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A Study of the Literary Genre of the Woe Oracle

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The "woe oracle," a genre of literature found with some frequency in both the Old and New Testaments, was familiar throughout the Ancient Near East. By divine guidance God chose to use words and forms already familiar to the Israelites as a fitting vehicle to convey a precise message which could be understood by the people of a particular culture and historical situation. The goal of this article is to provide a better understanding of the "woe oracle." By surveying both the structure of and "origins" or forms relating to the genre, it is hoped, primarily, that the ability to interpret contexts in which the woe oracle appears will be enhanced; and, secondarily, that a greater appreciation of the various nuances with which this genre is employed will be gained.

Syntactical Considerations

Before looking at the modern form critical controversy concerning the "origin" of the woe-oracles, an analysis of the syntactical peculiarities of the two basic Hebrew words meaning "woe" (*'oy* and *hoy*) and their possible derivations is in order.

'oy

Normal Syntax and Sentence Structure. The Hebrew word *'oy* (woe) is used twenty-five times in the Old Testament. In twenty-two places, *'oy* is immediately followed by the preposition *le* plus a pronominal suffix or in three cases a suffix alternative such as *napesam* (Isa 3:9). The use of *le* with *'oy* predominately occurs with suffixes of the first and second person and infrequently with third person suffixes (Isa 3:9; Hos 7:13, 9:12).¹ In addition, the syntactical

unit *'oy + le + pronominal suffix* is found most often attached to a sentence or subordinate clause. This sentence or clause may either 1) be introduced by *ki* (thirteen times), 2) take the form of an independent main clause or sentence (three times), 3) take the form of an interrogative (two times), or 4) take the form of an infinitive construction (one time).²

It is noteworthy that *'oy* appears as an independent interjection (without *le*) only twice. This is seen once in the judgment context against Israel's enemies in the Balaam oracle (Num 24:23b) and once in a judgment context against Jerusalem (Ezek 24:6, 9).

Alas (*'oy*), who can live when God does this? (Num 24:23)

Woe to (*'oy*) the bloody city . . . (Ezek 24:6, 9)

These two passages illustrate the range of word usage from that of almost a pure interjection (Num 24:23) to that of an invective or threat with *le* implied (Ezek 24:6, 9).

Earliest Use and Similar Use by Later Prophets. The earliest appearance of *'oy* (ca 1450 BC) is Numbers 21:29.

Therefore, those who use proverbs (*hamisalim*) say: (Num 21:27)

Woe to you (*'oy leka*), O Moab!
You are ruined, O people of Chemosh! (Num 21:29)

This use of *'oy* in its incipient form is very similar to its fuller expression as used by the classical prophets.

Woe to you (*'oy leka*), O Jerusalem!
How long will you remain unclean? (Jer 13:27)

Woe! Woe to you (*'oy leka*) . . .
you build a mound for yourself . . . (Ezek 16:23-24)

Woe to them (*'oy lahem*)
because they have strayed from me!
Destruction (*som lahem*)
because they have rebelled against me! (Hosea 7:13)

Hosea 7:13 is unique in that it contains a parallel structure of two clauses and syntactical units. The parallel positions of 'oy and *som* here indicate that they are synonymous in this passage. An investigation of the meaning and use of *som* sheds light on the significance of 'oy. According to *TWOT*, *som* is a substantive derived from *sdd* (ruin, destroy, spoil) and means "havoc, violence, destruction." It often appears in prophetic books (twenty of twenty-five times) and is often used parallel to the substantive *hamas* which refers to

injustice or social unrighteousness . . . It is clear, however, that *sod* is not only the cause for destruction but also may be the actual destruction itself (Hos 7:13, 10:14).³

hoy

Normal Syntax and Sentence Structure. The Hebrew word *hoy* (woe) is used fifty-one times in the Old Testament. In contrast to 'oy, it is used with a following preposition only four times ('el Jer 48:1; 'al Jer 50:27, Ezek 13:3; and le Ezek 13:18). *Hoy* is used in only eight places as an independent interjection without any direct connection to a following word (Isa 1:24, 17:12, 55:1; Jer 30:7, 47:6; Zech 2:10 (twice), 2:11). Its predominant use is found when it is combined with a participle twenty-six times and in its combination with a noun or adjective nine times.⁴ These figures include the times when *hoy* is clearly being used in a lament context (i.e. I Kings 13:30; Jer 22:18, 34:5 (four times); and when spelled *ho* in Amos 5:16 (two times).

Another distinction from 'oy is that the syntactical combination *hoy* + participle (or noun/adjective) in most cases is not followed by substantiating clauses. Rather, in most cases "the use of *hoy* finds its substantiation by means of the following participles or nearer distinguishing nouns."⁵

Earliest Use and Similar Use by Later Prophets. The earliest use of *hoy* occurs in I Kings 13:30 (ca 920 BC). It is used here as an interjection of sorrow or grief and is set in a context of the lament over the death of the prophet. It is used in a similar way also by later prophets as seen in Jer 22:18, 34:5 and in Amos 5:16.

It is also used later in the "woe oracle" and as a pure, independent interjection. Its use in "woe oracle" form is always set in the context of a prediction of disaster (cf. Amos 5:18, 6:1; Isa 5:8ff; Jer 23:13; Ezek 34:2; Zech 11:17). As a pure, independent

interjection it is used as a request or summons cry -- "Alas!" (cf. Isa 1:24, 17:12, 18:1, 55:1; Jer 47:6; and Zech 2:10 [6], 2:11 [7]).

Septuagint Translation of *hoy* and/or *'oy*

In the translation of the Septuagint, *hoy* and *'oy* are predominantly translated by *houai* + dative and sometimes as *ho*. This is also the word which is used in Matthew 23 when Jesus issues seven woes against the spiritual leaders of Israel. Infrequently, the translation of *houai* + substantive (nom case) is also found. It is interesting to note that *houai* usually (sixty-nine times) represents *hoy* and less frequently represents *'oy*.

Form Considerations

Formal *Rib* Structure

Two basic views are proposed concerning what constitutes a formal *Rib* structure.⁶ These two views are 1) that of Harvey the "covenant lawsuit" view based on passages such as Isaiah 1, Micah 6, and Jeremiah 2 as well as on extra-Biblical materials of the Ancient Near East; and 2) that of Wright the "heavenly or covenant lawsuit" view which combines concepts of a heavenly treaty with a heavenly council based on Deuteronomy 32 (Song of Moses), cf. Ezekiel 17:11-21.⁷

Harvey distinguishes between two versions of *Rib* based on the final element of its form. If both a declaration of guilt and a threat of destruction are included "then the unit is the *Rib* of condemnation;"⁸ but if the last section "consists of a warning and a call for a change in conduct, then it is a *Rib* of warning."⁹ The *Rib*, therefore, follows essentially -- in either case -- "the internationally used treaty form and assumes the covenant as the basis for relationship between Yahweh and His people."¹⁰ It is important to realize that the woe oracle always appears in the *Rib* of condemnation and never in the *Rib* of warning. Admonition (warning) must be distinguished from condemnation (woe).

In the admonition, the prophet tells the people what is expected of them if the judgment of God is to be averted . . . (Amos 5:16). The admonition sometimes has the appearance of a conditional announcement of judgment, but it also takes other forms. Woe

oracle (on the other hand) is the term applied to prophetic speeches . . . which begin with the cry "woe," followed by a description of the addressees and usually also an announcement of judgment.¹¹

There is never any condition given by which the situation can be alleviated in a woe oracle -- the judgment is set.

Prophecy of Disaster. It is significant to note that the fifth section of the formal *Rib* structure is referred to by form critics as a prophecy of disaster. According to Hayes, there are two major types of prophetic speech:

a "prophecy of disaster" which predicts future disaster or punishment and a "prophecy of salvation" which predicts divine intervention on behalf of those in need (usually Israel). The woe oracle occurs almost exclusively in the "prophecy of disaster."¹²

An example of a "prophecy of disaster"¹³ can be seen in Jeremiah 28:15-16. The "Indication of Situation" is found in verse 15, "Listen now, Hananiah (hear oracle); the Lord has not sent you (accusation) and you have made this people trust in a lie (accusation)." The "Prediction of Disaster" is found in verse 16, "Therefore, thus says the Lord (introduction) behold, I am about to remove you from the face of the earth (judgment). This year you are going to die (judgment)."

Woe Oracle. It is important to note that the woe oracle always appears within the "Prediction of Disaster" section of the "Prophecy of Disaster." This "Prophecy of Disaster" may or may not be found in the larger and more formal type of *Rib* structure. When it is found in this formal structure, the "Prophecy of Disaster" is found in fifth section of the "Formal *Rib* Structure." As pointed out above, it is also important to remember that the woe oracle always appears in the *Rib* of condemnation and never in the *Rib* of warning.

Controversy Concerning "Origins"

The main controversy among form critics concerning the woe oracles centers around their "origin." In this article the focus is not on "origin," but rather on the relationship, meaning, and nature of these forms as they were developed and used by the prophets under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The three main views concerning

"origin" of the woe oracles will be assessed from this viewpoint. These three views which will be considered indicate that the woe oracle finds its "origin" in 1) the wisdom sayings, 2) the funeral lament, or 3) the curse formula.

Proposed Relationship to the Wisdom Texts

Similarities. The main proponent of deriving the woe oracle from the Wisdom tradition is Erhard Gerstenberger.¹⁴ He suggests that "the woe (formula) as well as the bliss formula had its origin in the wise men's reflections about the conditions of this world."¹⁵ Gerstenberger believes that the curse form ('oy) had its counterpart in the "effective and authoritative blessing"¹⁶ ('asere) and that many times the two appear together in the same passage or context (cf. Eccl 10:16-17; Isa 3:10-11). He believes that this parallel relationship found between the curse ('arur) and blessing (brk) has its counterpart in the proposed parallel relationship between the woe (hoy or 'oy) and the more private blessing ('asere).

The formula ['asere + participle/noun] has been preserved in quite different contexts, namely, in the liturgical language of the Psalms (26 out of a total of 43 OT occurrences), but also in wisdom texts (10 times).¹⁷

Examination of Contexts. Gerstenberger suggests Ecclesiastes 10:16-17 and Isaiah 3:10-11 as examples of the parallel usage of 'oy (hoy) and 'asere:

Happy ('asere) (is) the righteous, because he is well,
because he can eat the fruit of his labor,
Woe ('oy) to the unrighteous; he is badly off,
because the deeds of his hands come over him.¹⁸ (Eccl 10:16-17)

However, Clifford questions the use of this passage to support this argument:

It should be noted that textual emendation [of *ḥ* to 'oy in Eccl. 10:17 and of *'imeru* to 'asere in Isa 3:10] is necessary in both examples to produce the necessary parallelism between 'asere and hoy or 'oy.¹⁹

On the other hand, Wolff proposes Proverbs 23:29-30 as an example of this parallel usage:

Who has woe (*'oy*)? Who has sorrow (*'asere*)?
Who has contentions? Who has complaining . . . (Prov 23:29)

Here, the woe is in the form of a question. This passage is taken as a parallel to Proverbs 23:25:

May your father and your mother be glad,
and let her rejoice who gave birth to you. (Prov 23:25)

Wolff states:

the interchange between the different expression woe-sorrow (*'oy - 'aboy*) in this . . . reference [Prov. 23:29-30], in conjunction with the participial formulations familiar from the woe-cries, shows that there were sapiential [wisdom] circles in Israel in which the old distinctions between *hoy* and *'oy*, as well as dialectal differences between "Woe" (*hoy*) and "Alas!" (*ho*), had become fuzzy.²⁰

Wolff argues that this supposed breakdown in distinctions based on these few passages indicates "very strongly the wisdom origin of the prophetic woe-oracle."²¹

Conclusion of the Form Critics. Wolff concludes that "the pedagogic [wisdom] woe-sayings . . . contained no elaborated element of threat. The function . . . was . . . to issue a warning against the way which led to death."²²

Most of the form critics who hold to this view believe that "*'asere* and *hoy* are weakened words of blessing and curse and become the successors . . . of *brk* and *'arur*."²³ Jantzen, however, disagrees claiming that:

this argument cannot be sustained. *'asere* never carries blessing, but remains the bystander's acknowledgement of the enviable state of someone blessed. It is employed as a teaching device in wisdom contexts.²⁴

Clifford raises further doubts regarding the wisdom texts being the origin when he says:

while there are many instances of *'asere* in the wisdom sayings . . . there are none of *hoy* . . . and only one of *'oy*. Gerstenberger himself is led to wonder why more wisdom texts have not preserved this form.²⁵

Two important observations should be made regarding the adaptability of the two words *hoy* and *'oy*. As just noted, Wolff indicated a breakdown in the old distinctions between these two words. Gerstenberger adds that "the woe-form changed from the mere foreboding of announcement of bad luck [wisdom sayings] to the pointed and Yahweh-centered indictment of covenantal apostasies."²⁶ It will become even more apparent as this study progresses that the context and/or the larger genre form in which the particular word for "woe" is used ultimately governs its meaning.

Commentary Regarding View. It has been demonstrated that the wisdom texts are not a major influence in the development of the use of the woe oracle. The pedagogical woe sayings refer to a potential state while the woe oracles refer to an already existing state. Additionally, regarding the conclusion of the form critics, it must be noted that the wisdom texts have many uses of *'asere* but very few of *'oy* and none of *hoy*.

It is, nonetheless, interesting to note that the wisdom contexts in which *'oy* and *'i* are used emphasize a resultant negative state (death) of an individual who has violated the moral stipulations of Yahweh's Law (Mosaic Covenant). This resultant negative state provides a loose parallel -- however small -- to the negative state described by the participial clauses following the pronouncement of "woe."

Significance. The significance which can be applied to the study of the woe oracle from the use of *'oy* or *'i* in wisdom texts is found in the fact that these texts present two ways of life. One leads to life and the other leads to death. These two words are used in contexts which present the way which leads to death. Death or destruction also predominantly characterizes the impending state of the recipient of a woe oracle. Thus it is seen that both the wisdom sayings and the woe oracles are related to the blessings and cursings of the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 27-28).

Proposed Relationship to the Funeral Lament

The second viewpoint regarding the "origin" of the woe oracle is that its source is found in the funeral lament.

Similarities. First, it is interesting to note that "the funeral lament is the only attested non-prophetic use of *hoy* in the Old Testament."²⁷ Clifford proposes that *hoy* entered the prophets "as a funeral cry and develops within this new matrix into a curse-like formula."²⁸

Before looking at the use of *hoy* in judgment contexts, it will be beneficial to understand its use in the contexts from which it originated -- those of the funeral lament. To gain this understanding it is necessary to look at the cultural background and use of the death wail in the Ancient Near East.

As soon as a death occurs in a home, a death wail is raised that announces to the entire neighborhood the sad event.²⁹ This ritual of mourning sometimes begins prior to the actual death of the person.³⁰ "The suddenness of the outcry is terrifying together with a shrillness and loudness which one cannot easily imagine."³¹ This "sharp, shrill, ear-piercing shriek . . . is followed by prolonged wails. When this is heard, everybody knows a death has occurred."³² This wailing and lamentation is then taken up by friends and relatives in the neighborhood who then share in the grief. Some of the language common to lamentation has been preserved in the prophetic writings (cf. Jer 9:17-18, 22:18-19; Micah 1:8; Amos 5:16). A few of these prophets mention professional mourners who are hired by the family to express sorrow for the deceased (Jer 9:17-18).³³ In much the same way, the prophets were mourners hired by Yahweh. They were the first on the scene to announce the condition of the ill subject (whether Israel or its leaders) who was about to die. The prophet lets out the first wail (*hoy*) to announce the impending death. These professional mourners were also skillful at lamentation (Amos 5:16), meaning that they were skilled at chanting and eulogizing poetic refrains about the deceased. This parallels closely to God's chief mourner -- the prophet -- as he skillfully employs his poetic craftsmanship (and even possibly his woe cry) over the demise of the object of his lament.

Examination of Contexts. Various contexts will be examined which employ a funeral lament, beginning with its first appearance in I Kings 13:30 and followed by its later development within the prophetic writings.

This first appearance of *hoy* which is found in a lament context is found in I Kings 13:29-30:

So the prophet took up . . . to mourn (*sapad*) and to bury him.
And . . . they mourned (*sapad*) over him saying, "Alas (*hoy*), my brother!"

The two uses of *sapad* establish this section as a lament context. Also note the similarity of the following passage by Amos (5:16-17):

Therefore, thus . . . there is wailing (*mspd*) and in the streets . . .
. say Alas (*hoy*)! Alas (*hoy*)!

Again, lexical environments establish this passage as a funeral lamentation.

A study of Amos 5 is crucial in analyzing the transition of the use of the word *hoy* from a lament context to that of a judgment context. Note first that the lament context appears in a *Rib* of warning:

Rib of Warning (Lament Context)

Amos	5:1	Hear oracle, lamentation announced.
	5:2-3	Contents of dirge.
	5:4-9	Warning.
	5:10-13	Accusation.
	5:14-15	Warning.
	5:16	<i>laken</i> + [formula: thus says the Lord] -- prediction of disaster within a lament context.

Form critics also incorrectly classify the following as a lament context:

Rib of Condemnation (Judgment Context)

Amos	5:18-20	<i>hoy</i> + identity of defendants.
	5:21-26	Accusation (reason) = idolatry, v. 26.
	5:27a	<i>laken</i> + announcement of judgment = captivity.
	5:27b	Identity of sender = the Lord of Hosts.

Note that verse 27 with its announcement of judgment distinguishes Amos 5:18-27 as a *Rib* of condemnation. Thus, we see a very important transition of the use of *hoy* from its original function as a lament to that of its later function as a woe cry within a single chapter of Amos.

Williams ventures that Amos was probably the first of the "classical" or "literary" prophets. "He was also more than likely the first figure in the history of Israelite prophetism to appropriate the *hoy*-lament and employ it in prophetic oracles."³⁴ Williams further notes that other prophetic forms such as "Thus saith the Lord" and hear oracles such as "Hear the word of the Lord" were commonly used long before the appearance of the eighth century classical (literary) prophets. He indicates that:

there is no evidence that a lament form was either characteristic of, or ever utilized in, previous prophetic utterances. In making use of this form, Amos probably drew upon well known mourning customs in order to express pointedly and poignantly what he envisioned.³⁵

Later, Jeremiah uses *hoy* in a lament context just before the exile (22:18):

Therefore, thus says the Lord in regard to Jehoiakim . . . they will not lament for him: Alas (*hoy*), my brother! or Alas (*hoy*), sister! They will not lament for him: Alas (*hoy*) for the master! or Alas (*hoy*) for his splendor!

It is noteworthy that *hoy* was employed as a funeral cry from the ninth or eighth century at least to the exile.³⁶ It is also important to note that when it is used in Lament contexts, the syntax is identical to that of the invective use -- *hoy* + noun (substantive)-- for example: *hoy 'adon*, *hoy 'ahoth*, *hoy 'ahi* (Jer 22:18). Clifford asserts that "the syntax will provide a clue to the development of the prophetic use."³⁷ Clifford sees a "chronological evolution of the prophetic use [of *hoy*]"³⁸ by Amos as he moves from a lament to an invective context. In Amos 5:18 and 6:1, Amos introduces:

descriptions of the coming punishment of the Lord against Israel.
hoy those who desire (*hammit'awwim* ptc masc pl) the day of the

Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light, etc. (Amos 5, 18)

hoy those who are at ease (*hassa ananim* ptc masc pl) in Zion and those who feel secure (*habbothim*) on the mountain of Samaria (Amos 6, 1)³⁹

Clifford rightly notes that, in consideration of the previous lament contexts, there is not any justification from syntax alone -- *hoy* + substantive -- to give *hoy* in Amos 5:16 and 6:1 the usual "woe to" translation.⁴⁰ Rather, *hoy* is very much dependent on its contextual setting for its designated meaning; that is, it derives its traditional "woe to" translation here from the fact that it is found within a *Rib* context announcing impending destruction.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that as far as form is concerned, a freeing of syntax serves to indicate increased intensity (cf. Jer 23; Ezek 34; Hab 2). In the following example (Ezek 34), the woe oracle does not appear in its expected position (v. 10b), but has been moved emphatically forward. This usage of the *Rib* form by the Hebrew prophets seems to parallel the use of moving words forward for emphasis in Hebrew sentence structure.

Structure of Ezekiel 34:1-10

- v. 1-2a Case: (Accusation)
- v. 2b Woe oracle: (emphatically forward)
- v. 3-6 Case expounded
- v. 7 "Therefore" + hear oracle
- v. 8 Oath formula + restatement of case
- v. 9 "Therefore + hear oracle
- v. 10a "Thus saith the Lord God" (formula)
- v. 10b "Behold, I am against the shepherds" (normal position of woe oracle)
- v. 10c-e Declaration of judgment

As indicated above, the interesting feature in this *Rib* of condemnation is that the woe oracle has been moved emphatically forward within the structure, from its normal position (v. 10b) to v. 2b. In v. 10b, the woe oracle (*hoy haro'im*) seems to have been displaced by the expression *hineni 'el haro'im*, with both *hoy* and *hinneh* functioning as words of exclamation.

Commentary Regarding View. *Hoy*, the main word used for "woe," had its origin in the funeral lament. It was later incorporated within prophecies of doom beginning with Amos, where it began to lose some of its original force as a pure funeral lament. Its distinctive use as a pure funeral lament loses its full force and becomes more of an invective or threat in a *Rib* context. Eventually, the distinction between *hoy* and *'oy* became fuzzy or blurred so that either one can be used in a threat or "woe to" context, prophesying doom.

Significance. There is definite significance in the similarities between the lament cry and the woe cry. Both announce to the community a sad event (death or judgment). Both summon attention for emotional participation regarding the sad news which is about to be declared, and both announce a resultant state (future) which is irreversible. The prophet is, in a sense, God's hired professional mourner in both cases. He is the first to announce both the "woe cry" and the "death wail."

Proposed Relationship to the Curse Formula

Similarities. Westermann has drawn much criticism from form critics for his suggestion that the woe oracle has its origin in the older curse formula. Westermann notes several points of contact between these two forms. First, the woes are found (at times) in series (Isa 5:8ff, 28:1 to 33:1; Hab 2). This corresponds well to the series of curses in Deuteronomy 27:15-26. Secondly, the woe is used in relation to a "social accusation" and the curses in Deut. 27 as well are exclusively concerned with the "common life of the community."⁴¹ More accurately, both are concerned with violations of God's Law as stipulated in the Mosaic Covenant. Thirdly, Westermann sees a similarity in style (or form) between woe-structure and the curse formula:

Cursed be he who slays his neighbor in secret. (Deut 27:24)

Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood. (Isa 5:18ff)⁴²

Fourthly, just as there is a close connection between the funeral lament and the announcement of judgment, so there is also a similar connection between the curse and the announcement of judgment.

Westermann asserts that "the most important complex that shows such connection is the Balaam story in Numbers, chapters 22 to 24."⁴³

Examination of Contexts. According to Westermann, although Balaam was a seer and as such does not belong to the early history of prophecy, an indirect relationship to the prophets certainly does exist; the office of seer was the forerunner of the office of prophet (I Sam 9:9).⁴⁴ Furthermore, Westermann asserts that the important aspect of the Balaam account is the basis which is given for the transition from the curse to the judgment-speech. This basis is that "Balaam is called to curse, but under the direction of Yahweh's powerful command he must bless."⁴⁵ Therefore, Westermann believes that the significant feature which connects this commission to curse to the woe oracle is the intervention of Yahweh in the history of Israel.

From a theological viewpoint it [the Balaam incident] is thus parallel to Genesis 12:1-3, where the blessing and curse are included and subordinated to the historical actions of God. This story proclaims that Yahweh alone is the lord of the blessing and the curse.⁴⁶

There seems to be a relationship between the Balaam oracles of Numbers 22-24 and the preceding woe oracle against Moab found in Numbers 21:29. The preceding woe oracle against Moab (based on the later prophetic pattern) would fit quite nicely with Numbers 24:17c just before the declaration of judgment against Moab. Note the following:

Woe unto thee, Moab! (Num 21:29)

A Sceptre shall . . . smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth. (Num 24:17d)

In the Balaam oracle there appears to be an early prototype of the prophetic commission to pronounce judgment. The whole point of this context seems to be the demonstration of who has sovereignty over the blessing and the curse. A basic structure of form may be outlined as follows:

Structure of Numbers 22

- | | | |
|--------|---|---|
| v. 6 | Come now . . . curse . . . | Human commission to curse |
| v. 12 | Thou shalt not go . . . | Divine prohibition, cancellation of human commission |
| v. 18 | I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or more. | Sovereign restriction: God's Word |
| v. 20b | And God came . . . If . . . (then) go | New commission (from God) |
| v. 20c | . . . the word which I shall say . . . do. | Message: God's Word |
| v. 38 | The word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak. | Reference will be made to divine sanctification of seer's organ of prophecy |

Structure of Numbers 23

- | | | |
|-------|---|--|
| v. 5 | . . . the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth . . . thus thou shalt speak | Reference to divine sanctification of seer's organ of prophecy |
| v. 7a | And he took up his parable . . . | Prophet's message |
| v. 7c | . . . Balak . . . saying, come, curse me Jacob | Reference to human commission |
| v. 8 | How shall I curse whom the Lord hath not cursed? | Overruled by divine commission |
| v. 11 | I took thee to curse . . . but thou hast blessed . . . | |
| v. 12 | Must I not take heed to speak that which the Lord hath put in my mouth? | Reference to the one controlling the prophetic organ of speech |
| v. 19 | God is not a man that He should lie | Contrast between character of the two commissioning agents |

- v. 20a Behold, I have received
commandment to bless
- v. 20b and I cannot reverse it Sovereign command is
irreversible
- v. 21 He hath not beheld iniquity in Spiritual condition determines
Jacob, neither perverseness in blessing or cursing
Israel.

Structure of Numbers 24

- v. 9 . . . cursed is he that curseth Case (accusation against)
thee
- v. 17c [Woe to thee, Moab cf. Num Would be normal position of
21:29] woe oracle
- v. 17d A Sceptre . . . shall smite the Declaration of judgment
corners of Moab

The real significance of the Balaam account, which Westermann hinted at earlier but fails to develop, is seen in the parallel relationships of this account's form to later prophetic forms of the woe oracle in a *Rib* context. Note the following parallels. First, there is a parallel to the prophetic commission -- "Now, therefore, please come" (Num 22:6). Secondly, there is the reason for the curse or condemnation -- "for (*ki*) they are too mighty for me" (Num 22:6). Thirdly, there is an interruption of the human commission with its replacement by the divine commission. Fourthly, there is also by divine intervention an actual prediction of disaster or announcement of judgment -- but it is against Moab, etc. rather than against Israel.⁴⁷ Fifth, the curse (*'arur*) is implied against these nations from "cursed is he (Balak and Moab) who curses you (Israel)" (Num 24:9d). The implied curse is significant in that it parallels the use of *hoy* in the later woe oracles, both in form and syntax.

Westermann appeals to other examples to demonstrate parallel connections between the curse form and woe form. In the following examples his emphasis is on the transition from the actual curse to the prediction of disaster (announcement of judgment). Note the

similarity of the sequence or order of the following standard curse form to that of the prediction of disaster.

Genesis 49:5-7

- v. 5 Simeon and Levi are brothers; Case: (accusation)
 Their swords are implements
 of violence.

- v. 6b Because in their anger they (reason)
 slew men,
 And in their self-will they
 lamed oxen

- v. 7a Cursed ('arur) be their anger, Curse
 for it is fierce;
 and their wrath,
 for it is cruel.

- v. 7b I will disperse them in Jacob, Declaration of judgment
 and scatter them in Israel.

A noteworthy example of a prophet using the word *hoy* in a curse form is seen in Zechariah 11:17. The significant feature here is that the apparent latest use of *hoy* by a prophet is employed in conjunction with the earliest of structures -- the curse formula (Gen 3:14, 17). Of all the prophetic uses of "woe," this is "the closest of all to the curse."⁴⁸

Zechariah 11:17

Woe (<i>hoy</i>) to	Woe oracle
the worthless shepherd	Identity of defendant
who leaves the flock!	Case (implied) and reason
(cursed are you)	(curse)(normally)
A sword will be on his arm and on his eye	Curse-form = Declaration of judgment

It is significant that this passage employs two devices to heighten the intensity of this woe oracle. First, the use of the curse form itself increases the bitterness of the oracle. Secondly, the woe oracle, which would normally appear in the same position as the implied curse, is moved forward for emphasis. It thus appears that the last usage of the woe oracle in the Old Testament is also the most intensive.

Note the similarity to the earliest form of the curse seen in Genesis 3:13-14.

Genesis 3:13-14

v. 13	The serpent deceived me	Case against
v. 14	Because you have done this	Reason
v. 14	Cursed (' <i>arur</i>) are you	Curse
v. 14	On your belly shall you go	Declaration of judgment

There are other Hebrew words which have the general meaning "to curse."⁴⁹ Since a study of each of these words is beyond the scope of this article, a further study of the most common verb (*'ar*) used in the curse formula will be noted.

This verb occurs sixty-three times in the Old Testament of which fifty-four occurrences are in the Qal stem. The most common form is the passive participle (*'arur*) and its related forms (forty times), which occur eighteen times in Deuteronomy 27:15ff and 28:16ff. This verb is also used as an antonym of *brk* (to bless) twelve times in Genesis 9:25-26, 12:3, 27:29, etc.⁵⁰

According to *TWOT*, the verb

means to bind (with a spell), hem in with obstacles, render powerless to resist. Thus the original curse in Genesis 3:14, 17, "cursed are you above all cattle" . . . means you are banned/anathematized from all the other animals.⁵¹

In the Balaam account, Balak hires Balaam

to say some word or recite some incantation that will immobilize [bind] the Israelites, giving the Moabite king the necessary opportunity to defeat his numerically superior foe.⁵²

Most of the "curse" sayings which employ *'r* fall into one of three general categories as follows: 1) the declaration of punishments (Gen 3:14, 17); 2) the utterance of threats (Jer 11:3, 17:5; Mal 1:14); and 3) the proclamation of laws (Deut 27:15-26, 28:16-19).⁵³

The following list of specifics from the curses of Deuteronomy 27:15-26 also appear in the woe oracles against Israel and its leaders. From Deuteronomy 27:15-26 there is

idolatry (v. 15), disrespect for parents (v. 16), deceiving one's neighbor (v. 17, 24) manipulating the disadvantaged (v. 18-19), sexual aberrations (v. 20-23), bribery (v. 5), and not observing God's law (v. 26) [and note that] all bring the condemnation of the curse.⁵⁴

Many of these practices are seen in the woe oracle passages. In these passages, the people and especially certain leaders, at times

are overconfident, even arrogant (Amos 5:8, 6:1-2; Isa 5:19, 21 et al.; Mic 2:3). Many lead lives of thoughtless luxury and revelry, unconcerned about the people's fate (Amos 6:4ff; Isa 5:11ff). They seize land and extend their holdings (Isa 5:8ff; Mic 2:1ff).⁵⁵

Commentary Regarding View. The woe oracle has many common points of contact with the curse formula. They are both 1) commonly found in series, 2) commonly associated with God's Law stipulated in the Mosaic Covenant, 3) seen to have a close affinity to the announcement of judgment (*rib*), 4) subordinate to the historical actions of God concerning His people and 5) similar in form and style.

It must, however, be pointed out that the woe oracle is not to be confused with the curse. It is noted that they have certain elements in common; namely, form and -- to a certain extent -- content. The main difference between the curse and the woe oracle is that the curse (like the Wisdom texts) describes activity which is hypothetical, potential, not yet having occurred. The woe oracle, on the other hand, condemns a person, group, or nation and gives a

description of the reprehensible activity which has already occurred. The fact that there is a distinct difference between the curse and the woe oracle is born out by the use of the curse (*'arur*) -- in Jeremiah 11:3 and 17:5. Jeremiah uses both forms -- "cursed" and "woe to" - - as distinct from each other within the main body of his prophetic writings.

Significance. The significance of the curse formula's relationship to the woe oracle is found in the similarity of form and style which the two share. It is interesting to note that the curse sayings "are a reflex of one violating his relationship to God."⁵⁶ This is significant because those condemned in the woe oracles are condemned for the same basic reason. Both the curse form and the woe oracle presuppose the future intervention of Yahweh against the offender.

Both wisdom and curse contexts generally deal with a potential state which brings about the required condemnation; whereas, the woe oracle deals with an already existing state of transgression.

Houai ("Woe to") in the Gospels and the New Testament

Range of Usage by Jesus

Houai, which is the most commonly used translation for *hoy* and *'oy* in the LXX (sixty-nine) times, is used in the four Gospel accounts a total of twenty-seven times. It should be pointed out that Jesus most probably spoke Hebrew predominantly and, therefore, would have used the word *hoy*. The fact that the range of usage of *houai* in the New Testament parallels the range of *hoy* as seen in the Old Testament seems to support this idea. *Houai* is used by Jesus as a warning and lamentation for mankind in general in Luke 17:1.⁵⁷ In Matthew 24:19 (cf. Mark 13:17; Luke 21:23) Jesus expresses pity and compassion over those who would be hindered in their attempts to flee the doomed city of Jerusalem. Jesus' woe over the fate of Judas (Matt 26:24, Mark 14:21, Luke 22:22) expresses pity and acute sorrow.⁵⁸

Luke 6:20-28 contains a series of four *makarisms* (blessings) balanced by a series of four *houai*-pronouncements (indirect "woe to").⁵⁹ Jesus pronounces these four woes to warn those who will not follow him. The repetition of *houai* seems to express Jesus' sadness over the end of those who follow their own ways.⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that the balancing of the series of blessings and woes seems to identify Luke 6:20-28 as a Wisdom context. The transition to the

"bless the ones cursing you" also seems to support this idea of a pedagogical context. Again, as seen earlier, the use of repetition seems to add intensity to the thrust of the message.

The skillful use of the series for the purpose of intensity is emphasized by Jesus in the series of seven denunciatory woes on Israel's spiritual leaders in Matthew 23:13ff. The use of the series indicates intense, bitter denunciation. The number seven exceeds that of all other uses in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.⁶⁷ Intensity of expression corresponds proportionally to the number of repetitions in a series. This context, therefore, indicates extreme intensity.

It is of interest to note that Jesus employs the woe oracle in a form more akin to the early form of the curses in Deuteronomy 27:15-26. Jesus' use of form is in contrast to the freer form used by both the exilic and post-exilic prophets, with the possible exception of Zechariah 11:17. The context of Matthew 23:13-38 includes an element of acute sorrow as Jesus laments over Jerusalem. This seems to parallel the use by both Amos and Jeremiah in which a woe oracle is situated near a lament passage (cf. Amos 5).

Usage in Jude and Revelation

Of further interest is the fact that *houai* is not used in judgment contexts in the New Testament outside the Gospels except in Jude and Revelation. Its occurrences in Revelation (twenty-six times) and Jude (one time) is equal to its frequency of use in the Gospels (twenty-seven times). It is also noteworthy that the woe oracle is used mainly in God's dealings with Israel. This is seen not only in the Gospels but also in Revelation where it does not appear until chapter eight where God prepares to renew His dealings with Israel. As in the Old Testament, increased frequency of the woe oracle indicates imminent and irreversible punishment.

Conclusion

Much benefit for the proper interpretation of Scripture in its context can be derived from a study of the "woe oracle." Many informative lessons and significances can be obtained from studying the various "origins" or forms relating to the woe oracle genre (wisdom sayings, funeral laments, and curse formula). The consideration of these relationships is essential for properly

interpreting passages in which this genre occurs. Additionally, a study of the use of this genre, which originates in the Old Testament, gives a greater appreciation for the intensity with which Jesus employed this form in the Gospels. Overall, the most significant feature noted is the influence which the form has on intensity, meaning, and nuance for each occurrence of *hoy* and *'oy*. Finally, as previously indicated, the benefit of this study ultimately lies in its application toward the proper understanding and interpretation of Scripture in its context.

Notes

¹ Note that the first person "Woe is me!" usage is a common cry of grief or despair and not a woe oracle.

² Gunther Wanke, "oy und hoy," *ZAW* (1966) 78:215

³ R Laird Harris, Gleason C Archer, Bruce Waltke, eds, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:2334

⁴ Due to the ambiguity between participial and nominal uses in three occurrences the figures may be twenty-three times with a participle and twelve times with a noun or adjective.

⁵ Wanke, "oy und hoy," 216

⁶ The "Formal Rib Structure" may be outlined as follows:

- I. Introduction
 - A. A call for a hearing; usually heaven and earth as witnesses
 - B. Or a call to witnesses; to give ear to the proceedings
- II. Questioning of the Witnesses and Statement of Accusation
- III. Introductory Statement of the Case Before the Court
 - A. By the Divine Prosecutor and Judge
 - B. Or by His earthly official
 - C. Regarding the case at issue
- IV. Reference to the Vanity of (Israel's) Cultic Efforts at Compensation
 - A. Or a recital of the benevolent acts of the suzerain (Wright)
- V. Declaration of Guilt = Indictment--Threat of Total Destruction = Sentence

⁷ John H Hayes, *Old Testament Form Criticism* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, reprint 1977) 166-167

⁸ *Ibid*, 166

⁹ *Ibid*, 166

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 166

¹¹ Gene M Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, reprint 1973) 66

¹² Hayes, *Old Testament Form Criticism*, 159, 162, 163

¹³ The "Prophecy of Disaster" may be outlined as follows:

- I Indication of Situation = The Case Against
 - A Introduction (by)
 - 1 Go! (commission) or Hear! (oracle)
 - 2 *ya'an 'eser*
 - 3 Indignant question
 - 4 Brief statement
 - B Woe Oracle [*hoy* or '*oy*] + Identity of Defendant (if present)
 - 1 Always introduces the accusation
 - C Reason or accusation
 - 1 States the existing conditions which bring about judgment
- II Prediction of Disaster = The Judicial Declaration
 - A Introduction (by means of)
 - 1 *laken* (frequently)
 - 2 The formula -- *koh 'mr yhwh*
 - a Usually introduces #II in early prophecies
 - b Usually introduces #I in late prophetic books
 - B Announcement of judgment
- III Concluding Characterization
 - A Introduction (by)
 - 1 *ki* (usually)
 - B Description (of)
 - 1 Sender of prophecy
 - 2 Or recipients

¹⁴ Wanke, "*oy* und *hoy*," 215

¹⁵ Gerstenberger, "Woe-Oracles of the Prophets," 259

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 260

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 261

¹⁹ R J Clifford, "The Use of HOY in the Prophets," *CBQ* (1966) 28:459

²⁰ Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 244

²¹ *Ibid*

²² *Ibid*

²³ Waldemar Jantzen, "ASRE in the Old Testament," *Harvard Theological Review* (1965) 58:218

²⁴ Waldemar Jantzen, "ASRE and HOY in the Old Testament," *Harvard Theological Review* (1969) 62:432-433

²⁵ Clifford, "The Use of HOY in the Prophets," 459

²⁶ Gerstenberger, "The Woe-Oracles of the Prophets," 263

²⁷ Clifford, "The Use of HOY in the Prophets," 459

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ G M Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs* (New York: Fleming H Revell, 1898)

- 30 Edwin W Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1910) 117
- 31 Ibid, 119
- 32 Fred H Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1953 142.
- 33 Ibid, 143
- 34 Williams, "The Alas-Oracles of the Eighth Century Prophets," 88
- 35 Ibid
- 36 Ibid, 459
- 37 Ibid, 460
- 38 Ibid
- 39 Ibid
- 40 Ibid
- 41 Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967) 193
- 42 Ibid
- 43 Ibid
- 44 Ibid, 194
- 45 Ibid, 195
- 46 Ibid
- 47 As was indicated earlier, the fact that the "woe oracle" of Numbers 21:29 would theoretically appear in Numbers 22:17c--the normal position of the woe oracle preceding the declaration of judgment--provides an interesting parallel in studying the usage of the woe oracle within a *Rib* context by the later prophets.
- 48 Clifford, "The Use of HOY in the Prophets," 463
- 49 Compare the verbal roots: 'rr, qll, 'l, qbb, nqb, and z'm.
- 50 Harris, *TWOT*, 1:75
- 51 Ibid
- 52 Ibid
- 53 Ibid
- 54 Ibid
- 55 Williams, "The Alas-Oracles of the Eighth Century Prophets," 87
- 56 Harris, *TWOT*, 1:168
- 57 Colin Brown, ed, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1976) 1052
- 58 Ibid, 1053
- 59 Jantzen, "ASRE in the Old Testament," 220
- 60 Brown, *NIDNTT*, 1053
- 61 Isaiah 5:8ff contains a series of six.