in Israel's history (Weiser, 538). The gracious acts of God are "irrational" (or perhaps better, "supra-rational") and the behavior of God's people defies all logical analysis. This is the "riddle" at the heart of the "parable" out of which the Israelites lived and out of which we live. Ours is a God who does not

> . . . perpetually rebuke
> nor does he retain his anger forever,
> He has not treated us in proportion to our sins
> nor has he dealt with us as our iniquities deserved.
> (Ps 103:9–10; tr. L. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*)

Rather, his loyal-love toward us continues to be demonstrated through all our sin histories. The psalm establishes the point that "no matter how heinous the infidelity, God stands ready to begin again" (Clifford, "An Interpretation of Psalm 78," 138).

Ps 78 is referred to in the NT in several places. Matt 13:35 cites v 2 as a prophecy of Jesus' speaking in parables (apparently referring to Asaph in the title as a prophet). V 3 is alluded to in 1 John 1:1–4, as is v 18 in 1 Cor 10:8. V 24 is cited from the LXX text in John 6:31, Peter quotes from v 37 in Acts 8:21, and v 44 is evoked by Rev 16:4.

A Communal Complaint and Prayer for Deliverance (79:1–13)

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Translation

1 An Asaphite psalm.[a]
O God, the nations[b] have come into your inheritance; (4+3+3)
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have reduced Jerusalem to ruins.
2 *They left the corpses of your servants* (3+3+3)
as food for the birds of the heavens,
the flesh of your devoted ones[a] for the beasts[b] of the land.
3 *They poured out their blood like water—* (3+2+2)
all around Jerusalem,
and there was no one to bury (the dead).
4 *We have become subjects of contempt to our neighbors,* (3+3)
of scorn and derision to those around us.

5 *How long, O Yahweh?* (2+2+3)
Will you be angry forever?
Will your jealousy burn like fire (forever)?
6 *Pour out your wrath on[a] the nations,* (3+2+2+3)
those who do not know you;[b]
(Pour out your wrath) on kingdoms
who have not called on your name.
7 *For they devoured[a] Jacob,* (3+2)
and devastated his living place.
8 *Remember not (our) wayward acts[a] of the past;[b]* (3+3+2)
let your compassion come quickly to meet us,
for we are down and out.[c]
9 *Help us, O God of our salvation!* (3+2+3+2)
For the glory of your name,[a]
deliver us and pardon our sins
for your name's sake.
10 *Why[a] should the nations[b] say,* (3+2+3+3)
"Where is their God?"
Before our own eyes let (your name) be known among the nations
by the vindication[c] of the outpoured blood of your servants.
11 *Let the groans of the prisoners reach you—* (4+2+3)
How great[a] is your arm!—
Reprieve[b] those condemned to death.[c]
12 *Pay back sevenfold into the bosoms of our neighbors* (4+4)
the contempt in which they have held you,[a] O Lord.
13 *Then we, your people,* (2+2+3+3)
the flock of your pasture,
will give you thanks forever;
to every generation we will declare your praise.

Notes

1.a. See n. 51:1.a. and n. 73:1.a.
1.b. "Nations" is used here in the sense of non-Israelites; the peoples who do not honor Yahweh (cf. v 6).
2.a. On, "loyal ones," see n. 52:11.a.
2.b. Note the לחיתו ("beasts of"), cited as having an "old case ending (poetic)" by BDB, 312; also in Pss 50:10; 104:11, 20; Isa 56:9; Zeph 2:14. Dahood (II, 250) calls it an archaic nominative ending, in an anomalous position after a preposition (which would normally have a genitive), and suggests that it is a fossilized expression used by "a deliberate archaizer who no longer appreciated the fine points of case endings and their function."
6.a. אל is used in the sense of על, "on/upon." See *BHS*. Note Jer 10:25.
6b. Or, "who have not known you." "Know" (ידע) is used in the sense of "acknowledge/respect/be well acquainted with."
7.a. MT has the singular, "he devoured." Some ms evidence and Jer 10:25 support the plural (see *BHS*).
8.a. More commonly, "iniquities." See n. 51:4.b.
8.b. עונת ראשנים is a phrase frequently translated as "the iniquities of our forefathers" (e.g., RSV, Kraus, Dahood, Gunkel), taking ראשנים as a substantive noun meaning "ancestors" (cf. Deut 19:21; Lev 26:45). However, the word is actually an adjective usually meaning "former" (cf. Gen 25:25; Deut 10:1–4; 24:10; Hos 2:9; Hag 2:3, 9); if read in this way, the phrase is "former iniquities" (BDB, Jacquet, Sabourin). Neither word has a possessive suffix ("our iniquities" or "our former/forefathers"), so in either case it must be added for smoother reading. Translating the phrase as "former iniquities" or

"wayward acts of the past" fits well with the following verse, where the sins are not "our forefathers'" but "ours."

8.c. This is Dahood's colloquial translation of "for we are brought very low." NIV has "for we are in desperate need."

9.a. Lit., "concerning the word of the glory of your name." For רבר in the sense of "for the sake of," see Ps 45:5; Gen 20:11; Exod 8:8[12]; BDB, 184.

10.a. Dahood argues for למה with the nuance of "lest": "Lest the heathen should say"—which may be correct. Cf. Eccl 5:5; 7:16, 17.

10.b. There is some evidence for reading "Why should they say among the nations. . . ." (See *BHS* and LXX.)

10.c. Better than "avenging" or "vengeance"; see n. 58:11.a.

11.a. Reading the כ on גדל as a *kaph veritatis* (see GKC, 118x), which gives emphasis.

11.b. The Syriac text indicates דהר for MT's הותר (hiphil impv from יתר, "remain over/preserve"). Cf. Ps 105:20. MT would be hiphil impv or inf abs from נתר, "let go free." The change is not significant, and MT may be retained.

11.c. Lit., "sons of death."

12.a. More lit., "their reproaches/taunts [with] which they have reproached/taunted you."

Form/Structure/Setting

Ps 79 is a communal lament. It implores God to take action against Israel's enemies in the face of national disaster, acknowledging that Israel has sinned and asking for forgiveness. The situation is desperate and portrayed in emotion-laden terms. There is no disinterested observation here; the speaker is deeply involved in the plight of God's people. This psalm is similar to Pss 44 and 74, both of which seek to move God to salvific action in the face of Israel's shame before her mocking neighbors.

Although the psalm appears to deal with a specific set of circumstances, scholars have not been able to agree on which event in Israel's history inspired it, which is also the case with Ps 74. Most consider both psalms to deal with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 B.C.E. (e.g., Delitzsch, Briggs, Kissane, Jacquet, Dahood, Anderson). Kidner holds that the psalm comes from eyewitnesses of the final fall of the kingdom, most likely ones who remained in the land after the deportation.

However, there are some specific problems with Ps 79 that have led commentators to consider other solutions (see Gunkel and Schmidt, who think of some unknown event after the fall of Jerusalem and probably after the time of Ezra). The psalm makes no mention of any detail that matches only the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers and no other situation. It does not refer specifically to the burning of the temple, mentioned in 2 Kgs 25:9 and Jer 52:13, or to the uprooting of the whole people. According to Isa 35:8, 52:1, and Lam 1:10, the mere presence of the heathen in the sacred precincts of the temple would be sufficient to defile it; its destruction is not required. In addition, the references to "our neighbors" in vv 4 and 12 lead some to believe that Jerusalem had been invaded not by one nation, as was the case in 586, but by the troops of several (E. Podechard, cited in Jacquet). These verses are also sometimes interpreted as specific references to Moab, Edom, and Ammon; nations bordering on Israel and frequently engaged in wars with her, several of which have been offered as settings for this psalm. They plundered Jerusalem before its fall to Babylon (2 Kgs 24:2) as well as afterwards (Ezek 35:10; 36:5). The notes in The New Oxford Annotated Bible (RSV) suggest that both Pss 74 and 79 reflect "some otherwise unknown event of the post-exilic period (cf. Isa 64:11)." Finally, the

fact that vv 2c–3a are quoted in 1 Macc 7:17 has led some scholars (e.g., Oesterley) to argue for the atrocities of Antiochus Epiphanes in the fourth century as the occasion for Ps 79.

In spite of all of these problems and theories, the time after the fall of Jerusalem in 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; Ezek 25:3, which recapitulates the end of Jerusalem, refers only to the profanation of the sanctuary, and nowhere in the Book of Lamentations is the fire of God's judgment (1:12; 2:3; 4:11) specifically linked with the destruction of the temple. Further, it is not absolutely necessary to find a setting in which Israel's neighbors were involved in war against her, although in this case the antagonism that the speaker feels for the neighbors could be an oblique reflection of the Edomites' plundering of southern Judah during and after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. As to the citation of this psalm in 1 Macc 7:17, Dahood points out that it is quoted there as scripture, indicating that it must have originated quite a bit earlier in order to have had time to attain that status. The fact that the psalm gives no concrete details tying its origin to the events of the fall of the Southern Kingdom does not mean that it does not reflect those events. The psalm seems to presuppose the same situation as that in Isa 63:7–64:11 [63:7–64:12], which H. G. M. Williamson ("Isaiah 63:7–64:11: Exilic Lament or Post-Exilic Protest?" *ZAW* 102 [1990] 48–58) has argued is an exilic penitential liturgy probably recited at the ruined site of the temple in Jerusalem before 515 B.C.E. Williamson relates the Isaiah passage more closely with Ps 106 and Neh 9, both of which he argues belong to the exilic period. He does not make much of Ps 79 except to note that it lacks any historical retrospect (56). There are no significant lexical parallels between Ps 79 and the Isaiah passage, but the situational relationship is strong enough to support their belonging to the same context.

Thus it seems most probable that Ps 79 belongs to a sizeable corpus of OT literature (including Ps 74) which emerged from the community which remained in Palestine during the exile and was used in penitential liturgies during that period. The relevance of the psalm need not be restricted to that period, however. Penitential liturgies were used throughout the post-exilic era, and Ps 79 continues to be used with the Jewish observance of the Ninth of Ab, which commemorates the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem. The fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. became a paradigm for all other invasions and oppressions.

Literary structure. The uneven literary structure of Ps 79 may be due, in part at least, to its anthological style. Stuhlmueller (II, 32) remarks that the psalm "belongs as much to the entire psalter as it does to Asaph." A considerable amount of the content of the psalm appears in other contexts. For example:

v 1c	see Jer 26:18; Mic 3:12
v 4	see Ps 44:15
v 5	see Pss 6:4; 13:2; 89:47
vv 6–7	see Jer 10:25
v 8c	see Pss 142:7; 116:6
v 9d	see Pss 23:3; 25:11; 31:4; 54:3; 106:8; 109:21; 143:11
v 10ab	see Pss 115:2; 42:4; Joel 2:17
v 11a	see Ps 102:21

v 11c see 1 Sam 26:16
v 12 see Pss 89:51–52; 44:14; Gen 4:15, 24; Lev 26:18, 21, 24

These examples are enough to demonstrate that much of the language of Ps 79 is borrowed from the traditional expressions and words of Israelite laments.

The psalm can be outlined in various ways: e.g., Gunkel, Kraus, and A. A. Anderson divide into vv 1–4, 5–12, 13; Stuhlmueller has vv 1–4, 5–7, 8–9, 10–12, 13. Jacquet divides the psalm into two major parts: vv 1–7 and 8–13. A division into two parts seems sufficient to me, but the division seems better after v 5, which concludes the complaint in vv 1b–4. Thus vv 1–5 are made up of complaints and vv 6–13 are made up of petitions and supplications, except for the vow of praise in v 13.

Comment

The Complaint (79:1–5). The first section of the psalm describes the horror that Jerusalem has become. It presents her as totally vulnerable to human violence and mockery as well as Yahweh's continued anger.

1 The historical referent is not given, but the psalm most likely reflects Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 B.C.E. (see *Form/Structure/Setting*). "The nations" are, according to v 6, those who do not know Israel's God, and so they are heathen coming into the holy places of Israel. Generally Yahweh's "inheritance" is his people (1 Sam 10:1; 1 Kgs 8:35), but the reference here is inclusive and includes the land and Jerusalem. Although only the defiling of the temple is mentioned, its parallelism with the destruction of the city indicates that it, too, has been ruined. Jerusalem would hardly be described as "stone heaps" or "ruins" with the temple left intact.

2–3 These verses refer to the many people slaughtered in the taking of the city, but the actual massacre is too terrible for the speaker to relate. Instead, we see its aftermath: Jerusalem has become a city of the dead where the corpses outnumber those who could bury them. Certainly those who killed them would not perform such a service; throughout the ancient Near East, the bodies of the conquered dead were dishonored by being left as carrion (cf. Deut 21:23; Isa 14:18–19). Bones and corpses made a sanctuary ceremonially unclean and unfit for worship (2 Kgs 23:16). The pathos is greater in that the dead were those who were faithful to Yahweh, his devoted servants. Innocent as well as guilty perished in the sack of Judah's capital, and their steadfastness in relationship to God did not protect his saints.

4 Although the fighting is over, Israel's suffering continues. The people must bear the contempt of their neighbors with the misery of their physical conditions.

5 The destruction of city, temple, family, and friends was not the full extent of Israel's loss. The taunts of her neighbors she can bear; her greatest loss was the care of her God. The speaker knows that it is because of his divine anger that they have suffered so; because of God's anger, they are still in pain. Yahweh's wrath continues to burn although the fires that consumed the city have long since cooled, and the speaker laments the duration of the anger. Surely the carnage and destruction already experienced is enough. "How long?" is Israel's cry under judgment. See Pss 13:2, 44:24, 80:5, and 89:47 as well.

Supplications (79:6–13) **6–7** The people plead with Yahweh to pour out his wrath on the nations that have defeated his people. The enemies are described as nations and kingdoms who "do not know you"; i.e., they acknowledge no relationship with him, have no claim on him, and it is these godless people who have razed the temple and murdered Yahweh's holy ones.

8 Although the nations know no relationship with Yahweh, the people are quick to point out that they themselves have not always lived up to their commitments. There are indeed former "wayward acts" that can be remembered against them. Their sin has led to this judgment and they do not argue against it. Instead, they plead for Yahweh's judgment to be matched by his compassion, for they have no other hope.

9–12 In these verses the people beg for Yahweh's power to be joined with his forgiving compassion for the deliverance of his doomed people. Some of the faithful are in the prisons of their human captors (and others, perhaps, in the prisons of frustrated faith); only Yahweh can save them from their fate.

Frequently in laments Yahweh is reminded of the power he showed in creation (74:12–17) as well as in Israel's times of need (44:1–8). A petition is addressed to the God of Israel's salvation (cf. Pss 22:5–6; 44:2–5) for pardon and deliverance. The motivation for the petition is an appeal to the glory and honor of Yahweh's name. For the significance of appeal to the name of God, see *Comment* on 54:3. The appeal to God's name is an appeal to his reputation, which is what he really is. God's name is inextricably intertwined with Israel—ultimately it is God's glory which is at stake. Such is the boldness of Israelite prayer.

It is on this basis that the nations have taunted Israel. Their mockery is less of Israel's people than of Israel's God. The fact that the nation has been defeated and her people deported leads others to think that Israel's God has been defeated as well, that her much-vaunted special relationship with him has ended. To the nations, Israel is a people without king, nation, home, or deity. Certainly Yahweh's own people must have wondered about this as well. The loss of temple, king, and nation was nearly a deathblow to Israel's understanding of her relationship with Yahweh. To hear her deepest doubts and fears echoed sarcastically by her enemies was painful. It is apparently this insult to Yahweh that angers the people most. In desperate faith they pray that when they are delivered, when the innocent victims of vv 2–3 are vindicated, then those who have laughed at Yahweh's power will see it in action and know that they were wrong. Yahweh's strength is greater than that of the nations; he is able to deliver those that the scoffers have marked for death.

13 The last verse in the psalm foresees an end to this nightmare period of death, confusion, and isolation. In confidence the people assert that Israel is Yahweh's people, his flock, and that when his redemption comes they will recount his praise for generations. It is worth noting that the last word in the psalm is "praise"—hardly expected at the beginning of the psalm.

Explanation

This psalm deals with one of the basic issues in religious thought: how do the people of God cope with disaster in the face of God's seeming absence? The answer is: by hanging on to hope in him. The fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. was a

horrible, bloody episode that changed the lives of all Israelites forever. The ones who survived had lost family and friends, some to death and some to captivity. They had lost their nation and their homes, all that had made for stability in their lives. But the disruption went much deeper than that. They had believed that, as God's chosen people, such a disaster could never befall them (Amos 9:10). They had thought that the nation would endure forever and that its Davidic dynasty would never fail and always enjoy God's love and watchful care (2 Sam 7:8–17; Ps 89:19–37).

The destruction of the nation, therefore, was a theological crisis as well as a political, economic, and social one. The problem was even greater than that, however. The temple had survived the Babylonian assault of 598 B.C.E. when King Jehoiachin, the legitimate ruler, had been taken away and his uncle was placed on the throne (2 Kgs 24:1–17). In the battle of 587 the temple itself—situated on God's chosen and beloved Mount Zion (Ps 78:68) and serving as his eternal abode (Pss 48:1–14; 76:1–3; 1 Kgs 8:12–13)—was burned to the ground (2 Kgs 25:9) and his faithful followers killed by heathen (Ps 79:2–3, 6). The destruction of God's own dwelling, his home on earth, was more than the loss of the national worship center; it seemed to indicate that God had either abandoned his temple and his people or had been defeated himself. This is apparently how Judah's neighbors interpreted the events of that year (v 10). Ps 79, therefore, is more than a response to the extremity of the situation in which Jerusalem's survivors found themselves. It is a heartfelt effort to integrate God into their understanding of the events that have wrecked their lives.

Ps 79 is not, however, an ordered theological assessment of the experiences of 587 B.C.E. and its aftermath. It is instead a desperate and honest plea for God to show himself to be the God that the people had always known, the God of their salvation. They had become a people with nothing. Conventional faith had been shattered along with everything else. In spite of this, they do not take the easy way made available to them by their neighbors of denying their God's existence and they are unable to believe that he is no longer concerned with them. In the midst of the chaos caused by the destruction of everything that had ever given them security, the people still hold onto faith in God.

This psalm is not particularly easy to read. It is full of anguish at the unspeakable things the people have seen and anger at those who are responsible for them. It is not pretty. It is not full of noble religious sentiments. It is too real for that. The people are too tired and confused to pretend. Instead, they tell God exactly what is in their hearts. They do not hide the pathos of their situation or their horror at the unmerited deaths of God's holy ones. They hope for a vengeance as bloodthirsty as the siege they themselves have lived through. Their faith and their need are great enough that they trust God with their honesty. They trust him with themselves, and what they are feeling is neither beautiful nor humane. W. Brueggemann (*The Message of the Psalms* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984] 71–72) comments that "the psalmist only wants Yahweh to feel what we feel. It is like a patriot watching the flag burned, a lover watching his beloved raped, a scholar watching the library burn—a helpless revulsion that can scarcely find words." In this way the psalm points to an important theological affirmation: God loves us as we are. Christians recall that Christ died not for perfected human beings but for sinners (Rom 5:6–8). That does not justify sin and ungodliness,

but it does assure us that God knows all about us. Our weakness cannot horrify him. As this psalm shows, we can trust him even with our weakness and unloveliness.

It must be noted that even in the people's cry for vindication—if not revenge—it is God's action they seek. They are asking for his deliverance, not trying to wreak their own vengeance. Although they have been unable to see his help in their immediate past, they have not forgotten his delivering power and have not lost hope that they will see it again. The psalm ends in v 13 with a vow of thanksgiving and praise forever, which Kraus (*Psalms 60–150,* 136) thinks expresses an assurance of being heard. It is, however, predicated on the response of God to the petitions in vv 8–11. Without divine help, there can be no praise.

This psalm continues to be recited at the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) of the temple in Jerusalem on Friday afternoons and, as noted above, is used in the liturgy of the Ninth of Ab, a fast day which commemorates the destruction of the temple. Part of v 3 is quoted in Rev 16:6, and v 6 is quoted in 1 Thess 4:5.

A Prayer for the Restoration of the Ravaged Vineyard of the Shepherd of Israel (80:1–20)

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Translation

1 For the leader; [a] according to *shoshannim;*[b] an *Eduth;*[c]
an Asaphite psalm.[d]

2 (1) *O Shepherd* [a] *of Israel: Give ear;* (3+3+4)
the one who guides Joseph like a flock.
O Cherubim-enthroned-One, shine forth,[b]