APPENDIX A

WOE AND CURSE

Although not identical to imprecation, the cry of “woe” (Hebrew יּוֹחֵן) in the ancient Near East bore a measure of semantic overlap with the curse—and in certain contexts took on “all the characteristics of a curse.”¹ This is most apparent in Zechariah 11:17, in which an oracle of woe is placed parallel to an evident imprecation:

Woe to the worthless shepherd,
who abandons the flock!
May the sword (strike) his arm and his right eye!
May his arm be utterly withered,
and his right eye utterly blinded!

Indeed, there is striking similarity not only in mood, but also in form, in content, and in context. The similarities are such² that Westermann posited an organic relationship


² This similarity is not confined to the Old Testament; the implicitly imprecatory “woe” is found as well, e.g., in the Sermon on the Plain, in which Christ contrasts his “blessings” not with “curses,” but with “woes” (Luke 6:20-26; cf., Deut 28:3-6, 16-19, in which the typical arrangement of blessings is countered by curses). Wenham observes that “in Luke’s account of the Sermon on the Mount the blessings and woes are recounted in a way that is reminiscent of the scene at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerezim” (i.e., Deut 27). John W. Wenham, The Goodness of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 156. And according to Mowinckel, Jer 17:5-8 (in comparison with Pss 1 and 112) illustrates that the combination יָרָם נְגוֹז is but a weakened variant of the more potent בר והוז. Sigmund Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien, V, Segen und Fluch in Israels Kult und Psalmdichtung (Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1966), 2.
between the two: that the woe-cry arose from the covenant curse.\textsuperscript{3} It has long been noticed that the form of the woe-cry has a distinct parallel in the Old Testament—that of the curse.

As a spoken formula, the curse is usually introduced by \textasciitilde{̄}יְוָּהָן, and the structure of some of these sayings is quite similar to that of the woes. Of particular note in this regard is Deuteronomy 27:15-26. There, appended to the \textasciitilde{̄}יְוָּהָן, is a participial construction of the simplest kind, in which the participle describes the action which falls under the curse.\textsuperscript{4}

Such is likewise the characteristic form of the woe-cry (i.e., \textasciitilde{̄}יְוָּהָן plus participle).\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, as Westermann perceives, both the curse and the woe are found predominantly in series (cf., e.g., Deut 27:15-26 with Isa 5:8-23; 28:1–33:1; and Hab 2:6-19),\textsuperscript{6} and largely concern the social morality of the Sinaitic covenant. For example, compare the following:

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\textsuperscript{5} The full elements of a typical woe oracle are as follows: The structure is marked first of all by the cry \textasciitilde{̄}יְוָּהָן. This opening interjection is then followed by a participle (or in some cases by some other substantive) which is descriptive of those who are the subject of the oracle. A second participial clause and explanatory sentence using a finite verb follows, specifying the offense. An announcement of divine judgment usually comes at the conclusion of the oracle, or it may be placed at times after a series of such (abbreviated) oracles. W. Eugene March, “Prophecy,” in \textit{Old Testament Form Criticism}, ed. John H. Hayes, Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion, ed. John H. Hayes, vol. 2 (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974), 164-65.

\textsuperscript{6} Westermann notes that in Deut 27:15-26, “the curse takes the place of the death punishment. Most of the transgressions named in the series are those which could be committed clandestinely and thus go unpunished . . . . A similar thing is true of the woes of the prophets.” Westermann, \textit{Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech}, 197. Moreover, he observes that the curse, which is included in the legal procedure (cf. Deut 27), “presupposed the future intervention of Yahweh against the offender exactly as did the prophetic woe.” Ibid., 198. Thus he believes it is “probable that not only the form but also the content of the prophetic woe originated with the curse, which was itself a part of legal practice.” Ibid.
As the Scriptures progress, they reveal a varied usage of the term "ho·y,"
characteristically translated “woe.” This term is used some fifty-three times in the Old Testament—the vast majority as announcements of doom. However, in eight instances—including the earliest attested—it is used to describe actual funeral laments. This earliest instance, 1 Kings 13:30, records one “man of God” mourning over another: "ho·y אֵלֶּה הָאָדָם," “Alas, my brother!” Indeed, as Clifford observes, the funeral lament is the only attested non-prophetic use of ho·y in the Old Testament. This suggests that the funeral lament is the origin of the ho·y-cry, and that ho·y enters the prophets as a funeral cry and develops within this new matrix into a curse-like formula. By the time of the later prophets, the curse-like element becomes more prominent. Clifford sees in Jeremiah and Habakkuk the “development of a bitter, curse-like tone,” and in Ezekiel, the ho·y “seems not primarily a lament, but a curse-like formula or taunt.” Thus, he concludes that “the prophet’s own feeling and tone of each ho·y passage must be learned from the context.” In summary, then, the ho·y-cry is the instinctive reaction of the prophet upon hearing the announcement

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7 During the reign of Jeroboam, early 10th century B.C.
9 Ibid., 461.
10 Ibid., 462.
11 Ibid., 464.
of God’s sure and certain judgment. As “God’s hired professional mourner”\textsuperscript{12} (cf. Jer 9:17-18; Amos 5:16), he is “the first to announce both the ‘woe cry’ and the ‘death wail’.”\textsuperscript{13}

When he hears of impending disaster from Yahweh, the prophet “utters a ritual hôy in automatic lament, a cry borrowed from the funeral customs of his milieu,”\textsuperscript{14} which became transmuted over time into a near-formula for curse.

Similarly, Janzen, in searching for the original Sitz im Leben of the prophetic woe oracle, agrees that there are undoubtedly instances in which hôy is associated with lamentation for the dead, yet also a significant number in which it introduces prophetic announcement of impending calamity.\textsuperscript{15} Jeremiah 22:13,18 illustrates this varied usage in the same prophetic context:

\begin{quote}
Woe \textsuperscript{[הוהי]} to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice! (Jer 22:13a).

They will not mourn for him:
‘Alas \textsuperscript{[הוהי]}, my brother! or ‘Alas, sister!’
They will not mourn for him:
‘Alas, lord! or ‘Alas, his majesty!’ (Jer 22:18).
\end{quote}

Janzen remarks that “it is precisely the relationship between the hôy of mourning and the hôy of prophetic invective that needs to be illumined.”\textsuperscript{16} And to the question: “Where does sorrow, mourning, and wailing on the one hand meet with accusation, announcement of


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Clifford, “The Use of Hôy in the Prophets,” 464.

\textsuperscript{15} Janzen, \textit{Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle}, 3.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 3-4.
evil to come, and curse?” he answers: “They meet where, in the face of violent death, mourning for the dead shades over into cursing of the guilty.” It is this context “which offers a genuine Sitz im Leben as the home of hoy, and which establishes an organic relationship between its apparently so diverse usages.” He finds striking corroboration for this hypothesis in the Ugaritic Legend of Aqhat. In this tale, as the royal Daniel weeps over the death of his longed-for son Aqhat, hepronounces curses/woes upon certain locales which presumably bore a measure of guilt in Aqhat’s death:

Qiru-mayim the king doth curse:
"Woe to thee, O Qiru-mayim,
O[n] which rests the blood-guilt of Aqhat the Youth!"

..............."Woe to thee, city of Abelim,
On which rests the blood-guilt of Aqhat the Youth!
May Baal make thee blind . . .
From now unto all generations!”

Notably, this series of “woes” concludes in an imprecation; yet the entirety is evidently introduced by the simple description: “curse.” This example illustrates that, although woes may be generally distinguished from curses, they are closely related, bearing a large measure of similarity and partial semantic overlap.

17 Ibid., 27.

18 ANET, 154-55. In this regard, cf. the lament/imprecation of David against the “hills of Gilboa” on which Saul and Jonathan were slain (2 Sam 1:17, 21), the frequent use of prophetic woes against cities or locations (e.g., Jesus’ woes in Matt 11:20-24), and the combination of both lamentation over one’s devastation moving to imprecation against the culpable (Ps 137).

19 Alex Luc likewise argues that “we should not place a sharp distinction in function between the imprecations and the judgment predictions. This observation is reinforced by the instances where an imprecation and a judgment prediction occur in the same context, with one echoing and affirming the other.” “Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms,” JETS 42 (1999): 402. He cites, e.g., Pss 28:4-5; 68:1-2, 21; 55:15, 23; 109:6-19, 29; notably cf. Jer 11:20 followed by vv. 21-22.