

Toward a Theology of Lament

The Loss of Lament: What is the Truth?

Calling the Community of Faith to Lament: Confessing the Truth

Seeking, Finding, and Sharing God through the Laments

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The Nature of Lament Literature

We must differentiate between “lamentation” as dirge and distress over present circumstances. The former is a “bemoaning of a tragedy which cannot be reversed”¹ Claus Westermann distinguishes between the “lament of affliction” and the “lament of the dead”—the former looking forward, the latter looking backward.² The biblical lament or complaint “is an appeal to God’s compassion to intervene and change a desperate situation.”³ It does not quite ring true that “the laments are really expressions of praise, offered in a minor key in the confidence that Yhwh is faithful and in anticipation of a new lease on life.”⁴ While it is true that many of the so-called “laments” of the Psalter do find their resolution in praise and there is in fact a robust confidence in Yahweh / Elohim which engenders this kind of complaint;⁵ nevertheless, praise cannot be equated with complaint. The complaint must be allowed to stand as testimony that “something is not as it should be.”

The genre and generic structure of the lament / complaint was adapted from the ambient ANE world which Israel inherited and inhabited. She, of course, gave this genre her own particular stamp which infused it with a theological and anthropological outlook otherwise unknown.⁶ The following might be considered an ideal typology⁷ for the form of the biblical lament:⁸

¹See Erhard Gerstenberger, “Jeremiah’s Complaint,” *JBL* 82 (1963): 50n.

²*Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 261.

³Roland E. Murphy, *The Psalms, Job, Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 41.

⁴Bernhard W. Anderson, and Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for us Today*, 3rd. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 60.

⁵This must be investigated.

⁶See Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried unto the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

⁷By “ideal typology” we refer to a template which contains all component which are attested in the genre, while at the same time conceding that not every example contains each of the components. Nevertheless, the “ideal” defines the boundaries of all possible components attested in the texts of the genre.

⁸Laments which are imprecatorial or penitential are sub-categories of the “standard” lament / complaint form. By their nature, each requires the identifying components, respectively, of expressions of imprecation (see this special emphasis in Pss 69 and 109) or penitence (where the “distress” is experienced as guilt or shame).

Ideal Typology of Biblical Lament / Complaint

- (1) ADDRESS (PRAISE) TO GOD / CRY OF DISTRESS / REMEMBERING GOD'S PAST DEEDS
- (2) COMPLAINT / LAMENT / PROTESTATION OF INNOCENCE
- (3) CONFESSION OF TRUST / PRAYER OF CONFIDENCE
- (4) PETITION FOR HELP (WITH GROUND FOR APPEAL OR AMPLIFICATION OF DISTRESS)
- (5) WORDS OF ASSURANCE / ORACLE OF SALVATION⁹
- (6) VOW OF PRAISE / THANKSGIVING / TESTIMONY¹⁰

The prevalence of the lament tradition in Israel's life and literature (Psalms, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Job, and assorted narrative contexts from the Torah and Former Prophets) reflects a robust confidence in and expectation from her God even as she complained bitterly about the present state of affairs. This earth to heaven conversation attests to (1) the perceived relational nature of Israel's God; (2) the nobleness of the human situation, (3) things are not "as they should be"; yet, (4) the idealized vision of *šālôm* as a divinely appointed destiny toward which not only Israel but also the entire habitation and its inhabitants should be moving must be allowed to unfold unabated. Indeed, Westermann has shown that the psalms of lament express a "narrative movement" from complaint to confidence / praise.¹¹

This lament tradition in Israel bears witness to her insistence to name some events and circumstances as "wrong" / "darkness" before Yahweh with full expectation that her / their / his / her cause would be vindicated "for the sake of his name."¹² Those psalms which do dare to name the "something wrong" Brueggemann labels "psalms of disorientation."¹³

Sometimes, we wrongly speak apologetically about the "earthiness" or "this-worldliness" of the Old Testament literature. The world is a habitation with God's fingerprints upon it. Humanity is set as vice-regents over it (in God's name). There is a divine agenda to be carried

⁹For the latter, see what is generally regarded as a "salvation oracle" at Ps 12:5[6].

¹⁰This template represents in all its essential features that of Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for us Today* (Louisville: W/JKP, 2000), 61-62. See also Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim & Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 265.

¹¹*Praise and Lament*, 33, 75 and *passim*.

¹²See the theology of individual and communal prayer and lament directed toward the Solomonic temple in the face of exigencies (1 Kgs 8:33-40).

¹³See Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms & the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 3-32; and idem. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51-121.

out on the earth which is wide, expansive, profound, and varied. Thus, should not the person of God and the community of God speak out against acts of power which are anti-creational and as such stand in the way of *šālôm* (cf. Isa. 12 and 65 and Matt 25).

Classified Psalms of Lament

Book I: Psalms 1-41

Psalms “of David” = 3-9; 11-32; 34-41¹⁴

* = contains imprecations

† = penitential

Individual

Community

3-5

12*

6-7†

9-10 (acrostic)

13

14 = 53

17

22¹⁵

25 (acrostic)

26

27:7-14

28

31¹⁶

35*

36

38†

39

40:12-17 = 70

41

¹⁴There are 13 psalms “of David” whose superscriptions contain an allusion to some episode in the life of David: Pss 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, and 142.

¹⁵Ps 22:1 is quoted by Jesus from the cross, according to Matt 27:46 and Mk 15:34.

¹⁶Ps 31:5 is quoted by Jesus from the cross, according to Luke 23:46.

Book II: Psalms 42-72¹⁷

Psalms of the sons of Korah = 42-49

Psalms of Asaph = 50

Psalms “of David” = 51-59; 61-65; 68-70

* = contains imprecations

† = penitential

Individual

Community

42-43

44

51[†]

58*

52

60

53 = 14

54-57

59*

61

63

64

69*

70 = 40:13-17

71

¹⁷Overwhelmingly, Pss 42-83 utilize 'ēlōhîm (God) for Israel's deity rather than the tetragrammaton (יהוה, *Yahweh*) which predominates in Pss 1-41 and 84-150.

Book III: Psalms 73-89

Psalms of the sons of Korah = 84-85; 87-88

Psalms of Asaph = 73-83

Psalms “of David” = 86

<u>Individual</u>	<u>Community</u>
77 ¹⁸	74
86	79
88	80
	82 ¹⁹
	83*
	85
	89:38-51

* = contains imprecations

† = penitential

Book IV: Psalms 90-106

Psalms of Yahweh’s Kingship = 93-100

Psalms “of David” = 101, 103

<u>Individual</u>	<u>Community</u>
102 [†]	90
	94

¹⁸It is clear in Ps 77 that the first person persona of the psalm expresses the corporate voice of Israel.

¹⁹This psalm is an anomaly in that the psalmist calls upon God to do what no god of the (pagan) assembly can do to set matters right.

Book V: Psalms 107-150

Hallelujah Psalms = 111-118; 146-150

The Great Hallel = 120-136

Psalms of Ascent = 120-134

Psalms “of David” = 109-110; 122; 124;131;133;138-145

<u>Individual</u>	<u>Community</u>
109*	108
120	123
130†	126
139†	129 ²⁰
140*	137*
141-142	
143†	

†Penitential Psalms

*Imprecatory Psalms

	Individual	Community
6 (individual lament)	35	12
32 (song of thanksgiving)	59	58
38 (individual lament)	69	83
51 (individual lament)	109	137
102 (individual lament)	139	
130 (individual lament)	140	
139 (individual lament)		
143 (individual lament)		

²⁰Note that this psalm gives voice to the community of Israel in the first person.

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