

Lament, the Language for Our Times¹

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ABSTRACT

Lament has many faces. The kind of lament addressed in this paper is indeed a form of mourning but not about death, not for a purpose, but an existential wail as primal as a child's need to cry. Through the ages it was a way of bearing the unbearable, a supremely human need. In Israel it was integral to the people's relationship with God. The paper discusses particular cases of lament in the Hebrew Bible as well as expressions of lament during painful moments in our world history. Lamenting is healing and the need for healing is paramount the world over, therefore the loss of lament in Western culture is lamentable.

A INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, at the University of South Africa, I heard a lecture by Denise Ackermann on lament. Ackermann was a Christian woman activist during the turbulent times of the eighties in this country and in her lecture she mentioned the political aspect of lamenting. This attracted my attention, for at the time my knowledge of lament went as far as the Psalms of Lament and the book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible and in my mind lamenting conjured up images of breast-beating and wailing (mostly) women covered in dust and torn clothes. The startling insights from that lecture made an impression on me and I increasingly became aware of public expressions of sorrow in whichever form. This paper is the result of what I learnt over time about a most poignant subject.

After some general remarks on the nature of lament, I shall discuss particular cases of lamenting in the Hebrew Bible and go on to explore expressions of lament relating to tragic events in modern world history articulated through music or various protest actions. In conclusion the loss of lament in mainline

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Christianity is lamented, for lamenting is healing and South Africa, as well as the world at large, is in dire need of healing.

B WHAT IS LAMENT?

Lament is not merely a vehicle for emotional release – it is a multifaceted human emotion. The kind of lament addressed in this paper is indeed a form of mourning, but not about death, not for a purpose, but an existential wail as primal as a child's need to cry.

Westermann's definition is to the point: 'Lamentation is the language of suffering' (1994:89). In Ackermann's words (2003:100), it is 'a language for dealing with, although not solving, the problem of suffering'. It is a vehicle for expressing the raw emotions that arise from pain so intense that it cannot be articulated in words. Just as pain and suffering are intrinsic to human existence, so also the expressing of pain is deeply human. A newborn child's first utterance is a cry. The cry of Jesus on the cross while he 'breathed his last' according to Mark 15:37, is most deeply human. When a pre-verbal expression becomes verbalised, the cry becomes lament.

People react differently to suffering – from apathy and muteness to atheism in the sense of deposing of God.² Traditional Christian responses do not serve those caught in the grip of suffering well, since they are based on doctrines of God that do not correspond with people's real-life experiences. The theodicy problem has long been recognised as a dilemma in Christian theology, and especially after the Shoah, in Jewish theology as well. God's authority is asserted with the words 'omnipotent', 'omnipresent' and 'omniscient'. It therefore assumes that if something is amiss, it must be the fault of the sufferer.³ However, an omnipotent, all-good God who sends or allows suffering for whatever reason (as a punishment for sin; as a test of faith; as a means of saving others; to impart some moral lesson), trivialises and justifies the victim's suffering which causes more harm than aid healthy, creative coping with pain (Wisner 1995:141-142).

Traditional Christian theology of suffering must be critiqued for there is no solution for suffering, no answers, there are only questions. If God is all-powerful and good, how can there be evil and suffering in the world? If God is unable, is God truly God? Was God in the gas-ovens of Auschwitz when babies were thrown in alive? When the tsunami of 2004 swept away hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting lives? When children die slowly of hunger and HIV and

² For a discussion of various human reactions to suffering, see Ackermann (2003:101) and Wisner (1995:144).

³ Landman (2007:6), a pastoral counselor who counsels abused patients in a South African state hospital, relates patients' feelings of guilt, inadequacy and depression when they experience their misfortune as of their own doing.

AIDS? We simply don't know. In the end, either one has to compromise God's power or God's love or conclude that suffering is simply part of the web of life (Ackermann 2003:104).

According to Dorothee Sölle (1975:5): 'If people ... are to move from purely passive endurance of suffering to suffering that can humanize them in a productive way, then one of the things they need is a language'. History has quite literally confirmed this need. A thousand years ago, women from the Hunan province in Central China, who were denied literacy and imprisoned by feet bound to the size of three inches from their seventh year, fought back and took revenge by inventing a secret written language, incomprehensible to men, called Nushu. This female language, now on the verge of extinction, was only recently discovered. Having been confined to one place all their lives, these Chinese women felt a desperate need for a language in which to protest and bewail their situation in support of each other.⁴ Today we have access to a language in the form of the ancient tradition of lament.

Through the ages lament has been a way of bearing the unbearable, of coping with suffering. It is difficult to write about lament because it is both communal and private; it speaks with political, social and religious voices; it calls God to account and at the same time it calls upon God for aid and relief; it accuses and it praises; it is deeply spiritual as well as subversive and political. Ackermann (2003:110) points out that the word 'lament' in English does not capture the relationship in Afrikaans between lament (*klaag*) and accusation (*aanklag*),⁵ for it is not about self-pitying complaints, but protest addressed to God (Brueggemann 1995:401-402).

It sends out a message that circumstances and relationships have gone terribly wrong. Lamenting is risky speech or, in Brueggemann's words, 'dangerous, restless speech', because tears become ideas (1995:111) and emotions become political. It is dangerous and provocative because it challenges power structures, it calls for justice, it pushes the boundaries of our relationships with each other and God to the limits. It refuses to settle for the status quo, reminding God (and the powers that be) that the human situation is unacceptable and that God (and these powers) must act. It is irreversible – when spoken, it is done and cannot be recalled. It takes risk because one never knows, until the act is done, whether one has gone too far (Brueggemann 1995:111). I want to remind the reader that

⁴ 'World of Nushu: Report on Women's Script in China: May 2006', http://womenshistory.about.com/od/nushu/Nushu_Chinese_Language_of_Women.htm. (Accessed July 29, 2007).

⁵ *Klagen* and *Anklagen* in German.

in the eighties in South Africa, black funerals became political protest actions, very hard to control.

African American 'Sorrow Songs' or 'Negro Spirituals' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sung by the slaves in the American South, had much the same effect. They were deeply spiritual laments of despair, hope and overcoming, but at the same time they were politically subversive, for they contained encoded words disclosing escape routes, times and places. 'Swing low sweet chariot' is a well-known sorrow song in which reference is made to the River Jordan:

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?
A band of angels coming after me,
coming for to carry me home.

Jordan, in this song, in fact refers to the Ohio River which the slaves had to cross during their escape journey to freedom.⁶

C HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

People have lamented through the ages. It goes back to ancient times when inhabitants lamented the destruction of their cities. When the great city of Ur was ravaged by the Elamites in 2004 B.C.E., the ancient Mesopotamians lamented. One of the most moving of Sumerian laments records the catastrophe. Ningal, wife of the moon-god Nanna, god of Ur, wails:

Woe is me, the city has been destroyed and the house too has been destroyed.
O Nanna, the shrine Ur has been destroyed, its people are dead.
Woe is me, where shall I sit me down, where shall I stand up?
(Pritchard 1955:461)

In ancient Greek culture, lament also played an important role. It found its way to classical Greek tragedy in the form of the chorus which stood between the world of the play and the world of the audience, delivering angry, vengeful and wailing social comment on the events on stage. In Greek communal lamenting, women conducted the rituals of grief. They beat their breasts, pulled out their hair and lacerated their bodies. Their performance would so inflame the people that public unrest resulted, forcing the state to forbid public lamenting. Ackermann (2003:113) quotes Plutarch as saying about women lamenting: 'Mourning is something feminine, weak, ignoble: Women are more inclined to it than men, barbarians more than Greeks,

⁶ 'Spiritual (music)', <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual>. (Accessed August 19, 2007).

commoners more than aristocrats.' To this day the notion that men do not cry, contributes to the woes of women!

D LAMENT IN ISRAEL

Brueggemann (1995:399-402) has a theory holding that the laments of Israel do not occupy a marginal position in Israel's faith tradition as is generally assumed – they actually fulfil a decisive role. The practice of lament is a way of protesting against what he terms, the 'common theology' found in the literature of the Hebrew Bible. The main features of this theology maintain, amongst others, that God has total and non-negotiable power and sovereignty, that God is merciful, to be loved and feared and that God rewards and punishes according to a rigorous pattern of retribution (1995:395). This theology however, as remarked earlier with regard to the traditional Christian theology of suffering, does not tally with Israel's experience of daily life or their faith experience (Job is a prime example of this glaring incongruity). The laments are Israel's deliberate break with the 'common theology', not as acts of resignation (*klaag*), but as acts of protest (*aanklag*), questioning and critiquing the 'common theology'. They are a reminder that the embrace of pain must also be part of Israel's theology. By 'embrace of pain', Brueggemann has in mind articulating the pain, insisting on God's reception of the appeal and waiting for God's resolution (1995:398).

Lamenting was integral to Israel's relationship with God. Israel lamented national as well as personal disasters and their lament was honest, candid and bold. They complained, mourned, wept and cursed, convinced that they could force God's hand for assistance. With enormous *chutzpah* they refused to accept guilt and blame for their hardships, but addressed God directly with their questions.

Moses models one of the voices in the biblical text that believes that the faithful can and must press God to pay attention to their pain. His prayers pose radical and dangerous challenges to God:

Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written (Exod 32:31-32).

Moses was troubled. He asked the Lord: 'Why have you brought this trouble on me your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all the people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me. I cannot carry all these people by myself: the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat

me, put me to death right now – if I have found favour in your eyes
– and do not let me face my own ruin’ (Num 11:10-15).

The amazing thing is that Moses in each case prevails. God actually acts in accordance with his protests (cf Brueggemann 1995:402-403).

And then there is Job. Job’s tale of suffering is the best example with which to disprove the kind of theology that legitimates life’s hardships. Job, through appalling circumstances that are lamented both by him and his friends, refuses to accept that he was responsible for his own suffering. He raises his voice, names the horror of his circumstances and insists that they be transformed (Ackermann 2003:112). He defiantly concludes that the strict causal link between sin and punishment proposed in the ‘common theology’, does not work. The verdict is in Job’s favour when Job, and not the friends, spoke what is ‘right’. This is an indication of his courage to stand before God and force the issues in new directions.

In my opinion the best illustration of the paradoxical nature of lament comes from Job’s anonymous wife who silently grieved the loss of her and Job’s children and possessions until she dared to express her pain and anger against God with the outcry: ‘Curse God and die!’ (Job 2:9), an outcry provoking sharp rebuke from her husband and condemnation from later interpreters.

Of the many women in the Hebrew Bible who lamented their pain, I want to touch on Tamar and Rachel’s cries. In 2 Samuel 13 we read about Tamar, daughter of David, who was raped by her half-brother Amnon, told that he hated her and then discarded with the two words: ‘Get out!’ She follows the ritual of lament by covering her head with ashes, rending her robe and leaving the scene crying loudly. Tamar’s cry is about the protection of her body and the honour of her people, for Tamar was not only a victim of rape. Her protest starts when she realises what is about to happen to her and cries out: ‘No, my brother, do not force me, for such a thing is not done in Israel!’ (2 Sam 13:12). She is also victim of her father’s abdication of his responsibility as king and father for there is no record of David responding to this outrage. The last we hear of Tamar is that she became a ‘desolate woman’ (2 Sam 13:20). Her whole life is a lament in the Afrikaans sense of being a ‘klaag’ and an ‘aanklag’ against the patriarchal men of her clan who knew the laws of Israel, who knew that ‘such a thing is not done in Israel’, and yet betrayed her in some way or the other (Ackermann 2001:8; Brenner 2005:142-143).⁷ The Tamar episode epitomises the personal and political character of lament.

⁷ See Brenner (2005) for a description of Tamar’s role as a pawn in her father and brothers’ power politics in the drama enfolding around the succession to the throne.

And Rachel? Rachel symbolises the archetypal mother. In a poem announcing the return of the exiles, Jeremiah describes the comforting of Rachel, mother of Israel. The poem depicts Rachel weeping bitterly for her lost children: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. It was Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they were no more' (Jer 31:15). Like any mother who lost her children, she refuses to be comforted. God speaks to the bereaved mother: 'Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears ... they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future' (Jer 31:16-17). They are not dead, God will return them to her and to their land (O'Connor 1998:185). Rachel's haunting cry resonates through the centuries and speaks to Matthew (Matt 2:18) who applies it to Herod's slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem.

Then again, not all mothers are as fortunate as Jeremiah's Rachel who was to be reunited with her children, which brings me to contemporary tragedies that evoke cries of pain.

E LAMENT IN LAMENTATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE TIANANMEN SQUARE MASSACRE (1989)

Historical criticism, with its focus on the historical scenario of the text, cannot actually help us understand the human reality behind the cries of lament in the book of Lamentations during the siege of Jerusalem in the years between 589 and 587 B.C.E. That is, the deep human quest for meaning in the midst of grief and pain (Lee 2005:195). This is an attempt to reread sections of the book of Lamentations in the light of the contemporary experience of wailing mothers during the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. The cries of the mothers of Tiananmen Square are put side by side with those of the bereaved mothers in Lamentations, shedding light on each other.

A brief overview of what happened at Tiananmen Square on the fateful day of June 4, 1989, will refresh the reader's memory. The massacre that shook the world followed on protests led by students who were critical of the ruling Chinese Communist Party and voiced demands for democratic rule. The subsequent military crackdown ordered by the political leaders left hundreds (some say thousands) of civilians dead in Beijing's streets and on its city square. What actually set off the tanks entering Tiananmen Square, was when on May 14, thousands of protesting students went on a hunger strike that lasted three weeks. The leaders had no compassion with the starving students – killings and massive injuries followed instead. Extracts from a poem by Guangzhong Yu from his collection *My Heart at Tiananmen* (quoted by Lee 2005:203), highlight the continuing cry of the dead:

Mama, I'm hungry
But I cannot eat.
Such bitterness choking all day at my throat.

And finally:

Mama I'm gone ...
 Remember to summon my soul
 In the days of democracy
 Beneath the Tiananmen Square.

Following the event, 115 mourning mothers who lost their children in the tragedy, formed a coalition, the 'Tiananmen Mothers Campaign', to raise their voices and demand justice for them and their dead children. For the past 17 years since the student demonstration and the massacre, they have been denied public mourning. The remembrance of their dead ones is not allowed. The student movement of 1989 is still condemned in China and the Tiananmen Mothers have not stopped demanding for the right to advocate for the right of the dead and their relatives. Their unresolved grief has grown into bitterness over the years and according to Lee (2005:200), their voices will not be suppressed until they are heard.

The mother in Lamentations and the mothers of Tiananmen have much in common. In Lamentations 1:1, Zion, personified as woman-city Jerusalem, is cast in the context of the siege of the capital as it lived in the memories of the survivors or their offspring. This devastated woman has lost her husband and children; she sits alone, condemned of all the sins committed by Israel's male leadership: 'How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow is she...' She laments her situation: 'Bitterly she weeps at night, tears upon her cheeks ... there is none to comfort her' (1:2). The reason for her suffering is given in Lamentations 1:5: 'The Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions.' So God is justified for bringing about the devastating violence to the woman, she is being rightfully condemned.

Ultimately the war's effect on mothers appears most sharply in scenes about the famine afflicting the city during this time. Mothers listen to babies cry for food: '... children and infants faint in the streets of the city' (2:11b), and watch them die on their breasts: 'Because of thirst the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth...' (4:4). Like the starving youths on hunger-strike at Tiananmen Square, '(T)hey say to their mothers: 'Where is bread and wine?'' (2:12). Daughter Zion is called to wail like the wailing Tiananmen mothers for the lives of her hungry children who died in their prime:

Arise, cry out in the night ...
 Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord.
 Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children,
 Who faint from hunger at the head of every street (Lam 2:19).

Daughter Zion hurls accusations at God to remind God of the horrific consequences of divine punishment: 'Should women eat their offspring, the children they have born?' (2:20) (cf. O'Connor 1998:190-191).

The Mothers of Tiananmen and the bereaved mother(s) of Lamentations embody resistance to unjust oppression. Like Rachel of old, they are weeping for their children and refuse to be comforted 'because they are no more'.

F LAMENT AND PSALM 88 IN THE LIGHT OF THE HOLO-CAUST

Psalm 88 has been called 'the most dangerous, unresolved, and perhaps most hopeless of all the laments' (Brueggemann 1995:403).⁸ Most biblical lament psalms are double-voiced: complaint is countered with expressions of praise or trust in God's justice,⁹ seemingly to defend God and dilute the complaint, thus hinting that the supplicant's problem is either deserved or 'that God's perceived absence is only a temporary aberration, soon to be rectified if the supplicant maintains faith' (Mandolfo 2007:158). Psalm 88 is the only psalm in the Psalter which expresses no thanksgiving or vow of praise. It ends the way it started, with anger and protest. It is pure complaint, not directed at an enemy or some vague condition or disease, but at God (Mandolfo 2007:154-155):

Why Yahweh, do you reject me?
Why do you hide your face from me?
From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death;
I have suffered your terrors and am in despair.
Your fury overwhelms me;
Your terrors destroy me (Ps. 88:14-16).

For this reason the psalm is less than popular in most Judeo-Christian liturgical practices. According to Linafelt (2000:267): '(C)ritical reading in the modern era has almost unanimously attempted to tone down, expunge, or belittle the language of lament and anguish'.

However, if read from a post-Holocaust perspective, Psalm 88 is not only a valuable resource, but in Mandolfo's words, 'one of the most meaningful prayers ever uttered' (2007:157). The Holocaust, or Shoah, forced theologians and biblical scholars to reconsider the ready answers offered by theodicy to the problem of evil and suffering. Psalm 88 lacks the customary theodic voice assuring the supplicant that God is a just judge and that the wicked will be punished. God is not let off the hook. No answers or justification for God's actions are forthcoming, for the supplicant knows that one cannot speak of a loving and caring God without making a mockery of those who suffered. The psalmist refuses to take the blame on himself so that God may save face – the psalm is one long grievance that points out the foolishness of God's actions in the light of the covenant he made with Israel in Exodus and Deuteronomy (cf. Mandolfo 2007:157).

⁸ See also Moore (1990:54) who writes: 'The psalm records a dry agony like none other in the Book of Psalms'.

⁹ See Pss 7 and 69.

God's active omnipotence in the world is not for a moment questioned – God can do something about his situation, but refrains from it. In verses 7-8 he assaults God: 'You have put me at the bottom of a pit, in the darkest places, in the depths. You have taken my closest friends from me and made me repulsive to them'. Verse 14 is an appeal for an explanation: 'Why, o God, do you reject me? Why do you hide your face from me?'¹⁰ But there is no answer. He seeks understanding but there is none. Fackenheim (quoted by Mandolfo 2007:107 n 63) said about the Shoah: 'We cannot comprehend it, but only comprehend its incomprehensibility.' When it comes to the Shoah, there can be no redemption, no understanding in the light of God's silence. Psalm 88 is inconclusive like the inconclusiveness of the Holocaust. Mandolfo (2007:168) concludes: 'Therefore this psalm, with its lack of finality should be regarded as the only prayer in the Bible that pays proper homage to those who perished and survived the "final solution" as well as the victims of all atrocities that defy meaning making.'

The Polish composer Henryck Gorecki captures the mood of forsakenness in a prayer of lament, the second movement of his Third Symphony, the Symphony of Sorrowful Songs. It was composed with reference to a prayer inscribed on the wall of cell 3 in the basement of the Gestapo headquarters in the village of Zakopane. Beneath it is the signature of Wanda Blazukiakowna and the words: '18 years old imprisoned since 26 September 1944.' And then follows the words of the prayer: 'No mother, do not weep. Most chaste Queen of heaven support me always.' Poignantly this young woman appeals to the Virgin Mary for support in her darkest hour. The plaintive voice of the soprano is a reminder that one innocent death is one too many.

G LAMENTING THE LOSS OF LAMENT

Lament is a powerful means of dealing with grief and injustice. Modern psychotherapy has long recognised the healing power of lament and mourning; that openly expressing the pain of suffering can alleviate its impact on the sufferer. We need to cry, tears to flow, bodies to rock. We need to express our anger. The nature of lament is profoundly spiritual and profoundly political, so through the language

¹⁰ In a heartrending lament, Yitzhak Katzenelson (1989:541) who was gassed in Auschwitz on April 30, 1944, addresses the heavens with the same questions:

Heavens tell me, why? Tell me, why this, o why?

What have we done to merit such disgrace?

The earth is dumb and deaf, she closed her eyes. But you, heavens on high,

You saw it happen and looked on, from high, and did not turn your face.

...Away! Away! You have deceived us both, my people and my race.

You have cheated us – eternally....

of lament we can rail against God and the powers responsible for the pain and injustices we suffer.

The global realities of the early twenty-first century warrant our indignation and moral outrage. Ours is a time of displaced people, wars, exile, abuse and poverty, depression and anxiety (cf. Ackermann 2003:124). We live in a country where rape is rampant, a country staggering under an HIV and Aids pandemic, a crime pandemic and children and loved ones lost to emigration. Our need for healing is paramount.

But in the Reformed churches lament no longer receives a hearing. Laments in general, but expressions of anger against God in particular, have no place in modern western Christianity – it appears that it is better to learn to suffer without lamenting.¹¹ Why has this happened? In the African culture women gather and speak of their problems, they sigh, weep and empathise in loud and expressive ways which often go over into lamenting and wailing (Ackermann 1998:141). Western culture has conditioned us not to express excessive emotion. A body swaying in grief is not acceptable. Emotions must be controlled while focusing on interpreting and understanding the scriptures. Ackermann (1998:146) remarks that there are no bodies on Protestant crosses, for Christ has risen and therefore we have nothing to cry about.

In practice we are going back on, even betraying, the bold break made in Israel's protest against the 'common theology' with its ready answers to suffering. And unwittingly, by silencing the lament tradition as an opportunity to pose tough questions of justice, we embrace the uncritical biblical faith which settles for the way things are. This faith supports a domination-submission relation between a powerful God and human beings. God has all the power and the suffering victim must simply submit and accept the trauma of his/her misfortune. Put differently, this faith endorses theodicy as the attempt to maintain God's omnipotence in the face of innocent suffering, with little or no consideration for the anguished individual (Moore 1990:6). The agonising experience of a present God, but turned enemy of the people, is not given its due and no healing can take place.

But we know what should 'not be done in Israel' and that allows us to assume a mode of existence that constantly protests, challenges, questions, undermines. A lifestyle that refuses to blindly support the status quo and fall in a state of passivity where everything, including guilt and blame for every dysfunction, is accepted without question. God is challengeable and so are the powers that be.

¹¹ Westermann (1994:81-85) describes a tendency in commentaries on Lamentations to devalue the lament. Most interpreters find it inappropriate to lament before God. He quotes Brandscheidt (1983) as saying: 'Lamentation and accusation is forbidden as an unsuitable form of behaviour for the pious.' Rudolph (1939) speaks in similar vein: 'One ought not carry on as do those people who were continually lamenting.' According to Kraus (1956): 'Those who came out of it alive have no cause to lament.'

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