

# LEVITICUS 26 IN PSALM 79: THE DEFILEMENT OF THE SACRED, NATIONS AND LAMENT

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## I. Introduction

A cursory look into a number of respected and classic bible commentaries on Psalm 79, one will immediately recognise that the discussion on Psalm 79 is treated in generic fashion, just like most other communal lament psalms.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.J. Perowne, *Commentary on the Psalms* (New York: Kregel Press, 1989); Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1962); James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Hans Kraus, *Psalms 60-150* (Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 2005); Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990). Gerstenberger compares the psalm with ANE lament psalms and writes "Also, the common Near Eastern tradition of city and sanctuary lament uses the same motifs and may be considered the fertile matrix of the OT genre. Profaning sanctuaries and leaving defeated opponents, leaving them unburied to increase their shame, were part of the warfare." Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part II and Lamentations*, FOTL 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 100. Samuel Terrien, in his theological commentary, reads the psalm

This article will argue for the strong presence of Leviticus in Psalm 79.<sup>2</sup> Using the principles and methods of intertextuality, this article will highlight what has been overlooked in Psalm 79 commentary<sup>3</sup> and investigate how Psalm 79 employs cultic vocabulary, images and concepts of Leviticus 26 in writing the communal lament. Underscoring the intertextuality between Leviticus 26 and Psalm 79 will help readers to appreciate the theological shaping and perspective of Psalm 79 in imputing upon the foreign nations the guilt of the desacralisation of the temple.

## II. Psalm 79 in Its Context

Psalm 79 is one of the psalms in the Psalter where Psalms scholars are in substantial agreement regarding its form as communal lament psalm.<sup>4</sup> In the tradition of lament psalms, the community are in unison in voicing out without inhibitions their pains and grievances to God in the context of a

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in connection with Jeremiah intertextually. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Brueggemann and Bellinger read the strong lament presence of lament with the book of Lamentations when he writes "Psalm 79 is a poem of anger and grief at the loss of Jerusalem and its temple, a poem that lives in the context of the artistic limits of the book of Lamentations." Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Even Jacob Milgrom in his commentary on Leviticus has a discussion section of the Holiness Code and other Pentateuchal Sources and Ezekiel but not with Psalm 79. Leviticus 26 is only compared with Deuteronomy 28.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford made a rather hasty and less than helpful comment in his commentary "Nearly every prayer in Book 3 up to this point has been concerned in some way with the Temple." Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 48.

<sup>4</sup> First personal pronoun vv. 4, 8-9, 10, 12, 13. (Gunkel, Kraus); Tate, *Psalms 51-100*.

divine dialogue. The structure of Psalm 79 follows the classic form-critical genre of a lament psalm beginning with invocation of the divine name, followed by complaints or laments, confession of sins, a series of petition, imprecations against the enemies and finally, a vow or pledge.<sup>5</sup> Akin to Walter Brueggemann's classification of psalms: Orientation - Disorientation - Reorientation, Psalm 79 is without a doubt a disorientation psalm. The community "enters a new distressful situation in which the old orientation has collapsed"<sup>6</sup> for the sanctity of the temple and the lives of God's people are under attack.

Using linguistic evidence, Gary Rendsburg<sup>7</sup> ascribes the Asaph psalms, namely, Psalms 50, 73-83 to be of northern origin.<sup>7</sup> While Psalm 79 belongs to the Asaph collection, Rendsburg skips this psalm in his book leaving no treatment of it. Insofar as the psalm is preoccupied with the temple in Jerusalem and its desacralisation, it is best understood as southern origin.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part I with An Introduction of Cultic Poetry*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). Claus Westermann has a simplified structure composed of 5 elements, namely, Address, Lament, Confession of Trust, Petition and Vow of Praise. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim and Richard Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms: The Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Using linguistic analysis, Nasuti maintains that Psalm 79 is tradition-historically connected with Ephraimite tradition stream. Harry P. Nasuti, *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph*, SBL Dissertation Series 88 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Although Psalms 79 and 65 are Asaph psalms but they are not classified by Gary Rendsburg as Northern Origin. Gary A. Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 43 (Scholars Press: Atlanta, Georgia, 1990). Kraus suggests יהוה instead of אלהים in v. 1 perhaps to make it fit to the temple theme of the psalm.

Despite the lack of particular referentiality to the historical event, majority of Psalms scholars are also in concurrence that the psalm is an exilic psalm pertaining to the 587 BC fall of Jerusalem by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>9</sup> This psalm is often read in connection with Psalms 44 and 74, which are also categorised as communal lament psalms. All these three psalms share significant commonalities for they implore God to intervene in Israel's 587 BC national disaster. Additionally, the thematic relationship between Psalms 74 and 79 is closer than with Psalm 44 due to the two psalms' forceful and extensive complaints and lamentation over the profanation of the temple in Jerusalem.

In sum, Psalm 79 describes the terrible carnage in Israel's national history. The community laments not only over the defilement of the temple but also the death of the people of God caused by the foreign nations. Consequently, the remnant community's petition is two-fold. First, for God to extend help by redirecting his wrath poured upon them toward the nations. Second, to forgive them of their sins. Finally, the community vows to praise God when the foreign nations face God's seven-fold retribution of their behaviour against the temple and God's people.

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars like Gunkel and Schmidt locate the psalm in the post-exilic period in the time of Ezra because of the lack of reference to burning of the temple. Dahood seems to identify the psalm to the Maccabean period but suggests earlier dating. After considering the late dating, Tate writes, "In spite of all these problems, the time after the fall of Jerusalem 587 seems to be best for the original setting of the psalm. The fact that it does not mention the burning of the temple is not so important." Tate, *Psalm 51-100*, 299. The 586 BC event is supported by the following: Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 100-2. Richard Clifford writes "the 6th century BCE exile is the most suitable context for the poem." John Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003). James Limburg, *Psalms*, *Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).



### III. Leviticus 26 in Context

Leviticus 26 is Leviticus version of Deuteronomy 28 Blessings and Curses. The blessings and curses build on the premise of obedience or disobedience, respectively. The chapter begins and highlights two major sins, namely idolatry and irreverence towards Sabbath and other cultic instructions, as criteria in deciding the fate of the people of God.<sup>10</sup> The instructions are expressed in apodictic negative prohibition<sup>11</sup> and positive instructions, respectively.

26:1 Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the Lord your God.

26:2 Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord.

The two sins are *pars pro toto* expression. They are representative of the various impurities explicated in the book. The reference to the sin of idolatry necessarily includes other moral impurities like sexual impurities and social injustices listed in Leviticus 18-20. The instruction to observe Sabbath and reverence to the sanctuary include all the cultic sacrifices and impurities described in Leviticus 1-15.

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<sup>10</sup> The sins of idolatry and Sabbath observance led to the fall of the nation of Judah. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, The Anchor Bible, vol 3B (Doubleday: The Anchor Bible, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, "The Origin of the Apodictic Law: An Overlooked Source," *Vetus Testamentum* 23 (1973): 63-75.

The reference to two commandments is followed by promised blessings upon obedience in vv. 3-13. The blessings listed include the blessings of agricultural prosperity, peace in the land, subjugation of foreign enemies and progeny. However, starting from vv. 14-39,<sup>12</sup> the punishment as result of disobedience is enumerated. The punishment for disobedience lists five if-then clauses, almost formulaic in construction, to describe the conditions and the corresponding punishments.

וְאִם-לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ לִי 26:14

But if you will not listen to me

וְאִם-עַד-אֵלֶּה לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ 26:18

If after all these you will not listen to me

וְאִם-תִּלְכּוּ עִמִּי וְלֹא תֹאבּוּ לִשְׁמָע לִי 26:21

If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me

וְאִם-בְּאֵלֶּה לֹא תִקְבָּלוּ עִמִּי כִּי 26:23

If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction  
but continue to be hostile toward me

וְהִלַּכְתֶּם עִמִּי בְּקִרְיָ וְאִם-בְּזֹאת לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ לִי 26:27

If in spite of this you still do not listen to me  
but continue to be hostile toward me

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<sup>12</sup> The hebrew syntax (contrastive וְ + conditional אִם, translated as "but if...") found on this section demarcates this section from the earlier blessings section.

The disobedient condition of the people and corresponding punishment should be understood as scaled. The gravity of punishment increases as Israel continues to disobey despite the punishment. The disasters here function like a warning. Behind the five if-clauses is the divine intention that the community repents and obeys God's instructions each time a milder form of punishment is experienced. The length and the syntactical prominence of this curse section compared with the blessings section, highlights the emphasis and the strong probability on Israel's disobedience leading to punishment.<sup>13</sup>

In the final section of the passage, vv. 40-45, it maintains that after divine's final blow of exile finally confess their sins and repent, God will remember the covenants he made with the forefathers concerning the land.<sup>14</sup> God remembers his covenant by refraining from performing complete and utter destruction while they are in exile. Their expulsion allows the land to experience rest; this is in line with the theology of the land in Leviticus.

#### IV. Dating and Methodology

As argued above, Psalm 79 is dated in the exilic period. Leviticus 26, as part of the greater Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-27), is understood as pre-exilic origin with various compositional levels and vv. 33b-37a, 40b-

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<sup>13</sup> Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, Apollo Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 487 writes "The strong emphasis laid on the disproportionately longer section of curses indicates the Lord considers that the people's disobedience is mostly likely to become a reality."

<sup>14</sup> William Barrick, "The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 16 (2005): 95-126.

43 as exilic interpolations. However, Jacob Milgrom maintains that 26:3-45 comprise two strata: vv. 3-33a, 36-42, 45, composed during the reign of Hezekiah and vv. 33b-35, 43-44, an exilic interpolation.<sup>15</sup> Milgrom's exilic interpolation proposal will receive its treatment in the paper. Regardless of the details, pre-exilic origin of the Holiness Code, Leviticus 26 in particular, has received scholarly consensus. Thus, the following discussion builds on that consensus and will assume the diachronic distance between the two texts in order to investigate how Psalm 79 which is a later literary text employs Leviticus 26.

Against traditio-historical criticism developed by Herman Gunkel, the method of intertextuality is primarily concerned with the relationship between texts rather how a tradition is passed from its earlier oral form to final textual form. One of the criticisms against traditio-historical approach is how it inevitably engages in elusive guesswork in uncovering the oral form; hence, it is subject to various methodological problems. Although, the intertextual method also has its own subjectivity problem but insofar as it generally deals with the relationship between source and later texts,<sup>16</sup> the investigation stands on a firmer footing than traditio-historical criticism. Hence, this article shall use the principles and method of intertextuality in investigating how Psalm

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<sup>15</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2363.

<sup>16</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell, ed. *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992). Intertextuality was first developed by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva. Since then, this conceptual method has evolved and used with numerous variation by succeeding biblical scholars like Michael Fishbane.

79 employs Leviticus 26 for its particular purposes. Insofar as intertextuality is applied in biblical studies, Michael Fishbane names the method as "inner-biblical exegesis." Among one of the three categories he proposes, aggadic exegesis<sup>17</sup> is perhaps the phenomenon which best describes how Psalm 79 used Leviticus 26.

## **V. Verbal Language and Theological Concepts of Leviticus 26 in Psalm 79**

At this juncture, I shall present the linguistic vocabulary used in Psalm 79 as they relate to Leviticus in general and Leviticus 26 in particular. Since intertextuality is not solely based on superficial linguistic connection, I shall also demonstrate the thematic or theological connections between these two texts. It should be said in advanced that the cumulative effect of these linguistic and theological connections will argue for the strong presence of Leviticus 26 in Psalm 79.

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<sup>17</sup> In his book, Fishbane listed three methodological considerations on the analysis of aggadic exegesis. The following statements is the subject under study. "A third means of isolating aggadic exegesis depends on a more subjective text-critical judgment. In these cases a *traditum* is incorporated into a tradition-which transforms it or re-employs it. Of particular aid and importance in this judgment is the dense occurrence in one text of terms, often thoroughly reorganized and transposed, found elsewhere in a natural, uncomplicated form." Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 291.

## 1. Linguistic Connections

Vocabulary	Gloss	Psalm 79	Leviticus 26	Outside Leviticus 26
היכל קדש מקדש	holy temple sanctuary	v.1	v. 31	multiple occurrence
ירושלים עיר	Jerusalem city	v. 1	vv. 31, 33	
טמא	defile	v. 1a		multiple occurrence
שפך	pour out	vv. 3, 10b		multiple occurrence
דם	blood	vv. 3, 10b		multiple occurrence
נבלה	corpse	v. 2a		multiple occurrence
בשר	flesh	v. 2b	v. 29	multiple occurrence
שםם	desolate	v. 7b	vv. 22, 31, 32, 34, 35, 43	
כפר	atone	v. 9b		multiple occurrence
שבע	seven	v. 12a	vv. 18, 21, 24, 28	multiple occurrence
שם	name	vv. 9a, 9b		multiple occurrence
כבוד	glory	v. 9b		multiple eoccurrence
זכר	remember to	v. 8	vv. 42, 45	
ידה	to praise to confess	v.13	v. 40	multiple occurrence

## 2. Defilement Language

In the theology of Leviticus, defilement is an important cultic and moral concept. In Leviticus 10:10, the notion of defilement (טמא) is set against the notion of pure (טהור). These two categories are the changing cultic conditions

of the sacred space, object and people as they are exposed to various cultic and moral impurities. Psalm 79 describes for us the defilement of God's inheritance:<sup>18</sup> sacred people and sacred space.

Insofar far the sacred space is concerned, the descriptions in Psalm 79 is more explicit than Leviticus 26. The reference to "your holy temple" (v. 1) is more definitive than what we have in Leviticus 26:31 as "your sanctuary." This is in parallel reference to "Jerusalem" (they have laid Jerusalem) which is only described in generic term as "cities" in Leviticus 26:31, 33. Moreover, both texts intentionally use שָׁמָּה (desolate) to describe the devastation of the sacred space.

In priestly theology, only the consecrated priests and cultically clean Israelites as God's consecrated people are permitted to enter the holy sanctuary. The purpose of coming close to the sanctuary is to offer sacrifice. The holy status of the people of God took effect when they were chosen and set apart from the nations to be God's chosen people and kingdom of priests. In the sight of God, the nations are profane while Israelites are holy. Psalm 79 depiction of the force entrance and occupation of the foreign nations (גוֹיִם) into the temple brings about utter defilement.

Furthermore, the nation caused the defilement of the sacred space and people as narrated in v. 2. There is a thoughtful reference to the carcass of the servants (נְבִלַת עֲבָדֶיךָ) and flesh of the saints (בֶּשֶׂר חֲסִידֶיךָ). Two things need to be clarified here: First, the "your servants" and "your saints" may refer generally to all of God's people or subgroup of people who faithfully

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<sup>18</sup> The reference to נַחֲלָה (v.1) read broadly to refer to both the space and the people of God.

obey God's law. But, to be sure, in this specific psalm it is better understood as referring to the priests as how it is used in Psalm 132:9 and Deuteronomy 33:8. A close reading of the psalm pays attention to the speaker of the psalm. The speakers call themselves as "God's people" (עַם) in v. 13 and describe the "servants/saints" as corpse. Thus, logically, the servants/saints refer to the priests or religious leaders of the community of God. Second, carcasses or human corpse are common in military war. It has negative connotation considered as impurity because of its association with death which is direct opposite to life. The reference to flesh (בָּשָׂר) should be read not just body but dead bodies where birds and living beasts devour them as food. The defilement described here is intensified for carcasses or opened flesh unavoidably means not only exposure of blood but also dead corpses are rendered as unclean (Num 19:11-16). Furthermore, flesh-eating animals are also considered unclean like beasts and eagles.

The reference to "and there was no one to bury them" (וַאֲיֵן קוֹבֵר) in v. 3 may intimate to the ominous story of Nadab and Abihu. Leviticus 10 records the fateful death of the two assistant priests Nadab and Abihu, for offering strange fire in sanctuary. When they died on the spot, Moses' immediate instruction is to bury the dead. In v. 4, Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Aaron's uncle Uzziel, and said to them, "Come here; carry your cousins outside the camp." So they came and carried them, still in their tunics, outside the camp," as Moses ordered. In the theology of Leviticus, carcass, animal or human, is a source of defilement (Lev 5:2, 11:8, 40). Hence, the disgusting image of human carcasses laid down without gravedigger and proper disposal is detestable to the sacred space.

Moreover, the blood (דָּם) and its corresponding verb used "pour out" (שָׁפַךְ) like water described in v. 3 causes defilement to the temple. The blood is central in Leviticus for in it is life and life is used to make atonement



for the sins of the people (Lev 17:14 The life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said to the Israelites, "You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood; anyone who dies must be cut off.") The blood in Leviticus is handled with care. If used for atonement, it is poured out at the base of the altar of the burnt offering or sprinkled against altar of fragrance incense (Lev 4:7). As respect for life, it is to be drained out and covered on earth (Lev 17:13). It is never spilled thoughtlessly and profusely like water the way it is described in Psalm 79. Shedding of blood is a source of defilement as well; causing one to become cultically unclean (women's menstruation and childbirth)

In Leviticus 24, Moses deals with the issue of a half-breed Israelite who blasphemed God's name. God's name is rendered holy in priestly theology. Although the nature of the blasphemy is unclear in Leviticus 24, but regardless of the nature of the blasphemy, the punishment is death. As we move to Psalm 79:9, it writes, "Help us, O God our savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake." God's name is finally honored. The community appeals to the sacredness of God's name (שם) for help and forgiveness.

### 3. Atonement Language

Psa 79:8 Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors;  
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,  
for we are brought very low.

Psa 79:9 Help us, O God of our salvation,  
for the glory of your name; deliver us, and forgive our sins,  
for your name's sake.

The two verses above suggest that the desacralisation of the temple and

God's people is the result of the sins of the former and present generation. Such understanding is theologically compatible with Lev 26:38 "You will perish among the nations the land of your enemies will devour you. Those of you who are left will waste away in the lands of their enemies because of their sins; also because of their father's sins they will waste away." The fate of the community as described in the psalm is coherent with the reason provided for their fate in Leviticus 26.

The above verses functions like confession of sin for it appeals to God not to count the sins of the former generation against them and to extend divine forgiveness of their sins. What is noteworthy is the lexical word used, כפר (forgive/atone). This word occurs only three times in the Psalter. Once here (79:9) and the other two are found in Psa 78:38 and Psa 65:3. The word is translated in NIV as "forgive" in these three occurrences, while its lexical meaning is glossed as "make atonement for" or "cover." There are other synonyms to the word such as נשא, כסה, סלח which are employed in other psalms to render God's forgiveness.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the minimal use of כפר word in the Psalms which comes from the priestly material can not be taken for granted.

What is noteworthy, the use of כפר in two out of three psalms are in the context of sacred temple and dwelling place of Yahweh. In Psalm 65:3(4) "When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions. Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple." Here in Psalm

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<sup>19</sup> נשא (Pss 25:18, 32:5; 85:2; 99:9); כסה (Ps 32:1); סלח (Pss 25:11; 86:5; 103:3; 130:4).

79:9, the community pleads Yahweh to forgive their sins after lamenting over the defilement of the temple. In other words, the atonement language כפר here in Psalm 79 points readers to Leviticus, especially the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). It is not simply a general lexical word for forgiveness but the kind of forgiveness, which encompasses cleansing the impurity caused by God's people to the holy sanctuary.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Language of God's Retribution

Retribution refers to the community pronouncing imprecations and maledictions to come upon the enemies because of their violent actions.<sup>21</sup> A cursory look at other lament psalms, we see common imprecations include: putting enemies to shame (Pss 83, 109, 129), or enemies fall into the traps they themselves made (Pss 35, 57, 59, 69). What is interesting is that Psalm 79:12 does not employ such common language but uses a conspicuous one. It writes "Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbours the taunts with which they taunted you, O Lord!" The image of "sevenfold into the bosom" is derived from the ample folds of the garments that served to gather and carry things.<sup>22</sup> The community pleads God to bring about seven-fold (שבע) retribution against their neighbouring nations for taunting God. The language of retribution is built upon a conception of justice that is rooted in Israel's

<sup>20</sup> Although the sin of the people is not mentioned in Psalm 79 but Psalm 78 as a context of Psalm 79 points us that the people of God despite warning, engaged in rebellion and idolatry, hence national destruction (78:56-58).

<sup>21</sup> Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Konrad Schaefer, "Psalms," in Berit Olam, *Studies in Hebrew Poetry Narrative & Poetry* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 195.

legal traditions.<sup>23</sup> "Blasphemous taunts should rebound on the mockers with sevenfold force."<sup>24</sup> The sevenfold vengeance is scarce in the Old Testament. "The appeal for sevenfold vengeance is reminiscent of the words of Lamech in Genesis 4:23-24, a vengeance that is total and appropriate to the initial violation."<sup>25</sup> The numerical figure seven here cannot be ignored for the number seven and the concept of seven-fold retribution<sup>26</sup> is central to Leviticus 26's punishment discourse. The word occurs four times in Leviticus 26:<sup>27</sup>

Lev 26:18 And if in spite of this you will not obey me, I will continue to punish you sevenfold for your sins.

Lev 26:21 If you continue hostile to me, and will not obey me, I will continue to plague you sevenfold for your sins.

Lev 26:24 then I too will continue hostile to you: I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins.

Lev 26:28 I will continue hostile to you in fury; I in turn will punish you myself sevenfold for your sins.

The number "seven" which represents wholeness, perfection and

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<sup>23</sup> David G. Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaint* (Great Britain: Paternoster, 2005), 142.

<sup>24</sup> John Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (T&T Clark International: New York, 2003), 288.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 346-47.

<sup>26</sup> The sevenfold reference in v. 12 finds its counterpart of sevenfold forgiveness in the New Testament (Matt 18:22). Walter Brueggemann and Bellinger Jr., William, *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 346-47.

<sup>27</sup> Also in Gen 4:15 But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over."

completeness of punishment is in line with the priestly tradition. Leviticus is full of reference to seven: sprinkling of the blood at the altar for seven times (Lev 4:6,17, 8:11); seven days of ordination of the priests (Lev 8:33, 35); ceremonially unclean for seven days (Lev 12-15). Lastly, seven is a significant number in Leviticus' holy days like Sabbath, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Trumpets, Feast of Tabernacles, Sabbatical Year and Year of Jubilee.

In sum, the above discussion has shown that the various language and concepts used in Psalm 79 is calculated and has close association with the language of Leviticus.

## **VI. Leviticus 25 in Psalm 79**

Now, we turn to how Psalm 79 employs Leviticus 25. As will be demonstrated below, the foreign nations have played an important part in the discourse of Psalm 79. The inclusion of the nations is important to develop the theology of the lament psalm of the community. The following are two aspects.

### **1. Foreign Nations Are Responsible for the Profanation of the Temple and Community**

In Leviticus 25, the unfortunate fate of Israel is attributed to the forefathers and people of that generation. Leviticus 25:39 writes, "Those of you who are left will waste away in the lands of their enemies because of their sins; also because of their fathers' sins they will waste away." They committed the sins of idolatry and irreverence to the sanctuary "Do not make

idols or set up an image or sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the LORD your God. Observe my Sabbath and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD." From the perspective of Leviticus 25, the foreign nations are merely God's instruments of punishing God's people because of their disobedience.

However, in Psalm 79, we see a variant perspective. On the one hand, the remnant community is not in denial for it recognises that their ill fate is due to the sins of their forefathers and their sin.

Psa. 79:8a Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors;  
Psa. 79:9 Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name;  
deliver us, and forgive our sins, for your name's sake.

On the other hand, the community also ascribe in great detail their fateful end to the foreign nations. The nations and their military actions are described to bring about defilement to the nation and their bad fate. The lament section of the psalm is found in vv. 1-4. The structure is certainly noteworthy. It is constructed to create ABA'B' structure as a literary unit, alternating the unfortunate fate of the temple and the people of God.

- A O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;  
they have defiled your holy temple;  
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. (v. 1)
- B They have given the bodies of your servants  
to the birds of the air for food,  
the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth. (v. 2)
- A' They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem,  
and there was no one to bury them. (v. 3)
- B' We have become a taunt to our neighbours,  
mocked and derided by those around us. (v.4)

## 2. Imprecations Against the Foreign Nations

Typical of lament psalms, Psalm 79 likewise uses the "how long" expressions (v. 5). The community pleads God to cease his anger burned against his people and redirect his wrath against the foreign nations (גוים) and kingdoms (ממלכות)<sup>28</sup> who are considered as the cause for defiling the temple and the people. The nations are described as people who do not know God and who do not call upon his name (v. 6). They consume God's people and devastate the homeland (v. 7). Moreover, the community complains that the nations taunts God. This is expressed in verse 10 even more clearly "Why should the nations say: 'Where is their God?' "God's name occurs three times in the psalm, vv. 6, 9a, and 9b. In verse 6, God's name is not recognised or called on by these nations. In verse 9, God's name is alluded as a ground for the community's petition for God to avenged the shed-blood of God's servants (v. 10b). "A complaint is articulated when the final blow had not yet fallen, when there still is time to argue a case before Yahweh."<sup>29</sup> Although the community briefly admits that their fate is caused by their sin. But the ground of petition is directed towards God's name. The community appeals God that he intervenes in the situation for the sake of his glorious name which has been mocked by the nations.

Finally, while in Leviticus 26, the seven-fold punishment was meant to be for the people of God, what we see in the psalm is that the highly specific form of retribution language is part of the imprecation of the community

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<sup>28</sup> Jer 10:25 reads "families" משפחות.

<sup>29</sup> Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part I with Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, 11

against the foreign enemies ("Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors, the taunts which they taunted you, O Lord.") The argument is that since the nations have reproached God by defiling the sacred, they shall be punished seven-fold while God's people receive forgiveness of sin.

## **VII. Triadic Characterization in the Psalter and Lament Psalm**

Readers of the book of Psalms as literature is exposed to the three main characters in the Psalm: God, the righteous and the wicked. Psalm 1 introduces readers to the three main characters. God is often the described as the one standing in between the righteous and the wicked. He is the judge who executes impartial judgment to the righteous and the wicked. God is the recipient of the righteous' and nations' praise because of his awesome works of salvation. Also, God is addressed to listen to the righteous' petition and plea.

The righteous are often the psalmist or the community of God who utters the psalm. The righteous are the ones who come to complain and ask for help in lament psalms; and offer praise when some form of deliverance is experienced or prayers are answered.

The wicked are either subgroup from the people of God or from the foreign nations. On the one hand, they are often described as the enemies of the psalmist and of the people of God. The wicked enemies are the external threats and are antagonistic to the psalmist or community. In Psalm 2, the nations are described to rage against Yahweh and the anointed one of Yahweh. They are not only the people's enemies but they are also hostile towards God. On the other hand, upon the witnessing and hearing the testimonies of God's



people of God's marvelous works of salvation and blessings, the foreign nations are summoned to praise and worship God.

Thus, from literary point of view, to ascribe to the foreign nations the reason for the desacralisation of the sacred and recipient of the seven-fold imprecations is characteristic of the theology of the lament psalms. Typical of Israel's communal lament psalm is the lamentation over the hostility, oppression and affliction directed to God and imprecations against the foreign enemies. The nations as the "third party" have contributed to the distress and the issue is a social one.<sup>30</sup> What we may observe here is that Psalm 79 further expounds Leviticus by attributing the defilement to the nations in line with the lament genre which caused the affliction and pain to the remnant community of God. At the theological heart of the Psalms, the nations are described as those who oppose God. Psalm 79 says very little about the sin and responsibility of God's people but the sins of the nations receive extensive elaboration. Needless to say, the national calamity is cast in the form of a lament psalm rather than in the form of a penitential psalm. The people of God are described to be victims rather than the perpetrators, a variant rendering of Leviticus 26.

In addition, according to Milgrom, Leviticus 26:33b-35, 43-44 is an exilic interpolation. This section speaks of the final blow of divine judgment upon the people through deportation so that the land finally enjoys her Sabbath. In 26:43 it underscores that the rest-less land was due to the people's disregard of divine instruction. If Milgrom's proposal of this section

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<sup>30</sup> Patrick Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 81.

is accepted, then such exilic view of the fateful event only strengthens the variant view of Psalm 79, which is likewise an exilic understanding of the national event.

Moreover, the remnant community uses the desacralisation of the sacred as the basis to move God to action. The community knows how the sacred is of utmost importance to God. Unlike other lament psalms which appeal to the ancient Abrahamic or Davidic covenant, the defilement of the sacred space is the foundation and reason for the lament of Psalm 79.

### **VIII. Summary**

Did Psalm 79 get it wrong to ascribe the defilement of the temple to the nations and not on God's people? Leviticus 26 is historically an earlier description of the fate of national Israel. Psalm 79 as a late composition is reinterpreting Leviticus 26 in line with the literary and theology of the Psalms. The difference does not have to be rendered as competing ideology but a reinterpretation of the leviticus text in light of the theology of the Psalms.

## ABSTRACT

A cursory look into a number of respected and classic bible commentaries on Psalm 79, one will immediately recognise that the discussion on Psalm 79 is treated in generic fashion, just like most other communal lament psalms. This article will argue for the strong presence of Leviticus in Psalm 79. Using the principles and methods of intertextuality, this article will highlight what has been overlooked in Psalm 79 commentary and demonstrate how Psalm 79 employs cultic vocabulary, images and concepts of Leviticus 26, in writing the communal lament. Underscoring the intertextual relationship between the Leviticus 26 and Psalm 79 will help readers to appreciate the theological shaping and perspective of Psalm 79 in imputing upon the foreign nations the guilt of the desacralisation of the temple.

## 撮 要

當代的詩篇注釋大多將詩篇七十九篇視作典型的羣體哀歌，未能精確掌握詩歌的獨特性。詩篇七十九篇的特色在於，詩中整合了許多利未記的元素。本文利用互文的理論和方法，揭開過去注釋書所忽略的現象，證明詩篇七十九篇這首羣體哀歌背後彙集了許多儀禮方面的語彙、圖象及概念。詩篇七十九篇因聖殿遭玷污而疚責列邦，了解利未記二十六章與詩篇七十九篇間的互文關係，有助讀者理解疚責背後隱含的神學理念和觀點。