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KnoWhy #438 - Why Do Biblical Psalms of Lament Show Up in the Book of Mormon?

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Abstract: When tragedy struck God's people in Old Testament times, it was common for them to respond, both as a community and as individuals, with "psalms of lament." A psalm of lament is a song of complaint to the Lord regarding difficulties being endured, and a petition for His help. They were so common that they make up the largest category of psalm in the Bible.

Lehi and his family would certainly have been aware of this type of psalm, so it would be natural to expect that similar expressions of lament would show up in some form in the Book of Mormon. Selections actually do appear in the Book of Mormon approximately two dozen times.

Due to the large number of laments in the Book of Psalms and elsewhere in the Bible, it is clear that this form of expression was an important means of communicating one's needs and desires to the Lord and petitioning His divine assistance.



“Jesus Mourning” via LDS Media Library

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WHY DO BIBLICAL PSALMS OF LAMENT SHOW UP IN THE BOOK OF MORMON?

“And after I had traveled for the space of many hours in darkness, I began to pray unto the Lord that he would have mercy on me, according to the multitude of his tender mercies.”

1 Nephi 8:8

THE KNOW

When tragedy struck God’s people in Old Testament times, it was common for them to respond, both as a community and as individuals, with “psalms of lament.” A psalm of lament is, essentially, a song of

complaint to the Lord regarding difficulties being endured, and a petition for His help.¹

Psalms of lament come in two basic types: individual (in which the speaker is “I/me”), and communal (“we/us”).² These psalms share a basic common form that generally has the following elements, although the order can be rearranged: (1) invocation, (2) complaint,

(3) confession of trust, (4) petition, and (5) vow of praise.³

Psalm 22, well known due to its use in the New Testament (Matthew 27:35, 39, 46, etc.), is a good example of the typical elements of this genre.

- Invocation: “My God, my God” (Psalm 22:1)
- Complaint: “why hast thou forsaken me?” (vv. 1–18)
- Confession of trust: “He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him” (vv. 8, 24)
- Petition: “be not thou far from me, O Lord ... haste thee to help me ... deliver my soul from the sword” (vv. 19–21)
- Vow of praise: “in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee ... I will pay my vows before them that fear him” (vv. 22–31)

This form of expressing lament to God was so common that it makes up the largest category of psalm in the biblical Book of Psalms. Roughly one third of all the 150 biblical psalms are laments or contain laments.⁴

Lehi and his family would certainly have been aware of this type of psalm, so it would be natural to expect that similar expressions of lament would show up in some form in the Book of Mormon. In fact, selections from the biblical psalms of lament appear in the Book of Mormon approximately two dozen times.⁵ A few examples include:

- 2 Nephi 33:3 – When Nephi stated that he cried unto God for his people and that his “eyes water my pillow by night, because of them,” he was echoing the lament in Psalm 6, which states in the KJV translation: “all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears” (Psalm 6:6).
- Moroni 10:25 – Moroni spoke of a time in which miracles might be done away among mankind due to their unbelief. He stated that “if this be the case” it will be because “there shall be none that doeth good among you, no not one.” This is almost a direct quote of Psalm 14:3, a psalm of lament.
- 1 Nephi 8:8; Ether 6:12 – An oft-quoted line from the Book of Mormon, “according to the multitude of his tender mercies,” comes from the “petition”

element of Psalm 69: “turn unto me according to the multitude of thy tender mercies” (v. 16).

Perhaps the most striking example of this genre in the Book of Mormon is the psalm that Nephi himself wrote in 2 Nephi 4.⁶ Nephi’s Psalm has all five of the elements listed above that are characteristic of a lament psalm:

- Invocation: “My soul delighteth in the things of the Lord ... O Lord” (2 Ne 4:16–17, 30)
- Complaint: “O wretched man that I am! ... I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me” (2 Ne 4:17–19)
- Confession of Trust: “My God hath been my support ... O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever.” (2 Ne 4:20–30, 34)
- Petition: (2 Ne 4:31–33)
- Vow of Praise: “I will praise thee forever ... my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee” (2 Ne 4:30, 35)⁷

Although 2 Nephi 4 is very original and unique to Nephi, he does allude to and quote from several biblical psalms of lament, including Psalms 25, 27, 28, 30, 31, and 52, throughout the chapter.⁸

THE WHY

Nephi’s Psalm depicts a soulful cry of anguish and a passionate plea for help virtually unrivaled in the Book of Mormon. It demonstrates the spiritual and emotional power that the Psalms of Lament typically carry and gives us an idea of why Nephi and other Book of Mormon prophets may have chosen to quote from them or write their own.

Due to the large number of laments in the Book of Psalms and elsewhere in the Bible (see, for example, Jeremiah 15:15–21), it is clear that this form of expression was an important means of communicating one’s needs and desires to the Lord and petitioning His divine assistance. The specific form or structure for these laments that has been described here was mostly likely established so that once recorded, a lament could be reused by others. Although the psalm may have been written in response to a particular disastrous

event or personal tragedy, the structure of the piece ensured that it would be applicable to a much broader audience.

Jesus, for example, was able to apply the words of Psalm 22 to Himself when He hung on the cross and invoked His Father, using the Psalmist’s inspired lament: “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, quoting Psalm 22:1). Likewise, when Nephi vowed that “my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation” (2 Nephi 4:30), he was echoing the cry of King David in Psalm 89:26, likely because that scriptural expression of praise represented exactly what Nephi felt inside himself at that moment.

So, when readers today immerse themselves in psalms of lament such as those found in the biblical Psalms and in the Book of Mormon, they may similarly find themselves, their trials, and their yearnings for God’s help, already expressed in an eloquent and inspiring manner. These ancient petitions may become the readers’ own prayers to a merciful Father as they learn to internalize them and apply them to their own situations.

FURTHER READING

Kenneth L. Alford and D. Bryce Baker, “[Parallels between Psalms 25–31 and the Psalm of Nephi](#),” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament* (2013 Sperry Symposium), ed. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Matthew J. Grey, and David Rolph Seely (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University), 312–328.

John Hilton III, “[Old Testament Psalms in the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old*

Testament (2013 Sperry Symposium), ed. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Matthew J. Grey, and David Rolph Seely (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University), 291–311.

David Bokovoy, “[From Distance to Proximity: A Poetic Function of Enallage in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon](#),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 1 (2000): 60–63.

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NOTES

1. For more on Psalms of Lament in the Book of Mormon, see Book of Mormon Central, “[How Did Mormon React to Seeing His People Slain?](#)” (Mormon 6:17), *KnoWhy* 232 (November 16, 2016).
2. [Psalm 9](#) is an example of an individual Psalm of Lament, while [Psalm 123](#) is communal.
3. See Matthew Nickerson, “[Nephi’s Psalm: 2 Nephi 4:16–35 in Light of Form-Critical Analysis](#),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 30.
4. See, for example, Psalms 3, 5-7, 9, 12–14, 17, 22, 25, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 51, 53–58, 61, 64, 69–71, 77, 83, 86, 88, 102, 109, 130, 139–144.
5. See appendix.
6. For more on this psalm, see John W. Welch, “[The Psalm of Nephi as a Post-Lehi Document](#),” *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 72–74.
7. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Is ‘Nephi’s Psalm’ Really a Psalm?](#)” *KnoWhy* 30 (February 10, 2016).
8. See Kenneth L. Alford and D. Bryce Baker, “[Parallels between Psalms 25–31 and the Psalm of Nephi](#),” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament* (2013 Sperry Symposium), ed. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Matthew J. Grey, and David Rolph Seely (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2013), 312–328. See also John Hilton III, “[Old Testament Psalms in the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord*, 291–31

APPENDIX: PSALMS OF LAMENT QUOTED OR ALLUDED TO IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Biblical Psalm of Lament	Book of Mormon Passage	Shared Material
Psalm 4:6	3 Nephi 19:25	“the light of thy countenance”
Psalm 6:6	2 Nephi 33:3	“water my bed/pillow ... night”
Psalm 6:8	3 Nephi 14:23	“depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity”
Psalm 9:1	Alma 37:41	“marvelous works”

Psalm 12:7	Alma 37:4	“keep ... preserve ... generation”
Psalm 14:3	Moroni 10:25	“none that doth good, no, not one”
Psalm 22:7	Alma 26:23	“laugh ... to scorn”
Psalm 27:11	2 Nephi 4:27, 29	“because of mine enemies”
Psalm 28:7	2 Nephi 4:28	“heart ... rejoice”
Psalm 30:8	2 Nephi 4:23, 25	“cry/cried”
Psalm 31:13	1 Nephi 7:16; 2 Nephi 5:2, 4	“to take away my life”
Psalm 31:19	2 Nephi 4:17, 19	“great” ... “goodness” ... “trust”
Psalm 35:5	Alma 37:15; Mormon 5:16	“as chaff before the wind”
Psalm 44:8	Alma 26:12, 35	“boast of my God”
Psalms 51:1 ; 69:16	1 Nephi 8:8; Ether 6:12	“according to the multitude of his tender mercies”
Psalm 52:9	2 Nephi 4:30	“I will praise thee forever”
Psalm 74:4	Alma 33:9	“in the midst of thy congregations”
Psalm 86:13	Alma 5:6	“delivered my soul from ... hell”
Psalm 89:26	2 Nephi 4:30	“my God and the rock of my salvation”
Psalm 106:31	Moroni 7:7	“counted unto him for righteousness”
Psalm 106:47	Alma 26:6, 8	“gather ... give thanks to his holy name ... praise”