint bears a striking resemblance to Joshua's in our passage. They bemoan leaving Egypt as Joshua bemoans leaving trans-Jordan (Num 14:2; Josh 7:7). Both speeches beginning with the particle לִי (“If only...!”; only 22 occurrences in the OT). The accusation against God, that his purpose is “to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites to destroy us”, is almost identically worded in Deut 1:27 and Josh 7:7. Only the word for ‘destroy’ is changed from שָׂמַד to אָבַד. In addition, Moses reminds Yahweh that his name (*i.e.* reputation) is at stake as Joshua does in our passage (Num 14:13-19; Deut 9:28-29; cf. Josh 7:9). These striking parallels draw the two passages together.

Many commentators note some of these similarities,¹⁴ but rarely highlight the stunning contrasts. Though mourning (or lament) occurs in both passages, in the former episode Joshua

mourns Israel's accusation against Yahweh (Num 14:6). In the latter, he laments as the first step in his own accusation against Yahweh. In the former episode, when Israel's heart melts (Deut 1:28), Moses tells the people not to fear their enemies. In the latter episode, Israel's melting heart causes Joshua to be filled with fear, too (Josh 7:5, 7). Likewise, Moses recognizes the people's sin and begs Yahweh for forgiveness (Num 14:17-19), while in our story Joshua is ignorant of the people's sin (Josh 7:11). When Moses reminds Yahweh that his name is at stake, it is as part of his plea for forgiveness (Num 14:13-19). But when Joshua does so, his logic is faulty because Yahweh's reputation actually *is* being maintained because his holiness has been violated by Achan (Josh 7:1). Moses encourages Israel to take the land with the words, "Do not fear or be dismayed" (אֵל-תִּירָא וְאֵל-תַּחַחָה ; Deut 1:21), but Joshua forgets this admonition and Yahweh must repeat the same words to him after the Achan episode (Josh 8:1).

These differences heighten the contrast between the former and latter Joshua. At Kadesh-barnea, Joshua is the man with rock-steady faith even in the face of giants and a melted-heart army. His faithfulness is rewarded by the word that he shall enter the land and cause Israel to inherit it (Deut 1:38), in contrast to the punishment of wandering for the faithless generation. He stands firm in faith when Israel accuses Yahweh. What a drastically different portrait appears in the book of Joshua when he forgets Yahweh's faithfulness, which has just been gloriously displayed at the Jordan and at Jericho. When the first bump appears in the road at Ai, he is infected with Israel's fear, forgets the Deuteronomistic warning that loss in battle follows from sin (Deut 28:25), and succumbs to finding fault with Yahweh.

The contrast between these two episodes is striking, but we must bear in mind the lack of

¹⁴ Christopher T. Begg, "The Function of Josh 7,1-8,29 in the Deuteronomistic History," *Biblica* 67 (1986), 322. Gordon J Wenham, "The Deuteronomistic Theology of the Book of Joshua," *JBL* 90 (1971), 146. Nelson, 102. Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 123.

condemnation of Joshua that we noted earlier. Before theologically reflecting on this tension, we briefly compare Joshua's lament with the larger genre of poems of national lament, especially as presented in the psalter.

Models of Complaint from the Psalter

Eissfeldt notes that national laments and intercession have a large place among OT cultic songs. The central idea of these songs is a "passionate complaint at the shameful wrong brought upon Israel by the enemies, accompanied by an equally passionate plea for help."¹⁵ The focus of the (often bitter) complaint is *God* and not the enemies who trigger the lament.¹⁶ The lament is concerned with God's remoteness and is an expression of something having gone wrong in Israel's relationship with him. The fault for the broken relationship is sometimes accepted by the lamenter with statements of contrition, but in many cases protestations of innocence are spoken instead. The lament speech type also appears in narratives, such as the one we are considering (cf. Judg 20:26-8; 2 Kgs 19:14-34; 2 Chr 20:3-17).¹⁷ Often in the narratives, the lament does not contain a particular petition because it is implied by the narrative situation,¹⁸ as in the case of Josh 7:7-9. Sometimes the lament is followed by a divine oracle that responds to the complaint (Ps 60:8-10; 2Chr 20:14-15).¹⁹ The basic components of a national lament are: (1) address [invocation of God], (2) lament [often a 'why?' question that expresses dismay at the current situation], (3) recollection of God's former favor, (4) confession of trust for the future, (5) petition for help, and (6) vow of praise.

By comparing Joshua's lament with this sketch of the broader form, we can gain some further insight into Joshua's words. Joshua's lament fits the broad strokes of the form. His

¹⁵ Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, tr. P. R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 112.

¹⁶ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox P, 1981), 199-200.

¹⁷ Eissfeldt, 114.

¹⁸ Westermann, 171.

speech contains three of the basic components of a national lament: address, lament and petition. The core of his words is his complaint to God about Israel's plight and a (mostly implicit) plea for help. Though he spends a large fraction of his words considering Israel's enemies, his message is directed solely to Yahweh. His complaint centers on Yahweh's remoteness from Israel and their broken relationship, which he attributes to Yahweh's newly revealed purpose for their destruction.

But Joshua's lament also deviates markedly from the general form. Missing entirely are the recollection of God's former favor, the confession of trust, and the vow of praise. In other words, Joshua seems not able to imagine that Yahweh is trustworthy. He closes with the simple challenge, "What will you do for your great name?" (7:9, *NRSV*), acknowledging Yahweh's greatness but questioning his character and covenant commitment. More striking is that Joshua does in fact recall a previous mighty act, namely the crossing of the Jordan. But instead of looking to this for confidence, he sees it as the first step in Israel's downfall. Yahweh's apparent favor has been part of his surreptitious plan for destruction. Westermann points out that the early narrative laments do not have the fuller form of the later lament psalms. "The lament of the early period is essentially a complaint against God."²⁰ However, another early narrative lament does contain a recollection of God's former saving deeds (Jdg 15:18). And doubtlessly Joshua, who experienced the Red Sea, Sinai, manna, the Jordan, Jericho and many other demonstrations of Yahweh's faithfulness, had many such personal experiences from which to draw. Joshua's lament contains neither contrition nor protestations of innocence. From the reader's and Yahweh's perspectives, contrition would have obviously been the correct response.

In summary, Joshua's speech is in accord with the form of a national lament. Against that

¹⁹ Eissfeldt, 113.

background, the Joshua's thoughts become clearer. Though the surrounding armies of Canaan hold the sword that is at his throat, his problem is not with them but with Yahweh. He is mystified by their broken relationship, and the only place he can conceive of placing blame is on Yahweh. He has forgotten his rich personal history of Yahweh's gracious dependability and the integrity of his voice as he has led Israel step-by-step to the Promised Land. Joshua's dire circumstances cause a faith crisis. All of his confidence and his hope for praising Yahweh in the future evaporates. From these observations and with hindsight, it is easy to chart Joshua's proper course of action. He *should* have suspected Israel's sin and offered a mediatorial lament for Israel's sin, as Moses did on several occasions.²¹ However, even acknowledging Joshua's blindness to Israel's culpability, his words of lament fell well short of the more theologically complete form revealed in the psalms of national lament. How could he omit confessing Yahweh's trustworthiness? Such an omission seems understandable in a spontaneous personal prayer, but this was Joshua's speech on behalf of the entire nation, as their leader, in public, after considering his words for much of the day as he lay in mourning. What has happened to Israel's leader? And possibly more mysterious, why is he not held culpable for his deeply flawed view? We consider this question in the final section of this paper.

Theological Reflection on the Acceptability of Complaint

Thus far, I have presented an unflattering characterization of Joshua based on his complaint and accusation against Yahweh. My portrayal has been intentionally dark in order to highlight the surprising result that Yahweh nonetheless accepts him, while correcting his erroneous understanding and conclusions. As previously argued, Joshua's speech is clearly lacking in insight, and reveals a flawed understanding of Yahweh's character and behavior.

²⁰ Westermann, 198.

However, just as clear is Yahweh's indifference to these flaws and his continuing favorable relationship with Joshua. To understand this tension, we must consider the function of lament within the human-divine covenant. Westermann describes lament as an essential component of the salvific pattern, as established in the Exodus and repeated throughout salvation history. The pattern is (1) distress, (2) a cry of distress (*i.e.* lament), (3) hearkening by God, (4) deliverance by God, and (5) a response of praise.²² According to this pattern, the lament has an important role in the saving acts of God: it is the human engagement with God that lies between the distress and God's salvation. As Gunkel observes, "In the alternation between lament and song of thanks there unrolls the whole life of the pious."²³ Some would argue that the believer should never even experience true distress, instead impassively trusting God in all circumstances. However, such a view does one of three things. It either (1) belittles God's incomprehensibly wise activity that defies human reason, (2) belittles humanity's quest for order and understanding in the universe that God sovereignly rules, or [most troubling] (3) disengages the human-divine relationship to one of fatalism. Balentine argues that lament prevents the disengagement that would amount to covenant-breaking, for the distress that produces lament is not simply havoc in the world but it is havoc *that indicates a breach in one's relationship with God.*²⁴ When circumstances seem to rebut the truth of the covenant by challenging the presence, power or goodness of God, the covenant itself is threatened. Lament, accusation, and complaint are then not only permitted but *required*. To ignore the problem is an invitation to covenant disaster. The faithful accuser or "loyal opposition"²⁵ hopes wholeheartedly to be proven wrong when the accusation is finished. But to jump to that conclusion ahead-of-time, although appearing pious, is

²¹ For a brief discussion of the mediatorial lament form, see Westermann, 196.

²² Westermann, 259.

²³ Westermann, 24.

²⁴ Balentine, 604.

probably an act of covenant-breaking because it transforms the human-divine relationship from one of mutuality to isolation, from dialogue to monologue.²⁶ How easy it is to forget that the human-divine covenant implies engaged relationship, certainly not an equal relationship, but not one where the human partner is squeezed out of the process either.²⁷ If covenant meant rule-keeping, ‘correct’ evaluation of situations, and ‘correct’ wording of prayers, then Joshua would have been disqualified after his lament. However, if covenant meant these things, it would be reduced to an “I-It” relationship and be worthless.

Given this understanding of the place for lament, even wrongheaded lament is praiseworthy if it is part of covenant building rather than covenant destruction. When the Israelites grumbled at Kadesh-barnea they began to plan a course of action without Yahweh: “Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt” (Num 14:4). They had had enough of the covenant and were then granted their desire by Yahweh: They “shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers” (Num 14:23). In reaction, Joshua joined Moses in the covenant-building acts of mourning, offering correction, and interceding with Yahweh. Much later when Israel faced defeat before Ai under Joshua’s command, hindsight can find deficiency in his speech, but his covenant loyalty spoke out *to Yahweh* against the obstacle he saw threatening the covenant. The result of his uninformed speech was another cycle in the familiar pattern of salvation: Yahweh hearkened to his words with righteous rebuke (7:10-11), delivered Israel from both their own sin (7:25-26) and the threat of military destruction (8:1-29), and produced a response of praise from Israel in covenant renewal (8:30-35). May all of God’s people be willing to wrestle with him, like Joshua, when the covenant seems to be threatened. Such a struggle is our privilege

²⁵ Balentine, 616.

²⁶ Balentine, 615.

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *JSOT* 36 (1986), 59.

and obligation. “Without these prayers and the model they encourage for engaging God authentically in the struggle for meaning in the midst of chaos, we would be confronted with an intolerable inexorability which imposes on us monologue without dialogue, revelation without response, destiny and fate without hope.”²⁸

Conclusion

Our exegesis of Josh 7:6-10 reveals that Joshua’s lament and speech to Yahweh after Israel’s defeat at Ai reveals both Joshua’s incorrect thinking and a lack of confidence in Yahweh’s character. Comparison with the Kadesh-barnea incident in Numbers and Deuteronomy highlights the situational and literary similarities between the two scenes and also the stark contrast in Joshua’s behavior. Comparison of Joshua’s speech with the form of national lament in the psalms shows strong literary connections, and re-emphasizes Joshua’s lack of confidence in Yahweh’s covenant commitment. However, Yahweh accepts Joshua even while setting straight his incorrect thinking. This initially surprising response is understood in terms of the covenant building nature of lament, even (especially?) when Yahweh appears to have abandoned his people. Joshua’s prayer to a God who seems to have deceptively planned Israel’s destruction is akin to the famous lament, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1, *NRSV*) that simultaneously affirms relationship and its opposite. Such a lament is the authentic soul’s tool for recovering the one vital thing.

²⁸ Ballentine, 616.

POSTSCRIPT

I was raised on the lessons and the victory speech,
And I fought for the standards that I could not reach,
And I hold my tongue when the pain is great
And I cover my tears as we celebrate
While a private war rages with the fear and the doubt
As I try to run faster to find a way out
I'm convinced if I stumble they'll just cast me aside
Or mock at my weakness and shatter my pride
'Cause I've watched as we've stoned the more hesitant soul
So we all must remember
It's still God's grace we all need to know.²⁹

²⁹ Brian Duncan and Chuck Barth, "We All Need," from *Anonymous Confessions of a Lunatic Friend* (Myrrh Records, 1990).

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