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The Prophetic Laments of Samuel the Lamanite

S. Kent Brown

Abstract: The wide-ranging sermon of Samuel the Lamanite, spoken from the top of the city wall of Zarahemla, exhibits poetic features in a censuring passage, features that bear similarities to laments found in the Bible, most notably in the Psalms. Like the laments in the Bible, those in Samuel's speech show contacts with worship. In distinction to the biblical laments, but like the *Thanksgiving Hymns* of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the poetic pieces in Samuel's sermon exhibit a set of prophecies that find fulfillment in later periods, including the days of Mormon, the compiler and editor of the Book of Mormon.

Quite unexpectedly I have discovered that the recorded words of Samuel the Lamanite include two laments, that is, psalms or poems that express sorrow. From what I can learn, no one else seems to have noticed them as poetic pieces. Measured by the criteria for laments identified by scholars of the biblical Psalms, the two from Samuel do not fit precisely.¹ However, in my view, they exhibit enough characteristics to qualify as lament literature. Samuel himself apparently identifies them as laments,

¹ The standard work has been Hermann Gunkel's *Die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926), in which he identifies the chief characteristics of laments among the biblical Psalms. These are summarized both by Gunkel, in *The Psalms, A Form-Critical Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), and A. R. Johnson in his important article, "The Psalms," in H. H. Rowley, ed., *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), 162–209, esp. 169–70. See also the acclaimed work by Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1965). A recent study that challenges many of the assumptions and observations of earlier studies on psalmic literature is that of Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

at least in his contemporary terminology, when he introduces the first lament by saying, "And then shall ye lament" (Helaman 13:32). Moreover, a compelling point is made in a mirroring lament uttered some forty years later over the destroyed city Moronihah, a lament that Mormon introduces with the words, "And in another place they were heard to cry and mourn" (3 Nephi 8:25; more on this below). As Richard N. Boyce has noted, not only does one of the bases of the relationship of God and his people lie in their cry to God, but also the cry to God is fundamental to the inspired and inspiring laments of the Old Testament.² As I read this passage in 3 Nephi, it is a similar notion that Mormon is expressing when he notes the cries of lament that followed the destruction of the city Moronihah.

To be sure, because we must rely on Joseph Smith's translation of the passage, we cannot be certain that we are taking account of all of the nuances that may have been present in the text preserved on the Book of Mormon plates. As a result, we may not grasp the precise balancing that the composer intended between the various parts of the poems, particularly in the second and longer piece. Even so, the texts of the laments are sufficiently clear, are apparently translated with sufficient literalism,³ and are bracketed distinctly enough in the text that one can offer a preliminary set of observations, including the fact that there exist formal structural frames within each.⁴

The two laments appear near the end of chapter thirteen of Helaman and form part of the long haranguing speech that Samuel delivered from the top of the city wall of Zarahemla. As I read the text, one cannot determine whether he sang, chanted,

² Richard N. Boyce, *The Cry to God in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 1–5, 68–69. A similar point is made by C. Westermann, *The Praise of God* (Richmond, VA: Knox, 1965), 75. Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986): 63, has noted that "it is the cry of Israel (Exodus 2:23–25) which mobilizes Yahweh to action that begins the history of Israel."

³ Judging the character of the translation of the Book of Mormon text is largely a subjective matter. In the instance of the two poems under review, the balanced poetic themes and other elements lead me to be rather confident that Joseph Smith's translation was faithful to the text of the hymns.

⁴ According to Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 6, one need only have the frame of a formal structure to have a poem, at least according to observations that can be made regarding Hebrew poetry.

or spoke these pieces on the occasion of his prophesying, although the possibility of singing or chanting cannot be ruled out.

One of the more intriguing issues concerns whether these laments may have been composed spontaneously by the prophet. If so, such a composition would match what is known about the uttered and written prophecies of biblical prophets whose works consist substantially or entirely of poetic or hymnic language. We must reckon seriously with the possibility that Samuel had the ability to compose such pieces more or less on the spot, much as biblical prophets could. However, there exist indicators in the second poem, and in later references to it, that he may have depended on a source for that one (see below).⁵

1. The First Lament

The first poem is very short. Although it lacks the extended development that the second exhibits, it displays fine skill and balance in its conception. This first piece, which appears to be an individual lament, can be arranged as follows, repeating Samuel's introductory words that set it off:

And then shall ye lament, and say:

O that I had repented,
and had not killed
the prophets,
and stoned them,
and cast them out. (Helaman 13:32–33)

The phrase “the prophets” is the only noun, and seems to constitute the middle element; as such, it is clearly emphatic.

⁵ From a brief examination, it is apparent to me that some prophetic discourses in the Book of Mormon incorporate poetic features. I have not yet determined how much of this kind of psalmic writing and speech is due to the prophet who is speaking and how much lies in the words of the Lord, or in words quoted by one of his agents, say, an angel. Three persons who have produced studies that deal with poetic characteristics appearing in the Book of Mormon text are Angela Crowell, “Hebrew Poetry in the Book of Mormon,” parts 1 and 2, in *Zarahemla Record*, nos. 32 and 33 (1986): 2–9, and no. 34 (1986): 7–12; Donald W. Parry, “Poetic Parallelisms of the Book of Mormon,” F.A.R.M.S. working paper, 1986; and Richard Dilworth Rust, “Poetry in the Book of Mormon,” in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 100–13.

Even though Samuel's language is consistent with the fact that he is addressing a crowd in Zarahemla, because of the plural pronoun "ye," the "I" of this piece is abrupt and therefore should probably be understood as a reference to an individual. Moreover, all of the verbs in the passage are in the first person singular, agreeing with the pronoun "I." Hence, we are likely looking at an individual lament, possibly composed for solo recitation.

In all individual laments in the Bible, the Lord is seen to be somehow connected to the suffering of the composer, usually by covenant. As a result, there regularly appears either an affirmation of the person's desire to repent, in order to come under the protective umbrella of the Lord, or a defense of the person's innocence, usually using legal terminology.⁶ In this first lament, the wish to repent on the part of the poet is broadly assumed.

Although short, the poem exhibits what Robert Alter has called "parallelism of specification," a very common feature of biblical poetry in which the language pattern moves from a generalized statement to one that is more specific or focused. The result is that, when "the general term is transformed into a specific instance or a concrete image, the idea becomes more pointed, more forceful."⁷ We can see this sort of development in the last three verbs of the lament: the notion of killing the prophets becomes more specific by mentioning the action of stoning them, and this latter is made more graphic by the idea of casting them out, possibly specifying the location of execution, and reflecting a legal necessity of taking a convicted person outside a city before execution.⁸

Whether the few preserved lines represent the whole piece cannot be determined with certainty. To be sure, in his editorial notes Mormon states that he has not repeated everything that Samuel had spoken (Helaman 14:1). And it is not clear from the passage in Helaman 13:33 whether Mormon had a longer piece in front of him and therefore has reproduced only a few lines from it. However, a passage that both echoes and expands the

⁶ Johnson, "The Psalms," 171.

⁷ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 20–21.

⁸ Whether there is mirrored in the last line of the lament a requirement that a person must be taken outside of a city or village for execution must remain unresolved. However, we must be open to the possibility that Samuel's words reflect such a legal necessity, already spelled out in the Old Testament and elsewhere (Numbers 15:35; cf. Leviticus 24:14; Luke 20:15; John 19:17, 20; Acts 7:58).

first lament, and also exhibits poetic qualities, may bring us closer to resolving this issue. The piece consists of a lament over the destroyed city of Moronihah.⁹ The passage can be arranged as follows, including Mormon's introductory and summarizing words, so that one can see its possible poetic features:

And in another place they were heard to cry and mourn, saying:

- A. O that we had repented
 before this great and terrible day,
 and had not killed
 and stoned
 the prophets,
 and cast them out;
- B. then would our mothers
 and our fair daughters,
 and our children
 have been spared,
 and not have been buried up in that
 great city Moronihah.

And thus were the howlings of the people great and terrible. (3 Nephi 8:25)

Several similarities and differences with the lament quoted by Samuel immediately present themselves. First the similarities. It is obvious that the same order of verbs appears—"repent," "stone," and "cast out." And the sentiment of the first verset¹⁰ remains as it appears in Samuel. On the other hand, the pronouns have been altered from "I" to "we." Further, the poem has been expanded by the added second line in the first verset. In addition, an entire second verset has been appended which decries the loss of loved ones. In this second verset, one notes the feature observable in the first part of this lament and in the

⁹ Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, UT: F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 393, has demonstrated that this lament is joined to another in the prior verse concerning Zarahemla (3 Nephi 8:24).

¹⁰ I have adopted the terminology of Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 9, in calling units "versets" rather than "colons" or "stanzas," terms that are more appropriate for the study and description of Western forms of poetry. In his parlance, a verset designates "the line-halves, or the line-thirds" found in the semantic parallelisms of Hebrew poetry.

version of the lament in Samuel, namely, parallelism of specification. In the case of the lament over Moronihah, the verbal phrase "have been spared" is sharpened by the words "not have been buried up." Moreover, the noun phrase "the prophets" is one place removed from where it is in the version preserved in the words of Samuel.

I cannot leave the discussion of Samuel's first lament and the responsum that is found in the last verse of 3 Nephi chapter 8 without discussing the apparently unusual order of the verbs "stone" and "cast out." It seems that they reverse the order of execution, for usually one first casts out and then stones the condemned. Why would an author reverse them? The answer may come from a narrative passage that preserves this proper ordering of events in the case of executing a condemned person. It is in 3 Nephi 9:10 that we find what seems to be a more natural order, "cast out" and then "stone."

I caused [these cities] to be burned with fire, and the inhabitants thereof, because of their wickedness in *casting out* the prophets, and *stoning* those whom I did send. (3 Nephi 9:10)

In light of this passage, I judge that placing "cast out" last in Samuel's lament, and in the lament preserved in 3 Nephi 8:25, constitutes poetic license.¹¹

2. The Second Lament

The second piece, which immediately follows the other in the text, should probably be characterized as a communal lament. As one would expect, it is written in the first person plural, using the pronouns "we," "us" and "our." Moreover, in a passage in which Mormon describes the fulfillment of the prophetic features of this lament among people of his own day,

¹¹ On the basis of Ether 8:25, a note of warning added by Moroni, one could argue that the expected order would place "cast out" in the last spot. For in this passage Moroni complains that the Jaredites, and others, "have *murdered* the prophets, and *stoned* them, and *cast them out* from the beginning" (emphasis added). However, it is just as possible that this order in the expression is influenced by, or dependent on, the form found in the lament of Samuel. That formal poetic expression among the ancients, especially that associated with lamentation, continues to influence speech has been pointed out by Walter Brueggemann in his essay, "The Formfulness of Grief," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 263-75.

Mormon specifically uses the term “lamentation” to describe the sorrowing that he had witnessed (Mormon 2:10–12).

Once again, Samuel introduces the text of the poem in a way that its beginning and end are plainly set off.

Yea, in that day ye shall say:

- A. 1. O that we had remembered the Lord our God
 in the day that he gave us our riches,
 and then they would not have become
 slippery
 that we should lose them;
- B. 5. Behold, we lay a tool here
 and on the morrow it is gone;
 and behold, our swords are taken from us
 in the day we have sought them for
 battle.
 Yea, we have hid up our treasures
 and they have slipped away from us,
 because of the curse of the land.
- 10.
- C. O that we had repented
 in the day that the word of the Lord
 came unto us;
 for behold the land is cursed,
 and all things are become slippery,
 and we cannot hold them.
- 15.
- D. Behold, we are surrounded by demons,
 yea, we are encircled about by the angels
 of him
 who hath sought to destroy our
 souls.
20. Behold, our iniquities are great.
 O Lord, canst thou not turn away thine anger
 from us?
 And this shall be your language in
 those days. (Helaman 13:33–37)

Although the two laments recited by Samuel should probably be seen as independent poems or hymns, they clearly bear a relationship to one another. For they both point up the estrangement from God that the composer—real or imagined by Samuel—feels. Their independence seems assured, however,

because the source of estrangement in the earlier lament comes, first, from not repenting and, second, from actively opposing the agents of the Lord, which opposition—as the poem reads—is the result of not repenting. In the second lament, the community will feel a distance from the Lord because, initially, its members did not “remember” the Lord God and, thereafter, because it did not repent as a group. As a result, the land is to be cursed and, what is worse, the community is finally to become “surrounded by demons” (line 17). In my mind this piece clearly fits the character of a communal lament. The first person plural is the initial indicator. Further, the expected connection between the actions of the Lord and the suffering of the community is clearly apparent. In addition, such laments typically exhibit a sense of trust that those who recite them will be given a hearing by the Lord. And that is the force of the last line, which assumes that the Lord is listening to the petitioners.¹² Moreover, such laments have customarily been composed in the face of some disaster that threatens the community, such as invasion or famine. Obviously, this lament expects disaster, not only of a physical type but also of a spiritual kind. Insofar as it does not envision a specific incident from the past, it must be seen as prophetic in its forward-looking anticipation of disasters to come. This last detail, incidentally, has to be taken into account in any determination whether Samuel was the author or was borrowing an already-composed lament for the occasion of his prophesying.

Clues exist that this latter lament was composed to be sung or recited in worship. If so, Samuel was reciting it from memory. What are those clues? Perhaps the most compelling observation that Samuel was repeating a known communal lament arises from comments made by Mormon regarding the fulfillment in his day of the part of Samuel’s prophecies that is contained in, and virtually limited to, the second lament.¹³ The key passage is the following:

¹² These characteristics of laments are noted in a variety of works; see, for instance, Duncan Cameron, *Songs of Sorrow and Praise* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1924), 125, 132, 136; and Johnson, “The Psalms,” 166–67.

¹³ Just before quoting the two laments in verses 33–37, Samuel declared that “the time cometh that [the Lord] curseth your riches, that they become slippery, that ye cannot hold them; and in the days of your poverty ye cannot retain them” (Helaman 13:31). But this passage clearly depends on the second lament for its inspiration, as the verbal phrase “become slippery” illustrates, a phrase that is otherwise unique to this lament.

The Nephites began . . . to cry even as had been prophesied by Samuel the prophet; for behold no man could keep that which was his own, [because of] the thieves, and the robbers, and the murderers, and the magic art, and the witchcraft which was in the land. Thus there began to be a mourning and a lamentation in all the land because of these things. (Mormon 2:10–11)

One first notes that the generally deteriorating situation had led to complaints that Mormon characterized as “lamentations.” In addition, the content of these lamentations coincided with the prophecy of Samuel, a detail that Mormon specifically noted. This observation leads implicitly to the conclusion that these lamentations were verbalized in commonly known expressions of sorrow. And the expression that fits most closely is Samuel’s second lament. This lament incorporates a unique set of ideas which appear in only two passages, Samuel’s sermon and the lamentations of Mormon’s contemporaries.¹⁴ In a relevant study, Walter Brueggemann has noted that the ancients expressed grief in formal ways, and that those formal expressions persisted for generations within ancient societies.¹⁵ In the case

¹⁴ One set of ideas associated with the second lament is that of the loss of tool and sword, which is specifically tied to the notation that this loss was due to “the curse upon the land” (lines 5, 7). Significantly, this arrangement of concepts is also combined in Moroni’s summary of events that occurred in the last generation of Jaredite history: “If a man should lay his tool or his sword upon his shelf, . . . behold, upon the morrow, he could not find it, so great was the curse upon the land” (Ether 14:1). It is not clear whether Moroni’s language here is influenced by that of Samuel or whether Moroni is saying that this set of observations was present in his copy of the translation of the Jaredite record, and consequently that he is simply summarizing what he found there in terms already present in the translated copy. If the former, then one could conclude that Moroni has adopted concepts expressed by Samuel in the second lament in order to depict the Jaredite situation. If the latter, it may be that the link between these ideas was already known to Samuel, or the composer of the lament, through the general knowledge of the Jaredite record that was had among Nephites and Lamanites (see Mosiah 28:11–13, 17–19; Alma 37:21, 27–30; 63:12), and therefore may have served as a source of inspiration for the lament. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine which alternative is closer to the truth.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, “The Formfulness of Grief,” 265–67, 273–74.

of Samuel, the formal lament repeated in Helaman 13:33–37 lies at the base of the expressions of grief uttered in Mormon's day, almost 350 years later.

Other clues point in the same direction. In the opening line of the lament, the verb "remember" is one that frequently denotes a recollection that takes place in worship settings at which certain important events or doctrines are recited orally or are recalled in the actions of the celebrants. And this sense characterizes this verb in the Book of Mormon, as well as in the Bible.¹⁶

Second, the phrase "the Lord our God" in line one may point to a worship setting for this lament. In scriptural language, particularly from the Old Testament, the Lord is often petitioned in important celebrations by his title "Lord God," particularly in the making of covenants. One immediately thinks of three crucial moments in the history of the Lord's dealings with his children where this name/title is invoked: in the account of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:4–3:24), a series of events that has been celebrated in worship for centuries; the covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai, at the heart of which was placed the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2–17); and the renewal of the covenant led by Elijah on Mount Carmel in an attempt to turn the hearts of the children of Israel back to the Lord God of their fathers (1 Kings 18:30–39).

Walter Brueggemann has called the account of placing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and of their actions that led to expulsion a "drama in four scenes"; Jerome Walsh has termed it a dramatic "series in seven scenes."¹⁷ As Brueggemann has noted, in the prior segment of Genesis "there is no action or development."¹⁸ It is only beginning at Genesis 2:4 that one finds a narrative that can be acted out by *dramatis personae*, that is, by persons whose acting re-creates the drama in the Garden as a worship celebration of what has been done in the past. Here, for the first time in scripture, the title "Lord God" is introduced, and it appears in Genesis only in this passage. The

¹⁶ Louis Midgley, "The Ways of Remembrance," in Sorenson and Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 168–76.

¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: Knox, 1982), 44–47; Jerome T. Walsh, "Genesis 2:4b–3:24: A Synchronic Approach," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 161–77.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 44.

obvious celebratory and therefore worship traits cannot be missed.¹⁹

The covenant-making ceremony at the holy mount invokes the name/title “Lord God” as the author and authority of the Ten Commandments, the heart of the law received that day. The Lord identifies himself as “the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2). Obviously, it is the Lord himself who has tied this title to his miraculous act of delivering the Israelites from bondage, an event that has been celebrated in family worship settings for centuries (Exodus 12:1–28). Moreover, it is reasonable to suppose that whenever one spoke of this event and God’s role in it, one would mean that it was the Lord God who had performed the feat, even if one referred only to the Lord or to the God of Israel. One need only think of the custom of swearing an oath on the name of the “Lord God . . . that brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt” (2 Nephi 25:20; cf. Jeremiah 23:7).²⁰

A third passage that bears on the question is found in 1 Kings 18, the narrative of Elijah’s contest with the priests of Baal, a passage full of references to worship and covenant making. According to the account, after Elijah had made all the necessary preparations for the miracle, he began his prayer by saying, “*Lord God* of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel” (1 Kings 18:36; emphasis added). Besides recalling the name by which the Lord had revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:6), Elijah also employed the name/title that the Lord had used of himself when sending Moses to bring the Hebrew

¹⁹ Two important studies on ritual in the ancient Near East are that of Theodor Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Gordian, 1961), and that of Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). Engnell followed his disputed but valuable volume with an important essay, “‘Knowledge’ and ‘Life’ in the Creation Story,” in Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas, eds., *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 103–20, in which Engnell dealt with ritual elements in the Garden of Eden account. See the cautioning words of Howard N. Wallace concerning some of Engnell’s assumptions in *The Eden Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), 161–63.

²⁰ In Jeremiah 23:7, and in the secondary passage at 16:14, the oath runs, “The Lord liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt.” But it appears that the more complete name for God in the oath is preserved by Nephi, a contemporary of Jeremiah.

slaves out of Egypt, adding a covenantal promise on that earlier occasion (Exodus 3:15–17). As Elijah continued to pray, he set out the purpose for requesting the miracle: “that this people may know that thou art the Lord God” (1 Kings 18:37), emphasizing the connection between “Lord God” and the covenant that Elijah sought to reestablish with his people.²¹ In the end, after the fire had fallen from heaven and consumed Elijah’s sacrifice, and more, the gathered Israelites uttered the words that verified renewing the covenant, “The Lord is God, the Lord is God” (1 Kings 18:39, NEB), a declaration that “re-echoes a cry long established in the cult [worship].”²² Consequently, this covenantal affirmation that the Lord is God clearly offers one of the important contexts for the use of the name/title “Lord God.”²³

Evidence can be marshalled that a significant number of instances of the use of this name/title among Book of Mormon authors points to worship contexts. For instance, at Alma 13:1, one reads that “the Lord God ordained priests, after his holy order.” Moreover, one sees a worship connection in Ammon’s establishment of synagogues among the Lamanites, “that they might have the liberty of worshipping the Lord their God according to their desires” (Alma 21:22). A sense of worship and covenant brims in the following words of Alma the Younger: “When I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy” (Alma 29:10). In another passage, the soldiers of Moroni “cried

²¹ To be sure, the Hebrew text could be translated “that thou Jehovah, art the God,” a translation suggested by J. Hammond in *I Kings, The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), 426. But the definite article that precedes the word for God (“Elohim”) should not blind us to the fact that, in this covenant context, it is the name/title “Lord God” that carries both authority and power in the minds and hearts of the participants. After all, the Lord has been addressed thus a few verses earlier in 1 Kings 18:36.

²² John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary, The Old Testament Library*, 2d ed. (London: SCM, 1970), 402. Gray suggests that the precedent for covenant renewal in this form is as old as Joshua (Joshua 24:18).

²³ Other important passages, of course, consist of the restatement of the Decalogue, in which God says of himself, “I am the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 5:6, and the following verses). In Deuteronomy 5:2, Moses makes the following point, using the title “Lord God”: “The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb.” In the Pearl of Great Price, one can also compare the worship dimensions implied in the command, “Choose ye this day, to serve the Lord God who made you” (Moses 6:33).

with one voice unto the Lord their God” when facing a strong Lamanite army (Alma 43:49). Examples could be multiplied of both explicit and implicit association of the title “Lord God” with worship and covenant making.²⁴

Thus, we conclude that the second lament was composed to be sung or recited during communal worship. While some may not want to rule out the possibility that it was composed on the spot by Samuel, the evidence strongly suggests that Samuel was quoting a known piece that continued to be recited as a formal expression of grief and sorrow.

General Structure

The introductory and concluding observations by Samuel serve as the *inclusio* of the poem. The frame or outline seems to rest on the three strong wishes, here represented by the word “O” that appears in the beginning, middle, and final lines. The first and second occurrences are clearly parallel, both beginning with the wish, “O that we” A second frame seems to consist of the two repetitions of the word “behold” in lines 5 and 17, with a third structure tied to the other three occurrences of “behold” in lines 7, 14, and 20. Earlier in his sermon (Helaman 13:17–20), Samuel had pressed home the point that the land, the people, and their treasures would be cursed “because of their wickedness and abominations.” All of the elements that are to be cursed—land, people, treasures—are repeated in this second lament. Further, the references to property that has “slipped away” and to “the curse of the land” at the end of verset B leads by “catchword” association to verset C which concerns the curse.

Not only do these structural elements support the view of the poetic character of this piece, but the occurrences of the verbal phrase “become slippery” that appear in versets A and C

²⁴ One may ask why I have argued at length about the name/title “Lord God.” To be sure, this title appears in contexts that have little or nothing to do with worship (e.g., Judges 11:21, 23). But the point is that at crucial junctures in God’s relations with his children, which involve worship and/or covenant making, his title “Lord God” has been the appellation by which he has been addressed. See the suggestive list of passages associated with worship in Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part I* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961), 97–100 (Exodus 9:30; 2 Samuel 7:22, 25; 1 Chronicles 17:16–17; 2 Chronicles 6:41–42; Psalm 84:8, 11).

also point to the independent composition of this piece apart from its context. Except for one further occurrence in Mormon 1:18, it is only in this second lament and in a verse immediately preceding it (Helaman 13:31)—which could be expected from Samuel as he was preparing his hearers for this lament—that one finds the verbal phrase “become slippery.” In the case of Mormon, the person who edited Samuel’s sermon, he was citing in his own book the prophecy that is embedded in the second lament to the effect that property in his day had become slippery because of God’s curse on the land, just as Samuel had prophesied (Mormon 1:18–19). Thus the use of this verbal phrase apparently arises in this lament and is found in no other passage in the Book of Mormon except in sections that are directly connected with the lament and its prophecy of coming disasters.

Content

The first verset, of course, deals almost exclusively with possessions or “riches.” It is important to note that, for Samuel, “riches” or possessions come as a gift from God (Helaman 13:21; and Mormon’s words in Helaman 12:2). The fact that they come from God gives him the right to hide them from unrighteous custodians, as the lament spells out.

One can also sense a crescendo that builds through the poem, beginning on a low level and rising to a pitch. It has to do with the concept of the loss of riches set out in verset A. The composer first notes that the Lord God had given “riches” (line 2), a term that is general in its application. Then the poem becomes more specific, when it mentions the loss of “a tool” (line 5). Next, it is “our swords” (line 7) that disappear. In this movement from mentioning tools to swords I sense a slight heightening of the drama of the lament. In general, a tool is not critical for one’s well-being. Even the loss of a tool used to support life, such as a plow or scythe, is not critical since a person has a “season” in which to plant or harvest, and thus can acquire another tool within the “season” to replace the one lost. But a sword, under certain circumstances, can be very critical for protecting life and property. And one such circumstance of needed protection is noted in line 8: “in the day we have sought them for battle.” Here one senses the desperation of those whose swords have disappeared. After swords, the next item to be lost consists of “our treasures” (line 9). To be sure, a treasure may

not be critical for preserving life, but it may be necessary for sustaining it. In addition, depending on the nature of the treasure, it may be the kind of possession that helps to give a person his or her identity or place in society. Moreover, the loss of treasure may not only doom the individual to an ill fate, but also have a debilitating effect on one's extended family. Furthermore, the word itself implies a loss of much more than a tool or sword.

After treasures, it is "all things" (line 15) that are lost. While we cannot know the sweep of this concept in the mind of the composer, we can safely assume that it must include the totality of one's personal wealth. Finally, the last loss consists of the loss of "our souls" (line 19), the most tragic loss of all. Thus the poem has led us from the concepts of God's gift, and our loss of his gift of riches, to the loss of "all things," and finally to the forfeiture of "our souls."

Parallelisms

One of the important characteristics of Hebrew poetry and psalmody is the general balancing of component parts. Usually, this feature will appear in the form of parallel language, either stating the same idea in similar terms or setting out opposite concepts. This trait can be seen in both laments. As I have noted in the first, one sees a "parallelism of specification" in the sequence of the verbs "to kill" and "to stone."

The second lament, on the other hand, exhibits what may be termed synonymous and antithetic parallelisms, expected parallels that characterize Hebrew psalmody. We have already seen an example of what has been called a specifying or intensifying parallelism, that builds from one concept to another, in the series of items lost, beginning with the general idea of "riches" and concluding with the loss of "our souls." In verset A, one sees antithetic parallels between the following clauses: "[God] gave us our riches" and "we should lose them." The expression has to do with riches, but the point of view alternates. On the one hand, God is the one who gives riches; on the other, it is humans who lose them.

In verset D, one sees an instance of synonymous parallelism, an expression that complements another by saying essentially the same thing, but alternating the images. One can see that the following clauses express similar ideas: "we are surrounded by demons" (line 17), and "we are encircled about

by the angels of him who hath sought to destroy our souls” (lines 18–19). However, it may be more accurate to say that these balancing ideas represent another instance of “parallelism of specification,” coupled with a circumlocution that defines more clearly the meaning of the second of two general terms. For the word “demons” seems rather general (line 17). But the balancing term “angels” (line 18), while also general, is immediately defined more closely by the added phrase, “of him who hath sought to destroy our souls” (lines 18–19).

A similar phenomenon occurs in verset B. The mention of “the morrow” in line 6 is rather vague. Two lines below, one reads of “the day we have sought them for battle” (line 8), a much more specific reference which implies deeper consequences.

Versets B and C are tied together by an instance of chiasmus, a literary ordering in which the first and last constituents match, and the components immediately adjacent to the extremes also match, and so on to the middle of the piece (i.e., a, b, c, c', b', a'). In the case of versets B and C, there are three elements that tie the two versets together directly, arranged in a chiasmic structure. First, something is said about the slippery character of property (lines 10, 15). Within these notices, one sees that the last line of verset B reads “the curse of the land” (line 11). Three lines down in verset C we find the following: “the land is cursed” (line 14). The order of the components of these particular phrases is curse, land, land, curse. Taking account of the fact that the notion of slipperiness stands at the extremes, within which the idea of cursing appears, and within which mention of “the land” occupies the center spots, one sees the following chiasmic arrangement: slippery, curse, land, land, curse, slippery.

Between versets A and C, there is a clear parallelism in language. One need only notice the reiterated opening words, “O that we . . .” (lines 1, 12), whose verbs (“had remembered” and “had repented”), in Midgley’s view, are roughly equivalent.²⁵ A further parallelism consists of the subsequent repeated phrase “in the day that . . .” (lines 2, 13). Further, as we have already noted, the final lines of these two versets both use the unique verbal phrase “become slippery,” followed by short refrains that are roughly equivalent, and form something of a synonymous

²⁵ Midgley, “The Ways of Remembrance,” 170, 176.

parallel: at the end of verset A, “that we should lose them” (line 4), and “we cannot hold them” at the end of verset C (line 16).

Between versets B and D, the parallelism breaks down. As one can see from the arrangement above, each segment is introduced by the word “behold,” followed by another “behold.” Moreover, each incorporates a clause of explanation that begins with the word “yea.” However, there is no balance in the arrangement of the clauses associated with these terms. The “yea” clause in verset B comes after the second “behold” whereas the corresponding “yea” clause in verset D precedes the second “behold.” Part of the explanation for the differences between versets B and D may well arise from the differing subject matters, concern for the loss of property in B and concern over the gripping power of the destroyer in the other. In this case, however, we should not claim that no connections exist between versets B and D. In fact, we may be looking at what is termed an “emblematic” parallelism in which the first subject has to do with the physical world (e.g., treasures, riches, etc.) and the second uses a metaphorical device to point to spiritual realities (e.g., demons, angels, etc.). A good example of this kind of parallelism appears in Psalm 42:1: “As the hart pants after the water brooks, so my soul pants after thee, O God.”

Conclusions

In this brief foray into the world of Book of Mormon poetry, it should have become clear that my focus has been rather narrow. I have looked at only two pieces incorporated within the prophecies of Samuel the Lamanite. But from my investigation, I believe that I can conclude with some confidence that Samuel himself was a poet. It is the first and shorter lament that leads me to this view. It seems to be his own composition. In the case of the second and longer piece, Samuel was likely quoting a hymn that was already known. I arrive at this observation principally because the formal expression of the hymn was known by a later generation that lamented the loss of properties, and secondarily because of the indicators of a worship context that appear in the opening lines, namely, the use of the verb “to remember” which is associated with the title “Lord God.”

As one might expect, one also sees features in these pieces that mirror traits found in Hebrew poetry. My notations about

these features have been anticipated in the work of several others who have turned their attention to poetry in the Book of Mormon. But the one element that has struck me most forcibly is the prophetic character of these laments. The first lament, set off in prophetic language by Samuel, finds fulfillment in the *responsum* recorded by Mormon which followed the destruction of the city of Moronihah. The second, of course, was fulfilled, as Mormon reminds us, in his own day. This prophetic character reminds me of certain of the Dead Sea Scroll Thanksgiving Hymns that also cast prophetic words about the last days in hymnic dress.²⁶ But that is a subject for another study.

²⁶ See, for instance, Bonnie P. Kittel, *The Hymns of Qumran* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981), 56–80, esp. 71–73, on the hymn that appears in the Dead Sea *Thanksgiving Hymn* scroll in column 3, lines 19–36, particularly her stanza D. This hymn is number five in the numbering of Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 3d ed. (New York: Penguin, 1987), 172–74.