

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat
There we wept as we remembered Zion.
On the poplars we hung our lyres:
For there our captors requested words of song,
And our mockers (demanded) joy.
“Sing a song of Zion to us!”
How could we sing songs of YHWH
On enemy territory?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
Let my right hand wither.
Let my tongue cling to my palate
If I do not remember you,
If I do not exalt Jerusalem over my greatest joy.
Remember, YHWH, against the sons of Edom,
The day of Jerusalem.
(Remember) the ones who called,
“Strip her! Strip her! Down to her foundation!”
Daughter of Babel, (you) destroyer,
Happy is the one who pays you back.
Happy is the one who grabs your children
And smashes them against the rock.

Psalm 137 has disturbed and challenged interpreters and people of faith for centuries. This most ironical psalm sings of a time when psalms were not sung; its sweetly melancholic memory of the grief of exile turns abruptly to a graphic call for infanticide. God is absent except when enjoined by the writer to keep the accounts of perfidious Edom and Babylon. The author speaks a curse, but the curse is on himself; and the macarism form, which normally claims blessing for those who trust God and follow God's commands, is employed to bless those who smash the heads of children. Psalm 137 effectively twists familiar language forms—psalm, curse, and macarism—to yield a sharp redefinition of what it means to remember YHWH after the fall of Jerusalem.

Much of the analysis of Psalm 137 has been directed at the contrast between pacific opening and horrific conclusion in an attempt to understand how and why—or even if—they belong together. Faith communities have often dealt with their discomfort by reading only the “nice bits.” Scholars in general have not been so blatant as to simply disregard a portion of the text, but employ other strategies that achieve the same result: for instance, some read the last verses metaphorically or claim that the call for infanticide was not part of the original text. Alternatively, some scholars cope with the implications of this psalm by labeling it vindictive and inappropriate to the canon, thereby eliminating any need to struggle with the text. There are a number of commentators who make peace with the text as it stands by placing the bloody ending within an eye-for-an-eye justice system: Calvin saw the murder of infants as no more than what God has authorized,¹ while a recent article by William John Lyons argues that the psalm should be read with an eye to systems of male honor.² While these last two avoid the elimination of the text, or parts of it, from the acceptable canon, they still do not explain how the psalm can read as a consistent whole.

In this analysis, I will be using the methods and insights of cognitive linguistics to attempt a coherent reading of Psalm 137 that addresses 1) the complex mental spaces evoked by the psalm; 2) the centrality, definition, and function of remembrance; 3) the patron/client relationship between God and God's people, and the mutual responsibility that entailed; 4) the twisting of genre conventions; and (5) the system of moral accounting which would have made the call for infanticide reasonable in ancient eyes. While a cognitive reading may render the psalm's sentiments no more palatable for modern readers, I argue that it will make them more comprehensible.

COMPLEX MENTAL SPACES IN PSALM 137, PART 1: METONYMY

Metonymy is a cognitive compression whereby a word or phrase stands for an entire complex of thoughts, situations, and/or phrases. While many of the underlying metonymic meanings in Psalm 137 seems simple and obvious when brought to

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, volume 5; accessed on October 28, 2006 at URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom12.xxi.ii.html>.

² Lyons uses contemporary film and social scientific observations to argue that the reasoning and desires of the psalmist are coherent within a system that values male honor. His emphasis is on the honor of the psalmist vis-à-vis Babylon and Edom.

consciousness, unpacking and close observation are important in order to understand how these metonymies affect one's reading of this psalm.

When the psalmist speaks of remembering Zion, he is using a metonymic compression to refer not only to Zion but also to Jerusalem, the Jerusalem temple, and the psalmist's god YHWH.³ To remember Zion or Jerusalem is to remember—and honor—the temple and God. This metonymy allows one to exalt Jerusalem, and by association, YHWH, without ever using the divine name or addressing the deity directly.

This complex compression contains not just Zion, Jerusalem, the Temple, and YHWH; it also contains temporal versions of these concepts. "Jerusalem" is not just the glorious Jerusalem of the past; it is also Jerusalem defeated, its children murdered, and the restored Jerusalem of the future. The Temple is the temple full of chanting and incense and sacrifice, as well as the Temple destroyed and rebuilt. Zion is productive, fertile Zion and concurrently Zion razed; YHWH is Most High God as well as the One who was silent and absent while His people were defeated.

Two other important metonymies in the psalm are the references to the psalmist's right hand and his tongue. The immediate allusion, of course, is to one's ability to play music and sing—impossible tasks without a right hand and a tongue. However, the right hand stands for much more than the ability to strum a lyre: it implies the ability to take action. Hebrew scripture associates the right hand with power and capacity. The tongue, similarly, represents more than the ability to sing. To lose the use of one's tongue is to be rendered incapable of communication, impotent to influence others, powerless to praise God or curse one's enemy. Loss of these functions destroys one's status and ability to participate meaningfully in one's own life or the life of the community.

COMPLEX MENTAL SPACES IN PSALM 137, PART 2: TIME AND PLACE

As Gerald Edelman observed in *The Remembered Present*, our present is constituted not only by the situations and states that we are currently experiencing, but also by remembered events and states.⁴ This remembered past gives meaning to our present: by providing a framework of comparison, we are able to see the present within the context of a broader story. The bigger picture enables us to make judgments about what we are currently experiencing and thus know how we "feel" about it.

Psalm 137 contains three spaces that can be identified temporally—verses 1-4 focus on the past, verses 5-7 are spoken from the psalmist's present, and verses 8 and 9 envision a desired future. Within each of these, however, there is a reference to the mental space that has been labeled "Zion" or "Jerusalem." This explicit recollection of "Zion" in every other temporal space—whether in Babylon or the unidentified present from which the

³ Throughout this paper when reference is made to this compression, it will be designated as "Zion" or "Jerusalem."

⁴ Gerald Edelman, *The Remembered Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). See particularly Chapter 5, Perceptual Experiences and Consciousness.

psalmist speaks—indicates that the psalmist believes that the memory of Zion’s glory as well as its defilement is necessary to the future of the people of Israel.

In order to examine more closely how time and place are used in this psalm, it is helpful to trace the movement from first to last verse in order.

The psalm opens with the psalmist referencing the recent past, in Babylon. The vividly drawn image corresponds to an actual physical space: the shores of the Babylon River, with its multiple meandering waterways and tree-lined banks and islands. This physical setting is named as foreign land—enemy territory—in verse four; and is constantly referred to as “there,” a spatial designation which only has meaning in reference to a “here” space.⁵

While remembering the past in Babylon, however, the psalmist also calls to mind what he thought about while sitting on the banks of the river: his beloved Zion. This riverside remembrance, with its contrast between the prosperous and independent Jerusalem of the past and the defeated and defiled wreck last seen, engenders weeping among the survivors.

The psalmist’s spatial references to the land of Babylon seem to stop short of participation in the physical space. The psalmist and his compatriots sit BY the rivers of Babylon, and they are ON, rather than IN, foreign land. Their distance is maintained. In contradistinction, Zion is a space into which the refugees enter fully. While *בְּזִכְרוֹנָהּ* is most often translated, “. . .when we remembered Zion,” the literal meaning of the *beth* is IN. The statement, “In (the time that) we remembered Zion,” evokes a metaphoric container. The psalmist seems to imply that there is a mental state more real and important than the physical space of Babylon. He may have been sitting BY the river or ON alien soil, but mentally he was in Jerusalem. This is the mental space where the psalmist believes the refugees belong.

The behavior in verses 1 and 2—weeping and discarding musical instruments—occurs as in response to the request of verse 3. In their mocking request, the Babylonians employ the metonymy “Zion” mentioned above; the command to sing YHWH’s songs implies that they have both physical and spiritual control of their captives. A god whose songs can be requested by his enemies is a god with no power. The demand is judged to be so inappropriate that the Jerusalemites retire their lyres to the trees.

Verse four takes a step back from the mental space of remembering and instead provides commentary on the behavior of the captives. This verse is in the form of a question: how could we sing songs of YHWH on foreign land? This is, of course, a counterfactual, and the question implies that one should not or may not sing about Jerusalem’s god in this enemy land. At one level, this is a ridiculous assertion: these lines occur in the course of a psalm, which is by definition sung about one’s God! Even in the next lines, the psalmist speaks of how he will remember Jerusalem, i.e., sing.

⁵ “Here” is presumably the psalmist’s present, but the mental space may also include post-exilic Jerusalem.

It is clear that the psalmist is not advocating silence forever. It appears the psalmist is attempting to parse the argument; he wants to simultaneously defend the refusal of the refugees and to underscore the horror of being in a foreign place. He is also, it seems, making an excuse for behavior that could be viewed as inappropriate—declining the invitation to sing of one’s god. For more on this, see the sections on patron/client relations and curse reversal.

Verses five and six constitute the temporal center of the psalm. Spoken in the present tense, in the psalmist’s current time at some unstated location, he again remembers “Zion”.⁶ When he looks from the present center to the recent past (the beginning of the psalm) and the expected future (the end of the psalm), he expects that the behavior of the survivors is going to be motivated by remembrance. For the remnant of Judah, every present moment must include and incorporate the past.

In these verses, the psalmist is speaking directly to Jerusalem, using counterfactual speech to outline the punishment he is willing to undergo if he forgets. The psalmist is cursing himself, using performative speech that is, like the macarisms at the end, not bound in a particular time frame.

The language of exaltation found here also serves to emphasize these verses as the metaphorical high point of the psalm from which the psalmist can look backward and forward at the same time. The reference to height (“...if I do not exalt you...”) also enforces the sense that the psalmist’s greatest joy (and hence the joy of anyone hearing this song) must be subordinate to the needs of Jerusalem.

In verse seven, the psalmist returns to the past when he directs YHWH’s attention to the specific role of the Edomites in the fall of Jerusalem.⁷ This time he is instructing God rather than the survivors. This is the only direct statement to Israel’s god in the entire poem, and it is not a declaration of praise but rather a request for YHWH to attend to his work.

The final verses return again to the survivors: but now the weeping, passive deportees of the first verse inhabit a future where they are active warriors exacting revenge for their losses. Their rehabilitation—and by extension, YHWH’s rehabilitation—is complete.

SUMMARY

As mentioned above, each of the mental spaces of past Babylon exile, the psalmist’s present, and future retribution contain within themselves the complex memory of the past glory and recent destruction of Jerusalem. For the psalmist, no place exists in time or space where the defilement of the temple and destruction of the city can be forgotten.

⁶ Numerous commentators argue that the psalmist is one of the returning exiles who is now back in Jerusalem. This is possible, but then when he says, “If I forget you, Jerusalem...” it is not the present Jerusalem of which he speaks, but the past, undefeated, glorious Jerusalem.

⁷The language of verse 7 indicates that YHWH should be taking notes in his moral account book—see below.

The past leaks into and permeates everything. For the psalmist, this infringement of the past on one's present is not only appropriate, it is desirable, because this remembrance motivates the behavior of the survivors.

PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS: Not Singing and Singing

The Bible portrays the relationship between the people of Judah and YHWH as that of a patron and client, with YHWH as the patron and the people, collectively, as client. This kind of relationship uses the framework of moral accounting in order to determine appropriate behavior. For instance, as clients, the people owe God loyalty, worship, and service. They are to speak YHWH's name publicly in a positive way, sing the songs of Zion in YHWH's temple, and behave according to the standards YHWH has set.

The client-patron relationship, while not symmetrical, is deeply reciprocal. A patron does not just receive loyalty, fidelity and praise; the patron is also obliged to provide protection for the client and the client's family, access to opportunities, influence, and material goods, to name just a few things.⁸ YHWH's obligation is to give the people land and food, children, peace, and prosperity.

A closer look at these mutual duties can be helpful. Songs sung to YHWH in the temple not only extol the goodness of God but emphasize God's commitment, as a patron, to defend and safeguard the clients who publicly praise him. While individual psalms sometimes charge YHWH with forgetting his people and encourage God to wake up or pay attention, there is an overall sense throughout the psalter that God is ultimately steadfast and faithful.

The Babylonian demand for joyful song is ironic because, in the eyes of the conquerors, Judah's patron god did not fulfill his obligation and thus deserves no praise. The request is a challenge to YHWH's honor which client Judea needs to counter in order that they do not accrue moral debt.

The mocking request for song involves two incompatible world views: the first is reflected by, for instance, Psalms 47 and 48, where YHWH is king over all nations, and his right hand is filled with victory. The second is the world where Jerusalem has been defeated, YHWH's temple destroyed, and his clients have been forcibly uprooted to serve someone else. Since this second mental space is the reality in which the psalmist finds himself, the shameful implications of the Babylonian demand are obvious. To sing the triumphant joyful songs of the Jerusalem temple is to sing words that are not true given the objective reality of the exile. For the exiles, this means that either their patron god has abandoned them or that YHWH was not powerful enough to save them.⁹

⁸ Jerome H. Neyrey does a wonderful job summarizing the work of social-science criticism and applying the findings of these scholars—especially Bruce Malina—on patron-client relations to analyze prayer in the New Testament. See "Prayer, in Other Words: New Testament Prayers in Social-Science Perspective," Jerome Neyrey. Accessed on June 16th, 2006, at URL <http://www.nd.edu/%7Ejneyrey1/Prayer.htm>.

⁹ Implying that they either neglected some part of their duties and were justly punished, or that YHWH is capricious. It's clear to see which of these the biblical authors chose.

But to refuse to sing is to deny YHWH praise. The Zion survivors are stuck. There is no response that the exiles can make, given the way that the Babylonians have framed their request, that will preserve their own and YHWH's honor.

The psalmist chooses to shift the debate—introduce a new frame—when he states the ground upon which he refuses to sing YHWH's songs. The refusal is not due to the Jerusalem survivors' desire to deny their patron, or their belief that God has been defeated or deserted them. Instead, the psalmist claims that songs of YHWH can only be sung in Jerusalem/Zion. There is an appropriate physical place for singing to one's patron god, and it is not on enemy soil. To sing in the wrong place is tantamount to forgetting YHWH altogether, according to the psalmist's reasoning.

But this is not the last word that the psalmist has about the need to sing. Psalm 137 exists because the psalmist decided that he HAD to sing. While the conundrum posed by the captor's demands has been sidestepped through the employment of a new mental frame, there is still the issue of one's duty to the patron god.

As a good client, the psalmist is obliged to find a way to speak approvingly of his patron in public. But present circumstances—whether the psalmist is still in Babylon or returned to shattered Jerusalem—make it clear that some new kind of psalm is needed. “How can we sing songs of YHWH on enemy territory?” the psalmist asks. The answer seems to be, “Maybe we cannot. But we can sing songs of Jerusalem.” The psalmist both evokes and sidesteps the metonymy between Jerusalem and Jerusalem's god.

This new psalm focuses on the past; but not the past most frequently cited in the psalmic recitation of God's saving deeds. No, the past that is called to mind is the combined past, the glory of Jerusalem as well as her appalling destruction. YHWH has performed no saving deeds on this occasion, and vindication is still a dream of the future. The job of this song and of the singer is to keep alive, simultaneously, Jerusalem's former splendor AND defilement, so that YHWH and YHWH's people will never again experience impotence and mockery in a foreign land.

The psalmist metaphorically reverses the fall of Jerusalem when he sings of her exultation. That which has been brought low, torn down to her foundation, is, in the psalmist's mind, raised higher than the greatest of joys. Jerusalem's destruction cannot be final—YHWH cannot be dishonored—if Jerusalem's glory still resides in the singer's memory and in the public song.

In order to make the point that the refusal to sing is not due to any disruption in the patron-client relationship, the psalmist lays out exactly what the punishment will be if he tries to erase from his memory either the glory or the defeat of Jerusalem—and parenthetically, the relationship with his patron god. The obligation to give public homage to God and to speak of the unmentionable suffering which the community experienced is so great that if it is not fulfilled, the singer's ability to play, to act, and to

speak will be taken from him. If he chooses silence because remembrance is too painful, he will be permanently silenced and perpetually powerless.

PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS: Keeping Score

While the psalmist is recalling his duty to remember and to exalt Jerusalem, he also takes the opportunity to remind YHWH of his own duties. This is a surprisingly restricted reminder, as if the psalmist were not certain what his patron god can or will do for the client people.

As mentioned above, the duties between client and patron are deeply reciprocal. Once the psalmist satisfies his duty—even though it is painful—and publicly recounts his obligation to YHWH, he calls on YHWH to fulfill his moral obligations by remembering. Surprisingly, there is no expectation of anything more; no call for restoration, for a sign, for action on God's part. There is not even a complaint about YHWH's abandonment or failure to protect his people. The psalmist does not mention what YHWH did or did not do, but merely reminds the deity of the duty to keep score.

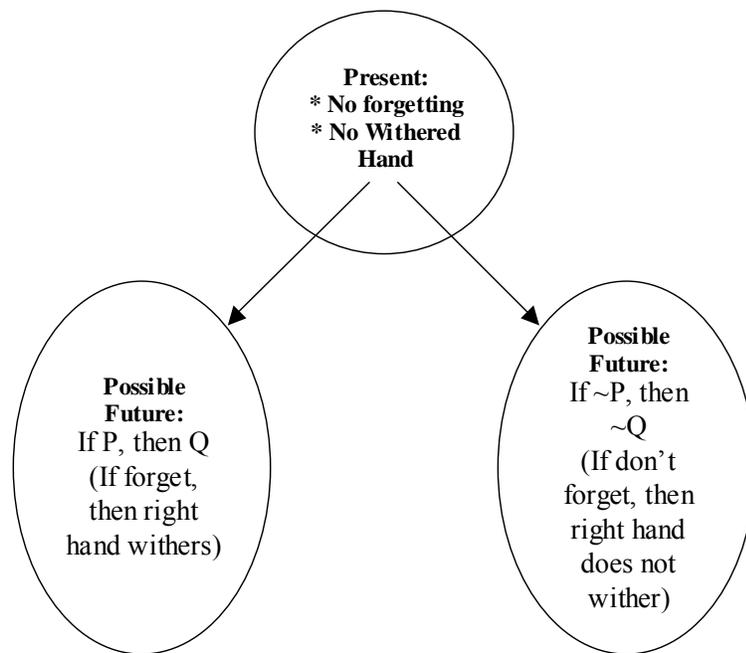
God's obligation to recall, according to the psalmist, is subtly different from that of the exiles. YHWH is directed to remember **against** (לְ) the Edomites. With this preposition, the world of moral accounting is referenced more specifically, and the patron god is subtly instructed in his duties. The psalmist has balanced the account from his end. Now, in order for YHWH to reciprocate, he must review his account with some third parties: specifically, the Edomites and Babylon.

To remember against someone is to hold them accountable, to note that they have a negative account that must be paid. In the world of moral accounting which underlies much of the biblical text, YHWH is more than the patron. YHWH also keeps track of and holds the accounts, and is responsible for making sure that those who have accrued credits are rewarded and those with debits are punished. In case one thinks that this commentator is reading too much into the text, one need only read on to the next verse. Line two of verse eight underscores the pervasiveness of moral accounting in this psalm, even outside of the patron-client framework. Literally “happy is the one who makes you complete,” the common sense of the text אֲשֶׁרֵי שִׁשְׁלָם לְךָ is, “happy are they who pay you back.” To be complete is to have all accounts in balance, whether they are balanced for good or for ill—hence the derived meaning of recompense. To be “paid back” in this context is not literal: what the psalmist suggests involves no exchange of currency or goods. The payment and the debt are both metaphoric, results of blends in the framework of moral accounting.

TURNING A GENRE INSIDE OUT: Self-Cursing

A curse is a speech act that predicts suffering or punishment for another. This punishment may come as the result of a past action—for instance, Noah’s curse of his son Canaan in Genesis 9. Alternatively, misery may be the result of a future action—Deuteronomy 28:15-68 is a lengthy list of horrors that will befall the people of Israel if they do not diligently observe God’s commandments and decrees. But whether the action temporally precedes or postdates the curse, a curse is performative speech. The speech act of a curse establishes a putative cause and effect relationship between a specific behavior and subsequent suffering. The curse and the behavior are understood to interact in order to bring about a penalty. And once one is cursed, one cannot be un-cursed. Whether or not the dire prediction comes to pass, one will always live “under the curse,” with expectation that reckoning may yet arrive.

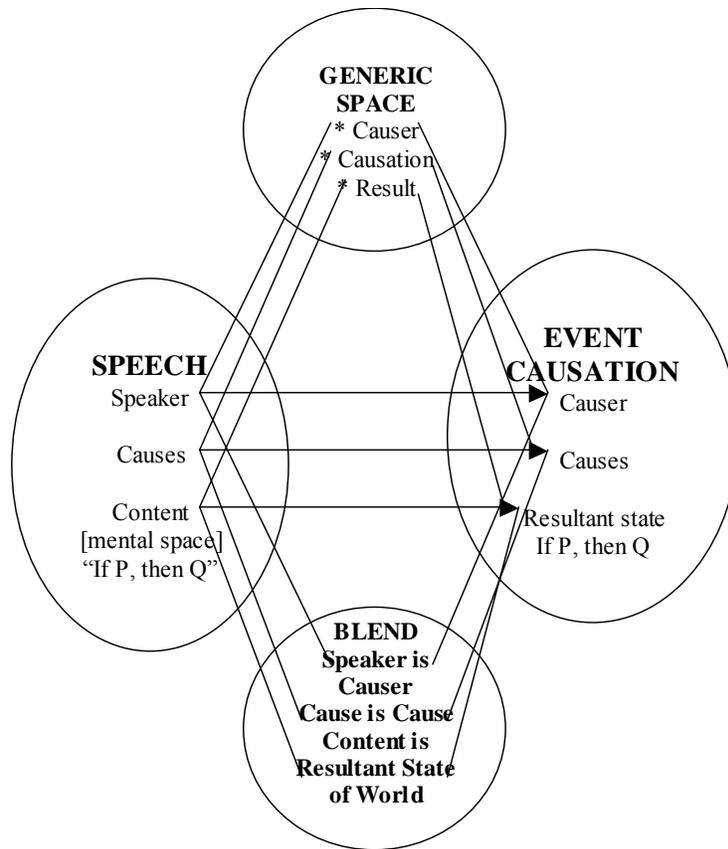
How do curses work at the level of cognitive blend? We can identify three levels of cognitive blends. At the first level, the speech utterance involves a comparison between the present and at least two possible futures.



SPEECH ACT “If P, Q”

This blend then becomes part of a large blend, where the concept of event causation comes into play; this is performative speech. Performative speech is a form of cognitive

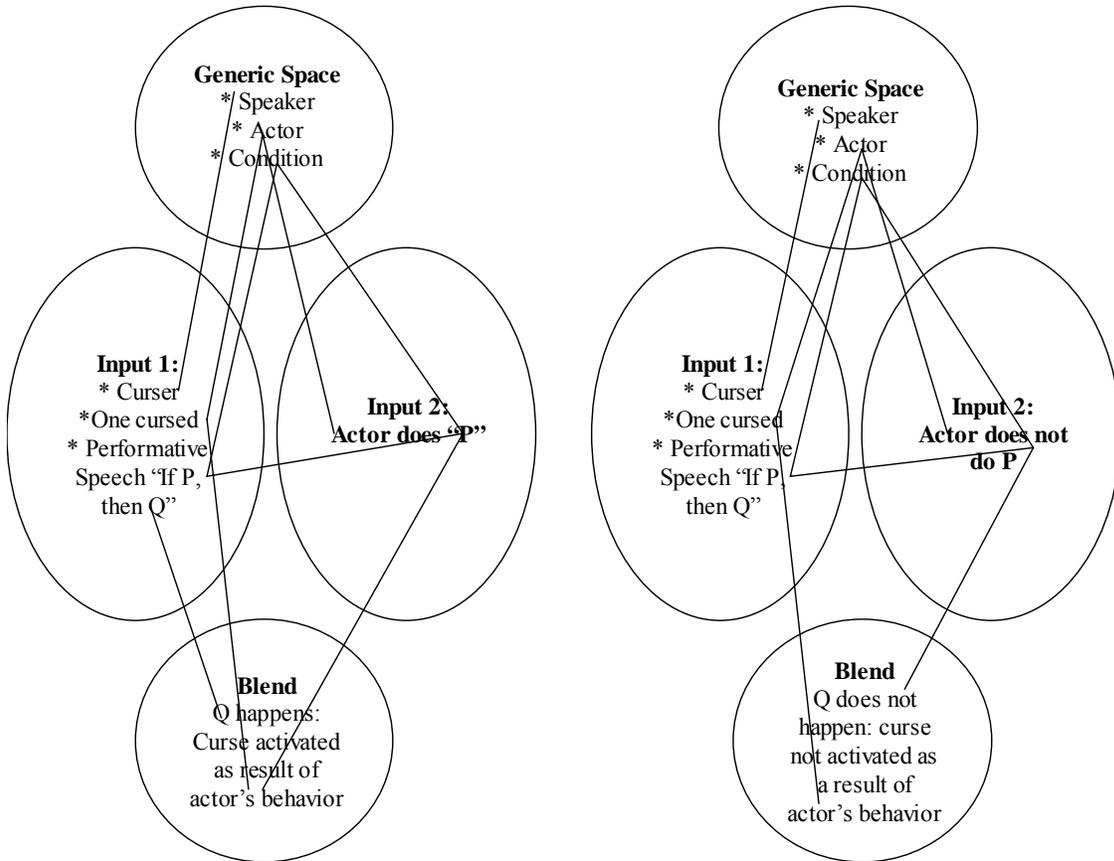
blend that causes a particular mental construal of the world; it shapes belief.¹⁰ The one who utters the performative speech, especially in the matter of a curse, is attempting to shape the behavior of another.



PERFORMATIVITY BLEND

Finally, a curse has mental spaces containing the one who curses—the speaker; the one who is cursed—the actor; and the speech act—performative speech—of the curse which implies alternative behaviors that the actor may take and the unpleasant outcome that will result from one of those behaviors. Whether the behaviors in question precede or postdate the performative speech, the blend always implies that the curse, combined with the behavior, is causal for the outcome. The intention of the curser is to prevent the actor from performing some behavior for fear of the outcome.

¹⁰ When a mother gives a child a chocolate chip cookie and says, “That’s your last one,” that does become the last cookie regardless of how many are left in the jar.



DETERRENT THREAT: COUNTERFACTUAL

Every curse is a counterfactual. Fauconnier and Turner define counterfactuality as forced incompatibility between spaces. They note that, "...when one is thinking about reality, counterfactuality is often a vital relation between spaces that involve some of the same people and the same events."¹¹ In a curse, the one who is cursed has a choice about their behavior and hence about what the future will bring. They do not, however, have a choice about being cursed in the first place. That is outside of their control.

Psalm 137 twists this last cognitive blend. For both of the curses in the psalm—"If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand wither" and "Let my tongue cling to my palate if I do not remember you"—the curser and the one cursed are the same person. While the curse is still seen as causal for the outcome, the action is now under the control of the one who made the curse. The one cursing is, in essence, attempting to control his own future behavior.¹²

A self-curse is not a vow. When one says, "May the Lord do thus and so to me if I should ever leave you," one is including an outside actor in the mental space. This

¹¹ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 230.

¹² Whether curse, self-curse, or vow, these examples of performative speech are excellent illustrations of the application of Moral Accounting.

outside actor—in this case, YHWH—neither makes nor breaks the vow; instead, the outside actor is responsible for enforcing the punishment. Speaking a self-curse leaves God out of the equation. In that same vein, it is worth noting that both of the curses in this psalm can be prevented by remembering “Jerusalem” and placing that memory above every other pleasure. While Jerusalem is metonymic for YHWH, it is not a direct reference. The psalmist approaches his god only obliquely.

TURNING A GENRE INSIDE OUT: Blessing and Revenge

Just as a curse is performative speech that predicts suffering or punishment for another, a blessing in its most common form is performative speech that predicts good. In the Hebrew Bible, this good is usually the result of one’s appropriate behavior with respect to YHWH, though at times it is merely the result of having been chosen by God. In the same way that speech shapes one’s mental image of the world and makes one’s behavior causal for an ill effect when one is cursed, so speech also shapes one’s mental images of the world in a blessing. Once one has been declared “blessed” for one’s attitude or the performance of a certain act, then subsequent positive experiences are seen as the effect of one’s attitude or performance rather than random luck. Like a curse, performative speech of a blessing interacts with one’s behavior to establish a presumed cause for subsequent occurrences.

The mental space for a blessing is, like a curse, a counterfactual mental space. In order to understand blessing, one must also understand what could happen if one were not blessed. When one analyzes the cognitive blend, further similarities are revealed: there is the one who blesses, the one blessed, the speech act of blessing, the action that the one who is blessed may or may not take, and the (presumably pleasant) outcome.

Most biblical instances of blessing are manifested through fruitfulness of one’s loins, wife, cattle, and/or land. Psalm 1 blesses with fruitfulness and prosperity those who refuse to walk in wicked ways; Psalm 112 tells us that the blessing to those who fear the LORD will be many descendants and riches; Psalm 127 sees sons as the blessing; Psalm 128 states that the man who fears YHWH will be blessed with a fertile wife and untroubled times; Psalm 144 sings of those whose god is the LORD and their blessings of healthy and beautiful children, crops, and cattle.

There are two blessings in Psalm 137, just as there are two curses. Blessings result in the same way that curses are averted, i.e., when the psalmist and his compatriots remember “Jerusalem.”

The cognitive blends are likewise similar. At the first level is the speech act with its vision of two counterfactual futures (where one is blessed or not blessed, depending on one’s behavior). That speech act is combined with causality to yield the blend of performative speech, speech which shapes one’s belief about the world; and then the blend of blessing, a statement—persuasive rather than deterrent—uttered by one person to shape the behavior of another.

The twist, of course, is that remembrance is defined as revenge; blessing is obtained not by loving or honoring YHWH but by destroying infants and toddlers.¹³ Happiness or blessing is not *having* sons and daughters; it is rather destroying the sons and daughters of others. Babylon and Edom—literally, the sons of Edom and daughter Babylon—have destroyed Israel’s blessing, i.e., its children. Whether the future generation was slaughtered in Jerusalem or resides in Babylon at risk of cultural annihilation, the loss must be accounted for. So the psalmist claims blessing for Israel when the enemy’s blessing, its children, are beaten to death on the rocky foundation of the city. In order to equalize the account, the enemy also must lose its future.

REFLECTIONS: On YHWH’s Role

The future envisioned by the psalmist is not dependent on YHWH’s intervention. There is no plea, as in Psalm 80, for the patron god to restore the community. This psalm echoes the bleakness of Psalm 88 but lacks even its commitment to prayer and expectation of divine recourse. God’s only task, it appears, is to keep the accounts; YHWH is not active in restoration of the community and is not asked to perform any salvific acts, does not enforce curses or reward blessings. The psalmist seems to argue that the exiles will need to take their future into their own hands.

REFLECTIONS: Psalm 137 in Worship

In the personal lives of parishioners and ministers, as well as in the corporate life of the church, there is often considerable reluctance to remember the painful past. From childhood abuse to sexual misconduct in the parish, we are adept at forgetting and discounting the suffering experienced by ourselves and by the community to which we belong. One of the values of this psalm is that the psalmist does not let his compatriots, himself, or those who come after him, forget. We are instructed that we must remember that which we long to repress: if we do not remember the past, we are doomed to repeat it. Remembrance makes possible action which may prevent future suffering.

While the psalmist’s call for infanticide is repellent to me, it is an honest expression of his anger, grief, hatred, and loss. But while acknowledging pain is not dangerous, going no further than that acknowledgement IS dangerous.

Retribution against innocents fulfills a measure-for-measure justice that may have been appropriate in the psalmist’s day and age. It is, however, not the standard used in this culture. But the repetition of this psalm in worship and its place in the sacred book of Judaism and Christianity involves everyone who ever hears it in the performative act.¹⁴ Because blessings and curses are written without tense—they function in the eternal present—each person hearing or reading this is impacted by the twisted curses and blessings of this text. There is no statute of limitations on the payback prescribed.

¹³ This is a stunning example of Moral Accounting where behavior must be paid back in kind in order to equalize accounts.

¹⁴ My thanks to my colleague Bonnie Howe for pointing out the ongoing force of this speech.

What is considered appropriate in this culture is full knowledge of one's own pain and one's own angry desires, and a willingness to find a way to resolve them that is both just and merciful. We must remember that YHWH is silent in this psalm. The call for retribution does not come from the mouth of God, but from a grieving psalmist. We can acknowledge his grief and anger without agreeing with his solution.