

## EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY LAMENTS (BASED ON BIBLICAL LAMENTS), ILLUSTRATING THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

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### Abstract

*Many of us do not see God in our suffering as a result of our notions of who God is and how God interacts with us. But a study of the psalms of lament can help us bring all our emotions – those emanating from pain, frustration, faith, and a need for revenge – to God. In this article, examples are given of lament poems composed by young Zulu ‘pain-bearers’, after they had come to understand the language of biblical lament, as seen in three psalms. A careful review of these lament psalms gave insight to the participants as to who God is and how we can approach God. They also noted that in the Bible suffering was part of the normal human condition. By composing their own personal laments, the young people were able to process their pain better, and gain a sense of agency, being able to tell their stories and be heard with respect and compassion.*

**Key Words:** Lament; Nature of God; Nature of Christian Life; Suffering; Community Involvement

### Introduction

Many of us have naive notions about who God is and of how God interacts with us, and consequently we do not see God in our suffering. In this study, ‘pain-bearers’ were encouraged to explore God in their suffering, through participating in a workshop where they were given a brief review of some psalms of lament, and then encouraged to write their own laments, following ideas they gained from the biblical pattern. The participants were Zulu youth from the Pietermaritzburg area, and included young women who are part of an AIDS support group, and young men and women from the local LGBT support group. During the workshop (conducted over two days, for three hours per day, for each group separately), they studied Psalms 3 and 13 (personal biblical laments), as well as Psalm 55 (a communal lament). They noted that the biblical poems included complaints (sometimes in the form of rhetorical questions), requests for justice to be done to the perpetrator, expressions of trust, and petitions, and these different forms were often intermingled, revealing the heart of the speaker. The young people then used these ideas to compose their own personal laments, speaking into their particular situations. A few examples follow, with complaints highlighted in grey, expressions of trust in bold, and requests (for justice or other) in italics. Thereafter, a review is made of lament studies in recent years, to place these empirical examples within the frame of the theory of biblical lament.

E.g. 1) The author of this lament is a young (unemployed) woman who is HIV+ as a result of being abused.

Why me?

What have I done to deserve this?

What have I done to be rejected by you, Lord?

Why have you turned your back on me?

Why let my enemies celebrate my fall?

Why can't you show them your power?

**Lord Almighty, I know you're a living God. You make things happen.**

*Prove it to them.*

*I will forever raise your name.*

E.g. 2) The composer of this next poem is also HIV+, unemployed, with a child but abandoned by the father.

I have problems that I am facing.

**You will protect me from them.**

I have a lot of suffering in my heart.

Mine, yours – you just abandon me.

**But you are the answer.**

**You lead me in a good path.**

*Lord, answer me in my cry,*

*Sweep my soul.*

This last request is particularly poetic, introducing a new metaphor which reveals her desire for a new beginning. Of interest is that she sees that new beginning as being dependant on God doing something in her innermost being.

E.g. 3) The author of this next poem gave herself the pseudonym 'Fatty' which says something of how she sees herself. She is also HIV+ and unemployed.

**Lord, you are my rock.**

*Lord, don't let them laugh at me.*

*Show them how big you are,*

Because **you are my cover.**

Lord, I cried several times to you, but you didn't answer.

You don't feel anything for me.

Father, they make me a laughing stock, saying this and that.

**But I know, Lord, you will fight for me.**

**I know, Lord, you will stand for me.**

*Lift me up and make them lose.<sup>1</sup>*

*Make them lose, because you are my cover, my shield.*

**You will never leave me alone or disappoint me.**

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<sup>1</sup> The explanation given by the poet was this: Let them lose the wrong idea that I am a loser.

E.g. 4) The following poem was composed as a group lament by five women of the LGBT community.

*My God, listen to our prayer.*

Don't hide when we need you. I'm confused and tired. **We only need you, Lord.**

*My God listen to our prayer.*

When bad people talk bad about us, they spit on our backs.

If we had wings, we would fly to a better place.

*My God, listen to our prayer.*

*God, make them talk nonsense. Make them go mad.* Because they have done bad to our community.

*God, listen to our prayer.*

This poem includes a wish, "If we had wings ..." which could be seen as a veiled request. It imitates the line in Psalm 55:6 (ESV): "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest." This was obviously a metaphor that resonated strongly with the women of this group.

In the next section, a review of the study of biblical lament is given, and then in the concluding section, the theory is used to help interpret the empirical laments given above.

### **A Brief Study of the Theory of Lament**

Walter Brueggemann has thought and written much about biblical lament over the past decades. In considering biblical lament, he notes:<sup>2</sup> "The issue of pain is crucial in Israel's portrayal of God." Indeed, by ignoring the realities of pain, one's theological system may be 'coherent and comfortable', but when one's desire for an end to pain is sufficiently strong, one will engage in lament,<sup>3</sup> and thereby grow in one's understanding of the character of God.

The fact that God allows lament against Godself to be included in the biblical text helps us gain a new vision of God's nature. In particular, lament reveals the following notions about God:

- God is not complacent about suffering
- God is not restricted to a dualistic system of retributive justice
- God engages with the complainant, but does not rebuke or crush him / her
- God does not view complaint as a lack of faith or hope
- God allows Godself to be criticised

### ***God is not Complacent about Suffering***

Suffering is a spiritual phenomenon,<sup>4</sup> and has a sacred dimension.<sup>5</sup> YHWH perceives suffering in this way, and thus 'the cry' (borne out of pain and truth)<sup>6</sup> prompts a response

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology. Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*. (Ed.) PD Miller. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992:18.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Stone, "Safer Texts: Reading Biblical laments in the age of AIDS". *Theology and Sexuality*, 10 1999:16-27, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen M O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002:104.

from YHWH, and indeed in Exodus 2:24-25, it is clear that YHWH is attentive to 'the cry'. As Kugel claims: "Hearing the victim's cry is a god's duty and God's duty".<sup>7</sup> The reality of hurt is experienced and voiced, and this links earth to heaven. The hurt is heard, and heaven acts.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, God is perceived as "either the perpetrator of the pain or the negligent permitter of such",<sup>9</sup> for pain is either the result of human agency or the consequence of the action of God (either merited or 'without cause').<sup>10</sup> This might suggest that God is complacent about human suffering. However, the inclusion of many laments in the Scriptures indicates that the "injection of the reality of pain into the sinews of social relationship" with YHWH is an essential part of revealing more of YHWH's character.

As Brueggemann notes, lament is always 'a dangerous posture' as it may be rejected by God, but Israel discovered that protest speech "is taken seriously in a way that permits a newness".<sup>11</sup> Throughout history, as people refuse to acquiesce to suffering but bring their complaints and questions to God, something happens. Job, in his suffering, could not be at peace with God and so wrestled with God, thereby securing a response.<sup>12</sup> The person who laments in Psalm 22 knows that "God does not regard suffering as an ideal",<sup>13</sup> but asserts that "(the LORD) has not despised the affliction of the afflicted, and has not hidden his<sup>14</sup> face from him".<sup>15</sup>

It seems indeed that God expects the complainant to complain. Trust in a "good and powerful God" requires that one be confused by suffering. As Gutierrez<sup>16</sup> observes, "Those who suffer unjustly have a right to complain and protest. Their cry expresses both their bewilderment and their faith." In the case of Job, it was his complaint, bewilderment, and confrontation that resulted in "his full encounter with his God".<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Brueggemann notes that for the Jewish people, "an *adequate* relationship with God permits and *requires* a human voice that will speak out against every wrong perpetrated either on earth or by heaven".<sup>18</sup> And God allows this voice to speak, without interruption. This is seen clearly in

<sup>5</sup> Jon Sobrino, Spanish theologian, in a lecture in the 1980s, cited by O'Connor. *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 2002:106.

<sup>6</sup> "Truth does not exist if pain cannot speak, nor is worship truthful if pain must be excluded". O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible*. New York: Free Press, 2003:124, 135-36.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 46-48. For example, see Exodus 2:23-25.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Lament as wake-up call (class analysis and historical possibility)". Pages 221-236 in Nancy C Lee and Carleen Mandolfo. *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*. Atlanta: SBL, 2008:231.

<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, "Lament as wake-up call", 230.

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "Re-reading Job in the midst of suffering in the HIV/AIDS era: How not to talk of God". *OTE* 16/2, 2003:353.

<sup>13</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job. God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. New York: Maryknoll, 1991:98.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout this article, God is spoken of without gender, except when reference is made to biblical translations which do otherwise.

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 22:24 (ESV).

<sup>16</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 101.

<sup>17</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997:22. Italics added.

the book of Lamentations. By omitting the voice of God throughout the five chapters of the book, “undistracted reverence [is given] to human voices of pain and resistance”.<sup>19</sup>

Those who are suffering are living in a situation that is contrary to God’s will, and God’s love provokes a longing for change. Gutierrez<sup>20</sup> claims that “The basis for God’s attitude is in God, in his (sic) gratuitous and universal love.” We see the same hope in Job (Job 16:19 ESV) when he claims: “He who testifies for me is on high”. Job had already appealed to God against God<sup>21</sup> in 14:13 (ESV): “Oh that you would conceal me until your wrath be past”. Job saw that, although God seemed to be at the root of his problem, God was also the one who could relieve him. As Bullock<sup>22</sup> notes, “the (lamer’s) trust is in the true character of YHWH”, who is not complacent about suffering.

However, the unacceptability of suffering to a loving God then raises the question of God’s power over evil. As Stone<sup>23</sup> notes, “the unacceptability of suffering ... calls into question any theological discourse that is willing to construct a comforting God while refusing to confront the difficult question of evil.” This ‘difficult question’ is beyond the scope of this article, but the fact that God is moved by laments, and often moved to action albeit not necessarily that requested, does indicate that God is not complacent about suffering.

One needs to remember, too, that God laments, and God’s lament precedes and supercedes human lament.<sup>24</sup> Even as God seems to afflict in judgment, so too God laments in incomprehensible grief. The God of wrath is also the God who mourns and is compassionate.<sup>25</sup> In the words of Berkhof, “His [*sic*] judgment is nothing other than his [*sic*] wounded love.”<sup>26</sup>

The book of Isaiah (1:2) begins with God’s lament over the rebellion of his people. The same lament recurs in Jeremiah 8:5. The redactors putting these laments at the beginning of the prophetic books, wanted to say that the compassion of God does not depart when God intervenes as judge.<sup>27</sup> In Hosea 6:4, we see God ‘wrestling with himself’.<sup>28</sup> God mourns the destruction of God’s people (for example, see Jeremiah 12:7) but it is God who has given them over into the hands of their enemies. Westermann<sup>29</sup> asserts that “The juxtaposition of God’s wrath and God’s grief vis-à-vis the people in these texts is almost incomprehensible.” This tells us about God’s relationship with God’s people which finds its fulfilment in God’s suffering for God’s people.

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<sup>19</sup> O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 62, 65.

<sup>22</sup> C Hassel Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001:143.

<sup>23</sup> Stone, “Safer Texts”, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Johan Cilliers, “Breaking the Syndrome of Silence: Finding Speech for Preaching in a Context of HIV and AIDS.” *Scriptura*, 96, 2007:391-406, 399.

<sup>25</sup> Cilliers, “Breaking the Syndrome”, 400.

<sup>26</sup> H Berkhof, *Christelijk Geloof. Een inleiding tot de geloofsleer*. Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1973:132.

<sup>27</sup> Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*. USA: John Knox Press, 1981:279.

<sup>28</sup> HW Wolff, *Hosea: Dodekapropheton*. Biblischer Kommentar. Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1957:151.

<sup>29</sup> Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*. USA: John Knox Press, 1981:280.

## ***Lament reveals that God does not hold to a Dualistic System of Retributive Justice***

‘Contractual theology’ proposes that God punishes disobedience and rewards obedience. However, the Scriptures indicate that life does not fit into such a dualistic system. The classic example is that of Job, a man considered by God to be ‘blameless’ (Job 1:8 ESV) and yet who suffered a string of excessive losses. Many other biblical texts also show that the experience of suffering is not simply related to reward and retribution.<sup>30</sup> Retributive justice is not the only operative motivator in the way God acts. There is another, which Brueggemann<sup>31</sup> calls ‘the embrace of pain’, a trajectory which permits ‘life outside the contract’. The two trajectories are not necessarily in opposition, but they exist in tension.<sup>32</sup>

As Gutierrez<sup>33</sup> notes, “God’s love operates in a world not of cause and effect but of freedom and gratuitousness”. Through the many dialogues with God, Job is pointed “towards a different way of thinking”, to understand that issues other than ‘rudimentary justice’ are at stake.<sup>34</sup> He realises that God cannot be limited to act in a binary way, rewarding ‘the good’ and punishing ‘the evil’. God is far more complex than such dualistic thinking allows.<sup>35</sup>

It is true that “the justice of God is a fundamental datum of the Bible”, and thus God does not rebuke Job for having demanded justice.<sup>36</sup> However, God seeks to help Job move beyond “imprisoning God in a narrow conception of justice”,<sup>37</sup> helping him to understand that justice is only one element in the way God interacts with God’s people. The ‘voice of pain’ is another important element, “a proper partner in the relationship with God.<sup>38</sup> Brueggemann<sup>39</sup> claims that the ‘voice of pain’, although not a ‘central proposal’, serves “an important probing function”, helping us understand that “God’s good news consists in more than structure legitimization.” Through lament and the embrace of pain, transformation can arise, enriching the relationship with God beyond that of a contract. Thus, as Gutierrez<sup>40</sup> concludes, “Job’s freedom finds expression in his complaints and rebellion; God’s freedom finds expression in the gratuitousness of the divine love that refuses to be confined within a system of predictable rewards and punishments”.

The recognition that there are counter-voices contained alongside one another in the biblical text is significant for it enables one to understand the character of God more fully. As West<sup>41</sup> notes, “It facilitates building the religio-spiritual capacities required to live posi-

<sup>30</sup> Nadar, “Rereading Job”, 343, 345.

<sup>31</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Brueggemann, (*Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 19) believes that God experiences a tension between his desire to show grace and the need (at times) for judgment. Paul Wayne Ferris Jr. (*The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the ANE*. Atlanta: Scholars’ Press, 1992:150), agrees.

<sup>33</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Nadar, “Rereading Job”, 354, 356.

<sup>35</sup> Feminist criticism seeks to deconstruct, among other things, “the false dualisms of retribution theology ... believing there are only two ways to live in the world” (Carol Fontaine, in Preface to *Wisdom and Psalms. A Feminist Companion to the Bible*. Sheffield: Academic Press, 2008:21).

<sup>36</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 33-34.

<sup>39</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 42-43.

<sup>40</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 80.

<sup>41</sup> Gerald O West, “Between Text and Trauma: Reading Job with People living with HIV”. SBL, 2016:227.

tively in a religious landscape dominated by theologies of retribution.”<sup>42</sup> This gives theological resilience, a ‘significant resource’ which enables marginalised sectors to interpret the Bible from, and for, their own experience.<sup>43</sup>

### ***God does not view Complaint as a Lack of Faith or Hope***

Complaint to God is presented in the Scriptures as “an act of hope that fully expects a response from a hearing God who is capable and who may be willing to intervene in effective ways”.<sup>44</sup> It is not viewed by God as evidence of a lack of faith.<sup>45</sup> Rather, as Bullock<sup>46</sup> asserts, “There is a place in biblical faith for this kind of boldness before God. The psalms of lament carve out a spiritual niche for us where we can use the colloquial language of life’s hurts and still stay within the vocabulary of faith.” Gutierrez<sup>47</sup> goes even further when he claims that “In the Bible, complaint does not exclude hope; in fact, they go together”. Walter Kasper<sup>48</sup> gives the example of Jesus’ words on the cross (‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Matthew 27:46 ESV) as representing “not a cry of despair but a prayer confident of an answer, and one which hopes for the coming of God’s kingdom”. Even in the midst of Job’s excruciating pain, he reveals moments of hope (as in Job 13:15) as well as belief in God’s ‘wisdom and might’ (Job 12:13 ESV). And it is to God that he brings his lament, “filled with deep pain but also with lively hope”.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the recognition of pain is “the beginning of ... felt hope. Those who are capable of noticing their hurt recognise that it is not normal and is unacceptable, and the situation must be changed.”<sup>50</sup> As those in pain insist on raising their protest through complaint and petition, the way is opened for hope to emerge. However, hope does not deny the significant obstacles along the way,<sup>51</sup> and thus is almost always infused with fear, to some degree.<sup>52</sup> But hope is allied with humility and imagination as it actively seeks to make new meaning.<sup>53</sup>

Laments help us to reflect on the relationship between hurt and hope. As Brueggemann<sup>54</sup> observes, “The Old Testament ... mediates ethical reflection through *disclosures of hurt and articulations of hope*”. If the complaint of hurt includes petition (as do many laments), this can be seen as “an act of hope, fully anticipating that God can and

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<sup>42</sup> West, “Between Text and Trauma”, 227.

<sup>43</sup> West, “Between Text and Trauma”, 226.

<sup>44</sup> Brueggemann, “Lament as wake-up call”, 232.

<sup>45</sup> The recurring use of the possessive in the form of a vocative is evidence of the trust relationship. Ferris, *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the ANE*, 122.

<sup>46</sup> Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 138.

<sup>47</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 98.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*. New York: Paulist, 1976:118.

<sup>49</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 51-52. The common view is often that taking human pain seriously will lead to a sense of despair. In fact the reverse occurs, as the complainant recognises the abnormality and intolerableness of such pain.

<sup>51</sup> Jon G Allen, *Coping with Trauma. Hope through Understanding*. Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2005:282.

<sup>52</sup> Allen, *Coping with Trauma*, 283.

<sup>53</sup> Allen, *Coping with Trauma*, 283.

<sup>54</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 45

will hear the petition and act to transform the circumstance”.<sup>55</sup> The speaker waits for God’s response, “is not intimidated, accepts no responsibility for the problems, and proposes no way out. ... If there is to be a next move, it will have to be on the part of God”.<sup>56</sup> This reveals the faith of the lamenter, believing that God can, and will, bring relief. Moreover, lament is based on the belief that “there is some benevolent disposition toward oneself somewhere in the universe, conveyed by a caring person”.<sup>57</sup> In the biblical text, the lamenter has faith that YHWH will respond with care, either directly or through a third party. As Gerstenberger<sup>58</sup> notes, “[Laments] are acts of a relentless hope that believes no situation falls outside Yahweh’s capacity for transformation [or] ... outside Yahweh’s responsibility.”

Brueggemann<sup>59</sup> sees the hope as not only for some future time, but “also a dismantling of the present”. For some scholars,<sup>60</sup> the lamenter’s hope lies in the possibility that YHWH “might turn his [*sic*] anger and be gracious”. “Where the cry is not voiced, heaven is not moved and history is not initiated. The end is hopelessness. Where the cry is seriously voiced, heaven may answer ...”<sup>61</sup> For other scholars, the hope arises not necessarily from changed circumstances, but from “public resistance to YHWH and refusal to accept further punishment without challenge”.<sup>62</sup> The very act of resistance to suffering provokes strength to well up, to replace hopelessness. Thus the refusal to settle for the way things are emerges either from a tenacious hope that believes things can change, or it stimulates hope as it protests an unrighteous situation.

Thus, lament is the language of hope, for lament and hope are “flipsides of the same coin”.<sup>63</sup> One could also say that lament and faith are inseparable. For without faith that God cares and will do something, one would not bother to ‘pour oneself out’ to God.<sup>64</sup> In our modern world, complaint and lack of faith have been equated,<sup>65</sup> but the converse is true. Lament can enrich a naïve view of faith. It does not represent a failure of faith, but an act of faith.<sup>66</sup> The lamenter recognises his utter dependence on God, and consequently “gives full rein to his lament as the expression of his belief that no human aid can avail him anything”, but that “God in his [*sic*] great love and compassion will not resist his plea.”<sup>67</sup> Complaint to a fellow human being would be simply complaint, but as it is addressed to God, “this makes all the difference”,<sup>68</sup> it becomes an act of faith.

<sup>55</sup> ES Gerstenberger, “Der klagende Mensch”: Probleme biblischer Theologie. FS G von Rad, pp 64-72, ed. HW Wolff, Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1971:ch.3, n.4. Cited by Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 85.

<sup>56</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 31.

<sup>57</sup> PW Pruyser, “Maintaining Hope in Adversity”. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 51, 1987:463-474, 467.

<sup>58</sup> ES Gerstenberger, “Jeremiah’s Complaints”. *JBL* 82, 1963:393-408, n.50.

<sup>59</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 86.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Norman K Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*. Chicago: Allenson, 1954:99.

<sup>61</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 111.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Williamson Jr., “Lament and the Arts of Resistance: Public and hidden Transcripts in Lamentations 5”, pages 67-80 in Nancy C Lee & Carleen Mandolfo. *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*. Atlanta: SBL, 2008:80.

<sup>63</sup> Cilliers, “Breaking the Syndrome”, 395.

<sup>64</sup> Psalm 62:8 ESV.

<sup>65</sup> Cilliers, “Breaking the Syndrome”, 396.

<sup>66</sup> Cilliers, “Breaking the Syndrome”, 395.

<sup>67</sup> T Worden, *The Psalms are Christian Prayer*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961:47.

<sup>68</sup> Worden, *The Psalms are Christian Prayer*, 47.



Gelin<sup>69</sup> agrees that cries of indignation are not blaspheming but the out-workings of faith. For example, the pain the psalmist expresses in Psalm 88 is “within the limits of faith”. They are “cries that need to be uttered”, and the fact that they were uttered (and recorded as holy text) affirms that such an “opening-out of oneself to God” is recognised to be an act of faith.<sup>70</sup> And “faith is the foundation of hope ... for faith unites us to the God of promises.”<sup>71</sup> Thus lament, in the eyes of God, is a sign of both hope and faith.

### ***God is Confrontational but does not crush or rebuke the Complainant***

The fact that complaint is recorded in the Scriptures as ‘serious speech’ shows that the petitioner is heard and valued.<sup>72</sup> With regard to Job, he had wanted to see God and to speak to God, but he feared how God might respond to his complaint.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, “those who genuinely hurt dare to speak a command, even to the throne of God.”<sup>74</sup> Clearly God is confrontational, as is evident in Job 38-41. However, God does not crush nor rebuke Job<sup>75</sup> but rather ultimately commends him (Job 42:7-8). The confrontation implicit in lament seems to make a change in both parties.<sup>76</sup>

A modern example of a confrontational interaction with God is seen in the work of the South African poet, Mzwakhe Mbuli. His writing shows a “relentless respectful-disrespectful questioning of God” but demonstrates too that it is legitimate to talk back to God.<sup>77</sup> For example, in his poem “Why Tricks not Solutions”, he includes the lines:<sup>78</sup>

“Therefore my God owes a special apology,  
To the ancient people of Babylon, Egypt, Sodom, and Gomorra.”

His work suggests that the complainant is not rebuked. In other writings, he is respectful to God as the following line<sup>79</sup> indicates:

“Oh mighty Kumkani/God, help me as I rise myself ...”

Such is the nature of lament: engaging with God, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, but engaging!

### ***God allows Criticism of Godself to be included in the Scriptures***

In the Psalms, expression ranges from celebration to complaint. The mood of a particular psalm depends not only on the situation in which the psalmist finds himself, but also on his conception of YHWH based on the current relationship between them. In praise psalms, God is seen as benevolent whereas in psalms of complaint, God is seen as indifferent or

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<sup>69</sup> Albert PS Gelin. *The Psalms are our Prayers*, translated by Michael J Bell. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1961:48.

<sup>70</sup> Gelin, *The Psalms are our Prayers*, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Gelin, *The Psalms are our Prayers*, 39. However, the God of promises remains the God of mystery, an essential characteristic of God’s transcendence.

<sup>72</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 101.

<sup>73</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 67-68.

<sup>74</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 51.

<sup>75</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job*, 69.

<sup>76</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 32.

<sup>77</sup> West, “Poetry of Job”, 211.

<sup>78</sup> Mzwakhe Mbuli, *Before Dawn*. South Africa: Congress of South African Writers, 1989:86.

<sup>79</sup> Mbuli, *Before Dawn*, 73.

hostile.<sup>80</sup> Thus these psalms of lament threaten the integrity of YHWH's character.<sup>81</sup> However, their inclusion in the Scriptures means that protest against God or criticism of God's actions was not denied to the people of God, to the extent that such protests were even recorded for future generations.<sup>82</sup>

The musical composer, Shulamit Ran,<sup>83</sup> has noted: "It is one of the extraordinary things about the Jewish religion that confronting God, even to the point of challenging God's actions and judgment, is acceptable." God is not threatened, and does not react vindictively when people complain against God. For example, when the people complained in the book of Exodus, God did not punish them, but rather gave sustenance to those in need.<sup>84</sup> Also when traumatised people accuse God, God seems to recognise and accept that their pain and anger make them likely to rage against not only the perpetrators but also against God (as a powerful one who did not prevent their suffering).<sup>85</sup>

Many people find the notion of criticising God offensive. For example, Bullock<sup>86</sup> concedes that we are invited to speak freely with God, but he adds: "We must be careful to use this freedom ... not to become defiant or mutinous before God, or filled with insolence or hatred of our enemies." This seems to go against the very nature of lament, when there are no constraints on what is acceptable before God. As Brueggemann<sup>87</sup> observes, "In these prayers, the last residue of transcendentalism is overcome and even God is expected to change". From a study of Lamentations, Kathleen O'Connor observes that lament is necessary to "burn away pseudo-spiritualities and God-diminishing pieties" which dodge the truth and allow God to escape unchallenged.<sup>88</sup> Thereby, it "smashes images of a god harnessed to our bidding", or a god who does not give room for the expression of pain.<sup>89</sup>

Thus a study of biblical laments changes and enriches our notions about God. Laments also serve three other purposes, which will now be mentioned briefly. First, one's understanding of the Christian life becomes more realistic when one realises that suffering is part of most people's lot, and thus one cannot have a relationship with God in which there is only praise and never lamentation.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, there is not always closure to a situation of pain. Some lament psalms (e.g. Psalm 88) and the book of Lamentations make it clear that truth is more important than comfort.<sup>91</sup> This is a necessary reminder as there is a strong movement in many churches today for 'triumphalist faith', with a focus on 'victory' and 'abundance' and freedom from difficulty. And yet this leaves the Christian with a distorted

<sup>80</sup> Craig C Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms. A Form-Critical and Theological Study*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989:53.

<sup>81</sup> Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms*, 53.

<sup>82</sup> See also Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms*, 53.

<sup>83</sup> Shulamit Ran, from the notes to a performance of her "Supplications (for Chorus and Orchestra)" 3 November 2002. Cited by HW Attridge and ME Fassler. *Psalms in Community. Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions*. Atlanta: SBL, 2003:1.

<sup>84</sup> Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 271.

<sup>85</sup> See Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery. The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1992:94-95.

<sup>86</sup> Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms*, 138.

<sup>87</sup> Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 85.

<sup>88</sup> O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 110, 127.

<sup>89</sup> O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 110, 126.

<sup>90</sup> Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 267.

<sup>91</sup> O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 78-79.

view of the true spiritual life, and consequently vulnerable to lose his/her faith in the face of adversity.<sup>92</sup> Laments thus help bring a more accurate understanding of spiritual reality.

Second, pain-bearers are helped in various ways. Studying biblical lament helps them identify and name their pain, and this affirms their human dignity. The biblical laments also make it clear that it is a fallacy that suffering should always be borne patiently.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, the biblical laments can provide a template to help contemporary sufferers bring their own personal pain into the open. For as Dorothee Soelle<sup>94</sup> points out, suffering is not to be denied or ignored, but in fact is one of the *ways to God*, if it is worked through. And the way to work through it is by speaking out one's own personal lament. This restores agency to the former victim, restoring to him/her a voice, the first step toward healing. Moreover, being able to share one's pain with empathic others also enables the sufferer not to feel isolated and alone any longer. Indeed, the opportunity to hear the pain of sufferers can change one's thinking and acting, and consequently the practice of communal lament can also lead to a healthier, more socially aware community. This is the third additional value of lament, simply mentioned here but expanded elsewhere.<sup>95</sup>

The most extreme example of a biblical lament is that seen in the book of Lamentations. This adds a new dimension to the function of some laments, and thus this is reviewed below briefly before returning to the empirical laments.

### **Insight from the Book of Lamentations: A Hidden Transcript in some Biblical Laments**

The book of Lamentations is intense in the level of suffering experienced by the community, and their pouring out of pain to God. As in many psalms of lament, YHWH is named as the agent of destruction,<sup>96</sup> “[driven by] abusive rage” in chapter 2.<sup>97</sup> However, in the central and prominent<sup>98</sup> verse of the book (3:33) there is a comment that “He does not willingly afflict” (ESV).<sup>99</sup> The book then ends in Chapter 5 with a communal lament in which YHWH is accused of having broken to help Israel, but also suggesting that Israel's suffering is a result of her having broken the covenant through her disobedience.<sup>100</sup>

This communal lament is what Williamson<sup>101</sup> calls the ‘public transcript’. However, there is also a ‘hidden transcript’ nurtured by the anger and frustration of the people for the

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<sup>92</sup> “The issue of pain appears to me to be the crucial social issue for the contemporary community of faith.” Brueggemann, *Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, 21, footnote 33.

<sup>93</sup> Claus Westermann, *Lamentations. Issues and Interpretation*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994:274-5. As Westermann points out, many in the church view the ministry of Christ as dealing with sin but not suffering. And yet never in the Gospels is healing denied in preference to the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>94</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, translated by Everett R Kalin. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975:129-130.

<sup>95</sup> Dickie, June, “Lament as a means of healing the community”. Under review.

<sup>96</sup> This is clear in Lamentations 1-4. Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 71.

<sup>97</sup> O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 112.

<sup>98</sup> Attention is also drawn to this verse by the change to *Adonai* as the form of address.

<sup>99</sup> O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 114.

<sup>100</sup> Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 72.

<sup>101</sup> Williamson bases his work on that of James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1990. Both maintain that, before dominant authorities, the speech of subordinates typically includes ritual performance (the ‘public transcript’) but there is also a ‘hidden transcript’ (which may include evasion and resistance).

public humiliation that YHWH has inflicted on them.<sup>102</sup> The hidden transcript is seen in the way that Lamentations 5 deviates from the usual form of a communal lament<sup>103</sup> or a typical city lament,<sup>104</sup> particularly with the introductory particle in 5:22.<sup>105</sup> As Williamson<sup>106</sup> observes, the last verse of Lamentations 5 is “completely outside of the communal lament structure”. Although it is essential in order to complete the acrostic structure of the entire poem,<sup>107</sup> it achieves something more significant, “something which the communal lament was not able to do”.

To understand how the hidden transcript is achieved, one must re-examine verses 1-21 (the public transcript) for ‘covert elements’.<sup>108</sup> Many such elements are identified.<sup>109</sup> For example, there are intertextual allusions, reminding YHWH of promises made but not upheld, thus implying ‘a hint of reproach’.<sup>110</sup> There are apparently contradictory statements, allowing “the communal voice to protest its own innocence (5:7) while appearing to adhere to the ‘officially sanctioned’ interpretation that its suffering is a legitimate punishment for wrongdoing (5:16).” There is a juxtaposition of contradictory statements (e.g. 5:19 and 5:20) which “may allow the communal voice to maintain the expected element of the turn toward God while simultaneously undermining and even critiquing it”.<sup>111</sup> And lastly, there is a use of double entendre in 5:19,<sup>112</sup> “suggesting that YHWH is a god who sits, perpetually doing nothing” and not willing to help Zion.<sup>113</sup> Thus, hidden within the form of a communal lament is another agenda, viz. to provide ‘public revenge’ in the face of ‘public humiliation’, thereby enabling Israel to reclaim its dignity and make possible “a viable future with YHWH”.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 72-73. See also Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 111, 113. Scott also notes that “The experience of humiliation is nearly always far more injurious when it is inflicted before an audience”.

<sup>103</sup> For example, the complaint section is much longer than normal; the turn toward God (v.19) is very brief and then there is a return to complaint; and the poem ends with a severe accusation of rejection (v.22).

<sup>104</sup> It lacks the return of the gods and the restoration of the city, as in a Mesopotamian city lament.

<sup>105</sup> Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 74, 79-80.

<sup>106</sup> Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 79-80.

<sup>107</sup> The first four chapters of Lamentations reflect an acrostic structure (with 22 verses or a multiple thereof) hence Chapter 5 is also required to have 22 verses to complete the structure.

<sup>108</sup> Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 75.

<sup>109</sup> See Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 6. 19:183-201.

<sup>110</sup> Iain Provan, *The New Century Bible Commentary. Lamentations*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991:127.

<sup>111</sup> Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 77.

<sup>112</sup> Strawn (personal communication, cited by Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 77) suggests that  $\text{וַיֵּשֶׁב}$  might be understood as an adverbial accusative describing the manner of YHWH’s sitting, giving the sense of: ‘You, o YHWH, sit forever.’

<sup>113</sup> Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 77. This is strengthened by the intertextual connection with Psalm 102:12 which uses the same verb. However, the next verse of Psalm 102 has YHWH arising to restore Jerusalem, implying that in Lam 5:19 there is a hidden accusation that YHWH is not willing to help Zion (Williamson, “Lament and the Arts of Resistance”, 78).

<sup>114</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 214-215. One should remember that other biblical books ‘complete’ the picture painted of God in Lamentations. For example, in Second Isaiah many of the complaints from Lamentations are addressed, and God responds positively as the Comforting God. See O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 147.

## **Discussion of the Empirical Poems in the Light of Lament Theory**

The four empirical poems in this paper show an intense honesty in communicating their pain and disappointment to God. The composers were not reticent to express criticism of God, and they did not accept their suffering as ‘retributive justice’ (which they deserved). Rather in a number of the cases, the composer expresses innocence,<sup>115</sup> and asks God to execute revenge on the perpetrator on his/her behalf. The compositions are also remarkable in that the authors do not apologise or feel they have to defend their attitude. For them, complaint did not imply a lack of faith or hope. Rather, their compositions show positive trust, indicating that they consider that God is not complacent about suffering.

It seems that a study of lament has helped these young people to have a bigger understanding of the character of God, which allows, and even encourages them to lament. With regard to changing their view of the Christian life, their compositions show an acceptance that difficulty and suffering are normal. The second example has “I have problems ... but you are the answer” and the third example includes the lines “Father, they make me a laughing stock... But I know, Lord, you will fight for me.” The first example is a little different: the poem begins with the complaint “Why me?” which suggests that she considers her suffering as outside of what should be expected. However, she does continue to say, “You make things happen” which implies that although she cannot understand why she is suffering, she does believe that God is not indifferent, can help her, and will help her. Then she is defiant: “Prove it to them!”, but ends her poem with a declaration of praise: “I will forever raise your name.”

The empirical poems all show a mixture of various emotions, swinging between complaint, trust, and petition.<sup>116</sup> This was noted to be typical of the biblical laments too. The lamenter is experiencing a cacophony of emotions, all at the same time, and they spill out, as a representation of the turbulent state of the mind. Whether the swing from accusation to faith (as in Example 2: “...you just abandon me. But you are the answer”) indicates a ‘hidden agenda’ is questionable. It could simply be the result of such turbulence arising from the pain, or it could be a means of softening the complaint (the ‘hidden agenda’) by immediately counteracting it with an affirmation of faith (the ‘external agenda’).

It has been said that if we are to change the way we see God in our suffering, we must first change the way we see God.<sup>117</sup> This empirical study has shown that an understanding of biblical lament has helped contemporary pain-bearers see God in a new way which has enabled them to speak boldly to God about their personal situations. More generally then, the study and practice of lament can help ‘ordinary people’ learn to express their pain to God, which can leave them with a sense of hope that things could, and may, be different in the future. Also, realising that many people in the Psalms have suffered many difficulties, some of which reflect their own difficult experiences, also helps them recognise that suffering is not absent in the lives of those who follow YHWH.

The lives of many people today are filled with pain which has no therapeutic outlet for expression. But in the biblical text, we have a window giving a fresh view of the nature of God, a window which can blow away the discouragement of difficulty and infuse new hope. That window is found in the psalms of lament ...

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<sup>115</sup> E.g. Example 1: “What have I done to deserve this?”

<sup>116</sup> E.g. Example 4 (in the first cola) moves from petition to complaint to trust to petition to complaint.

<sup>117</sup> Nadar, “Rereading Job”, 354.

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