

## Led through grief – Old Testament responses to crisis

Mathews, Jeanette  
Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia  
jmathews@edu.au

In July 1989, together with my husband David Hunter, I arrived in Cape Town to undertake masters' studies in the School of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. The programme was recommended to us by John de Gruchy whom we had met while students at an international Baptist seminary in Switzerland. The opportunity to live and study in South Africa at such a momentous time in its history was a great privilege, and an experience that significantly shaped our theological reflection and practice. We were able to participate in "the Struggle" in small ways: by attending protest rallies, funerals and prayer services; visiting prisoners on Robben Island and welcoming some upon their release; joining in Baptist Fellowship groups; and being present in the crowd welcoming Nelson Mandela in his first public appearance following his release (a notable highlight amongst my life's experiences).

We had deeply appreciated our studies, instructors and fellow students in the Baptist Seminary from which we had come to South Africa but studying in Switzerland had been a somewhat "ivory tower" experience, with very little interaction between our studies and the political and social context in our host country. Living and studying in Cape Town was an entirely different experience. There the context shaped both life and learning, and our lecturers and fellow students were exemplary models for theology engaging with the concerns of the day. We arrived not long after the release of the *Kairos Document* and were challenged by its expressed prophetic theology, where we found resonances with our own Australian context with its inherent disadvantage amongst its indigenous population. John de Gruchy's writings on Bonhoeffer and the Anabaptist tradition were of particular interest for us as Baptist students and subsequently pastors.

While in Cape Town we were involved with the Rondebosch Uniting Church where the De Gruchy family were members and we lived in a house belonging to John and Isobel. Although we only resided in Cape Town for 18 months, it was a time that made a huge impact on us, and the theological perspective embraced there continued to influence our life and work back in Australia in churches and theological institutions.

In recent years I have shared another experience with John de Gruchy – that of grieving a loved one. Aside from the birth of our three sons, David's death due to cancer in 2003 has been the event that has had the largest impact on my life. As so eloquently expressed in *Led into Mystery*, when one grieves the loss of a loved one, “the intellectual and existential dimensions of being human [are] brought together … in a new way.”<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, sudden accidental death and slow deterioration due to disease affect those involved in different ways, yet there are universal dimensions to the death of a partner or close relative that create a sympathetic solidarity between those who have grieved such a loss. Moreover, watching someone one loves “struggle for the fullness of life” as they face the challenge of certain death gives a new dimension to the concept of “Humanity Fully Alive.” In the years that David lived with cancer he was also working on a PhD thesis entitled “Signs of Life” – a study of the sign narratives in the Gospel of John via the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. The title is indicative of his desire to find resources within the Scriptures for “living life well,” even when life was threatened by illness. My academic work has been focused on the Old Testament, so I have naturally turned to *its* pages to seek offerings from the intellect of our spiritual forebears in the light of my existential experience. As I have explored the various genres and perspectives offered by Old Testament writers another sentence from *Led into Mystery* has been the impetus for further reflection: “not everyone ‘owns grief’ in the same way.”<sup>2</sup> It occurs to me that Old Testament responses to tragedy are examples of contextual theology at work, where each discrete theological perspective is a response to its own unique context.

---

1 John W. de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 12.

2 de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 11.

In this essay I will consider the nature of contextual theology as a way of describing the approach biblical writers themselves employ, and then explore the diversity of biblical responses to crisis articulated in the Old Testament as examples of theology arising from particular contexts. I will propose that these expressed responses to grief in all their variety can still have resonance in personal and communal tragedies that we experience today.

## 1. Biblical authors as contextual theologians?

“There is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only *contextual* theology.”<sup>3</sup> Since all theology is the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context, the process of contextualization is part of the nature of theology itself. The distinctiveness of the term is necessary, however, because there can still be a tendency to conceive of theology as objective, located in Scripture and tradition which are canonized and therefore unchanging. The emphasis that contextual theology places on human experience as a further locus for theology reflects a modern cultural shift to the subjective: a move from viewing from the perspective of a metanarrative to multiple narratives or perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Contextual theology recognizes that meaning and reality are determined by interpretation, which in turn is shaped by the context of our culture, historical period, contemporary events and concerns, and social location. Many contemporary forms of theology celebrate this particularism by making the context the *primary* interpretive key, such as feminist theology, black theology, ecological theology, queer theology and so on. This recognition of the context as a valid source for theology is what makes contextual theology a “new” form of theology.<sup>5</sup> Yet Bevans argues that this way of doing theology is actually very traditional, and he runs briefly through a historical overview to show how celebrated theologians have been shaped by their context.

---

3 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 3. Author’s italics.

4 See L. Holness and R.K. Wustenberg (eds), *Theology in Dialogue: The Impact of the Arts, Humanities, and Science on Contemporary Religious Thought. Essays in honour of John W. de Gruchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xiii-xiv.

5 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.

From a Reformed theological perspective John de Gruchy similarly affirms the role that the reformers played, particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, in calling on the local church to discern the Word of God for its own time and place.<sup>6</sup> Examining Calvin's sermons and commentaries, De Gruchy assures us that "Calvin did not hesitate to read Scripture in the light of the events and the struggles of his day, and from the perspective of his own commitment to them."<sup>7</sup> In a context of a struggle against the church that was placing higher authority on custom than Scripture, the reformers were encouraging church goers to hear the Scriptures afresh, speaking to their own contexts and calling them to individual response.

According to De Gruchy, Calvin gave a prominence to the Old Testament Scriptures in his teaching and preaching because he recognized parallels between the church of his day and the "church" of the Hebrew Bible "struggling to be faithful."<sup>8</sup> This is fleshed out more fully a little further on in De Gruchy's chapter:

... much of the theology in the Bible grew out of the struggles of the people of God to be faithful to their covenantal relationship with God in relation to their socio-political journey through history. Theology was worked out in the process of responding to the promises and commands of God within history.<sup>9</sup>

This statement compels us to recognize that Scripture itself was conceived and formulated in particular contexts. Bevans also speaks of "the absolute importance of context" for the development of the Scriptures, which are "the products of human beings and *their* contexts ... developed by human beings, written and conceived in human terms, and conditioned by human personality and human circumstances."<sup>10</sup> Biblical writers, in other words, were *themselves* engaged in contextual theology. The very word "Bible" (*biblia*, books) reminds us that the Scriptures are better understood as a library than a monograph, and hence we should expect to see a range

---

6 John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 53.

7 de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 58.

8 de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 59.

9 de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 68.

10 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 5, author's italics.

of theologies represented in both Testaments, reflecting different times, different concerns and different cultures.

It is possible, of course, to shift focus a little and view “theologies” as “ideologies” – a challenge to biblical interpretation put forward by Itumeleng Mosala, my thesis supervisor when at the University of Cape Town. Mosala points to ideological conflicts embodied within Scripture itself that are in conflict with each other, seen clearly in his exegeses of Micah and Luke, and describes the “appropriation” or “co-option” of earlier liberating texts by later communities for their own purposes.<sup>11</sup> Mosala struggles with the fact that whilst some passages in Scripture may indeed reflect the perspective of those struggling with poverty and oppression, the prevailing voice that dominates Scripture is that of the ruling class.

While I am largely convinced by Mosala’s argument, and indeed view it as a significant challenge to the approach of canonical criticism and its current manifestation in evangelical “Trinitarian hermeneutics,”<sup>12</sup> I would suggest two counter arguments that help us to view the authors of the Old Testament Scriptures as contextual theologians, responding to their own particular context, rather than competing ideologues.

First, the final editorial hands in the Hebrew Bible in all likelihood come from a post-exilic context in which the small community of Yehud was a vassal to dominating empires, a far cry from their earlier existence as an independent state. The leaders of the Jerusalem cult, the priests and temple functionaries, were undoubtedly supported by the empirical authorities in the Persian period. Nonetheless, the texts edited in that period preserve voices that offer competing viewpoints. For example, in the books of Deuteronomy, Micah and Zechariah there are favourable references to “the people of the land” – those who remained in the land as faithful inhabitants during Neo-Babylonian occupation. The appellation “humble of the land” (Zeph 1:2–2.3; 3:2–4) – those who seek righteousness and humility – may refer to the same group and gives evidence of the tension between them and the priests, prophets, judges and officials in the royal court. Thus,

---

11 Itumeleng Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 14–21.

12 See Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman, *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God’s Address* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), xv–xvii.

the texts themselves evidence the perspective of the underclass as well as the voice of the “ruling class”. Furthermore, post-colonial studies of the Hebrew Bible are re-examining the material from the perspective of Israel as the colonised vassal rather than an entity with any real power.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the particular texts I explore are texts responding to a context of crisis, whether personal or communal. If the context in which we are “struggling for the fullness of life” is tragedy, grief or death, then humanity is united in a common experience. It could be argued that for these texts the common perspective is that of the oppressed, those who struggle, even “the poor.” In Hebrew lament psalms and the prophetic literature, the term ‘*anawim*’ is frequently used which seems to deliberately merge meanings of “poor,” “humble” and “pious.” Much debate exists in regard to the meaning of this term<sup>14</sup> but decisions about semantic nuances do not undermine the assertion that those who suffer crisis become emotionally impoverished. In the experience of grief all are coming from a perspective of struggle. As John de Gruchy has said, “Death … is the great leveller.”<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Biblical responses to crisis

In the Old Testament we can find individual traditions that have “owned grief” in ways that may be helpful for our own crises. The biblical traditions discussed are not necessarily in chronological order – in fact, there is significant debate over the dating of most of them – and inevitably there is some commonality between their content. Nevertheless, they broadly reflect different but overlapping stages in the grieving process: inarticulate silence; expression of pain; switching into survival mode; reflection and analysis; and remembering or commemoration within liturgy.

This survey of Old Testament perspectives begins with the book of Job – a book that transcends concrete historical placement yet has as its setting a situation of intense crisis: the physical, mental and spiritual anguish of an upright and innocent individual.

---

13 See Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

14 See J. David Pleins, “Poor, Poverty (Old Testament),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 5, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 402–414.

15 de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 5.

## Job – the solidarity of silence and presence in grief

In a public address based on his book *Led into Mystery* John de Gruchy referred to a key passage in the prologue to the book of Job. Following the disasters that are wrought upon Job we are told that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, Job's three friends, "sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:13, NRSV). The narrator's statement in the book of Job precedes the record of many words spoken, of course, but in his reference to this statement De Gruchy spoke of the value of the silence of solidarity.<sup>16</sup> The reference to seven days of silence echoes other passages in the Old Testament, such as King David's time of fasting and silent prayer for his ill child (2 Sam 12:15b–19) and periods set aside for mourning the deaths of Joseph (Gen 50:10) and Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam 31:13). In Ezekiel 3, despite a commission to "speak the word of God" to the exiles, the prophet is described as sitting in stunned silence for seven days amongst the exiles at the River Chebar (Ezek 3:15). In personal and communal tragedy there is an initial wordlessness – an inarticulate nature to grief – that needs to be honoured. The number seven is more symbolic than prescriptive, suggestive of completeness. Grief can only be healed in the fullness of time. Individual experience will vary greatly; but in the immediate aftermath of tragedy very little can be said to fill the void created by the loss of death or disaster. It was certainly my own experience that theological explanations or reassurances that were offered in the months following the death of my husband were unable to be internalized and so were perceived as meaningless.

This passage in Job, while affirming silence as an appropriate initial response to grief, also recognizes the value of the presence of others. Sitting with a sufferer without making any demands on them is an important gesture of solidarity and community. This is borne out at the end of the book of Job as well. Not only are the friends chastised by the Lord for their "wrong" words ("you have not spoken of me what is right," Job 42:7); they are commanded to restore Job's standing in the broader community via public ritual, offerings and gifts (Job 42:7–11).

---

16 De Gruchy, "Led into Mystery" Public Lecture 19 November 2013.

Both of these passages from Job come from the book's narrative framework in which events and characters in the story are described. But I believe the poetic core of the book also affirms the importance of silent solidarity in the face of crisis, in the rejection of the many words offered to the sufferer and especially in the poetic "confession" recorded in Job 42:1–6. This speech is the subject of much debate, particularly with regard to the meaning of the concluding verse: "therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6, NRSV). Does Job repent of his earlier speeches of protest and lament? Or is he sorry that he sat in dust and ashes, thus implying some level of guilt on his part for his suffering (... *repent of* dust and ashes)? Either interpretation is possible given the difficulty of translating the Hebrew.<sup>17</sup> But it seems to me that what is more important is the prior verse: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5, NRSV). The experience that has made the difference between Job's suffering and his restoration to faith is the mysterious *presence* of God that is beyond words yet is tangibly real. John de Gruchy speaks of "... the ultimate mystery we call God within our lived experience."<sup>18</sup> When that lived experience is tragedy or death, an awareness of God's presence is not a panacea for the sharpness of grief or even an answer to the questions that inevitably arise, but it does enable the beginning of the process of hope and healing.

Thus, in the book of Job we see that the context of personal crisis leads not only to silence in the one suffering, but also to an appropriate initial response on the part of friends and family – that of the silence of solidarity. Further, inner knowledge of God's presence within that context, while not answering the questions raised by suffering, may offer a measure of peace and acceptance.

### **Lamentations – Contained grief**

Not everyone owns grief in the same way. The book of Lamentations is perhaps the rawest expression of grief in the Old Testament, and is thought to have originated early in the exilic period, not long after the destruction

---

17 Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 576.

18 de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 17.

of Jerusalem and the Temple which forms the context for the poems.<sup>19</sup> It has few words of hope, is marked by a multitude of voices addressed to God but importantly has no voice of God in response, and ends in despair, with the plaintive question “Art thou exceedingly angry with us?” (RSV) The poetry is carefully composed, however, in five poems of varying lengths but each shaped according to an acrostic pattern or principle: the first four chapters are written in lines beginning with subsequent letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the fifth has 22 lines, equivalent to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. This dichotomy between content (raw grief) and form (intricately crafted poetry) is remarkable and worth exploring.

The acrostic structure acts as a framing device, functioning to both constrain and heighten the poems.<sup>20</sup> The grief of post-traumatic Jerusalem is devastating, with its descriptions of pillaged and destroyed streets and temple (4:1, 11), raped and starving citizens (4:4, 5:11), even reference to cannibalism (4:10). Constraint is needed lest these descriptions spill over in wanton invective. The acrostic structure thus keeps some control of the account, while at the same time allowing the full gamut of suffering to be articulated in honest and emotional expression (the A to Z of pain, so to speak). This careful structure suggests an elapse of time between events and the written record, but by retaining the early emotions of denial and anger that are so common to the experience of grief, the poems continue to speak to contexts of crisis and suffering.<sup>21</sup> Leaving the book on an open question is equally significant for its re-use in contemporary contexts of crisis.

---

19 Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 9.

20 See Jeanette Mathews, “Framing Lament: Providing a Context for the Expression of Pain,” in *Spiritual Complaint: The Theology and Practice of Lament*, eds. Miriam J. Bier and Tim Bulkeley (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 187.

21 There are a number of relevant publications in this area including Todd Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament and the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Gerald O. West, “Senzenina? From Lament to Restoration in Job 42:10-17 and in the Context of HIV and AIDS,” Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting Conference Paper (Atlanta, 2010); Nancy C. Lee, *The Singers of Lamentations: Cities Under Siege, from Ur to Jerusalem to Sarajevo* (Boston: Brill, 2002).

I will return to the role of lament in worship below when exploring the lament psalms but some comments relating to theological exploration of the lament genre are appropriate while keeping the book of Lamentations in focus.

First, this book calls theology to be in the present. As noted in the discussion of Job, sitting with someone's pain without being tempted too quickly to reflect on the past or suggest a new future is an appropriate and necessary response to grief. Second, unlike the "solidarity of silence," Lamentations *does* give words to the unspeakable, but in so doing names the trauma or injustice with tears and emotion rather than explanation. It is interesting to observe the change in the narrative voice which at the beginning of the book is detached, using third person address, but seems to be drawn into the suffering community in the process of describing the situation so that by the final chapter the discourse is related in first person. Third, the book of Lamentations creates space for grief. Undoubtedly there was a long process of formulation and transmission of the texts that constitute the Old Testament, with varied but refined theological explanations for Israel's history. But in the midst of this sits a book that is characterized by immediacy and mourning. Despite some words that acknowledge and confess guilt, the overwhelming tone is accusation against the Lord who has become Israel's enemy, punishing her more than her crimes deserve. Todd Linafelt translates the final sentence as unfinished, as if the author has broken off in pain:

Why have you forgotten us utterly,  
forsaken us for so long?  
Take us back, O Lord, to yourself, and we will come back.  
Renew our days as of old.  
For if truly you have rejected us,  
bitterly raged against us ...<sup>22</sup>

Israel's grief was not written out of the story despite the texts of restoration and hope that follow in her history. Grief must be acknowledged and honoured as a valid response to crisis.

---

22 Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 60.

### Priestly literature – Confessional praxis as a response to grief

Grief is a human response to crises both personal and public. For some “owning grief” is predominantly a matter of switching into survival mode. The fall of Jerusalem to the Neo-Babylonians in 586 BCE was a public crisis of immense proportions for the tiny nation of Judah. When comparing Judah’s history to similar nations in the Ancient Near East, it is remarkable that she survived at all as most small nations were lost to history when conquered by empirical powers. The survival of Judah and, more broadly, Jewish identity, was arguably due to the response of the scribes and priests in the exilic community, a response that emerged out of their grief. After all, in the sequestering of the land of promise, attack against the Davidic dynasty, destruction of the temple and removal of the possibility of the sacrificial cult, “almost all of the old symbols systems had been rendered useless.”<sup>23</sup> By holding on to what *could* be preserved – their laws and stories and rituals – in what has become known as the Priestly Tradition,<sup>24</sup> these community leaders exhibited a committed confessional praxis designed to survive tragedy. A renewed emphasis on Sabbath and circumcision are the most characteristic forms of praxis woven into the Priestly Tradition that enabled them to preserve their identity.

It seems evident from the layers of textual traditions that the Sabbath as a weekly day of rest only became an established practice during the Exile. Earlier texts indicate that the Sabbath marked the new moon cycle and occasional rest days during the year, but the strict weekly observance began only after the fall of Jerusalem. This is shown in references from the exilic priest Ezekiel (see Ezek 22) and other texts from the Priestly Tradition (e.g. Chron 36:21, Lev 26:34–35), each of which name the years of exile as an opportunity to amend for failure to observe Sabbath regularly during Israel’s pre-exilic existence.<sup>25</sup> The importance of this practice for the Priestly Tradition is borne out by the fact that the Priestly creation account

---

23 Klein, *Israel in Exile*, 5.

24 Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 149–154.

25 Andreasa Schuele, “Sabbath,” in *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* Vol. 5, ed. Katharine D. Sakenfeld (New York: Abingdon, 2009), 6.

gives a theological justification for Sabbath in God's work of creation (Gen 2:2–3).

Circumcision is the second practice given prominence in the Priestly Tradition (see Gen 17, 34:14–17; Exod 4:24–26; Josh 5:2–9). Sabbath observance and the practice of circumcision were both overt signs of difference, marking out the Israelites at a time when identification from the surrounding context was especially important. It is worth noting that another context called for a *different* practice in Israelite behaviour. The book of Maccabees attests to the decision to *overturn* the Sabbath law for the sake of preservation of the nation, following the massacre of a community refusing to fight aggressive Gentile troops because it was the Sabbath (1 Macc. 2:29–41).

Another emphasis of the Priestly Tradition can be seen in the strict cultic restrictions characterised by purity laws. A world in which lines of inclusion and exclusion are clearly drawn and in which purity can be easily identified in outward behaviour is an ordered and predictable world. One can imagine the attraction of such a structured lifestyle for a displaced community living in an alien environment. Many groups in crisis take comfort in emphasising a common identity over against the outside threat. What distinguishes the texts of the Priestly Tradition from being merely nationalistic propaganda, however, is the belief that through these identifiable marks the community were able to maintain a sense of the presence of their God. The crisis of exile led them to give new prominence to the symbols that had defined their special covenant relationship with the Lord. By retelling their stories with an emphasis on the practices that marked them out as the chosen ones, they could imagine a new era of restoration and blessing for those who returned to these practices with new zeal. Such was this commitment that anything that might prove a distraction had to be removed, hence the Priestly Tradition's polemic against foreign women (e.g. Num 25) and the post-exilic priest Ezra's instructions to remove non-Israelite wives and children (Ezra 10). The book of Ruth and the debate over the validity of Moses' Cushite/Midianite wife in the Pentateuch (Num 12) indicate that this segregationally teaching was uncomfortable for many in the community, giving rise to different contextual theologies.

For the priestly leadership in the exilic period, grief was owned by emphasising the practices that set their community apart in order to renew their expectation that God would lift them from their crisis. For many who suffer crisis of a political or national nature, survival includes holding onto identity by joining together in likeminded communities of fellow practitioners. For individuals whose grief or crisis is threatening to their faith identity, there can be value in “going through the motions” – holding onto symbols that mediate faith. When John de Gruchy wrote of the need he felt to continue in a weekly commitment to Holy Communion and Scripture meditation,<sup>26</sup> he affirmed the value of maintaining routine spiritual praxis in the midst of grief. Furthermore, such praxis gave opportunity for reflection on the experience of grief and for sharing that journey within a community.

### Prophetic literature –Analysing grief

The prophetic literature is concentrated around the period of Israel’s monarchic rise and fall, events leading up to the exile and the immediate aftermath. The scant references to prophets in the pre-nationalistic period and references to prophets as figures in the past in the post-exilic literature (e.g. Zech 1:1–6) have led many to understand the phenomenon of prophecy to be tied to the monarchy. Unlike kings and priests, however, prophets seem to be largely independent of the royal and cultic institutions. The prophets are perhaps the most obvious example of biblical contextual theologians, responding to the issues of their time by drawing on and re-evaluating tradition, covenant law and their personal sense of God’s involvement in their lives.

I find it helpful to study the prophetic literature of the Old Testament through the lens of Biblical Performance Criticism. The field of Performance Studies is committed to embracing both theory and practice, captured up in Conquergood’s alliterated terms artistry, analysis and activism.<sup>27</sup> These terms are useful when approaching prophetic literature.

---

26 de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 3.

27 See Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London, New York: Routledge), 318. See also Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*. Biblical Performance Criticism Series (Eugene: Cascade, forthcoming).

Predominantly written in poetic form, there is *artistry* in the prophetic writings. The manner in which the messages are conveyed are as important as the messages themselves. The use of metaphor, word play, provocative symbolic acts and formulae that claim to speak the words of the Lord are all attention-grabbing devices that give weight to the message of the prophets. The role of the prophets, however, was not to be entertainers but to *analyse* their present time, giving a message they believed God had for their communities. On the other hand, the very fact that prophets are God's embodied messengers suggests that *activism* within the community is a key aspect to being a prophet.<sup>28</sup> It was not possible to deliver a message and be uninvolved in the consequences, as the brief story of Jonah tells us.

In this sketchy overview of Old Testament responses to crisis and grief I cannot hope to do justice to the breadth of the prophetic literature, so will limit my comments to just a few books in the Scroll of the Twelve (Hosea, Joel and Habakkuk).

The twelve books gathered in the corpus of “minor prophets” are arranged in the Hebrew Bible in an approximate chronological order, with the historical setting for the books of Hosea, Amos, Micah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the books of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi set in the Persian period after the return from exile. Interestingly, the historical gap – the period of exile itself – is not the focus of any of the Book of the Twelve but is filled by the prophetic witness of Second Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. I recommend Klein’s study *Israel in Exile* (1979) as a resource for examining responses to the crisis of exile by these three prophetic voices. The chronological ordering of the Twelve gives a theological shape that attests to God’s providence over the history of the Israelites and their surrounding nations. Within this history the individual prophets become models of faithful obedience in situations of grief and crisis.

The metaphor of marital infidelity and reconciliation in the book of Hosea is compelling on several accounts: the involvement of the prophet and his own family in acting out the metaphor (activism), the use of symbolic names and graphically drawn events to convey the message (artistry) and

---

28 de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 64.

the message of God's abiding love for a stubborn and faithless covenant partner (analysis). Hosea's acquiescence to God's surprising instructions to "take a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom" (Hos 1:2, NRSV) became the foundation for a message that God's punishment for infidelity still could result in forgiveness and restoration. The prophet's faithful obedience was in itself the result of his analysis – an obedience that demonstrated Hosea's "favourite word *chesed* [capturing] the faithful, gracious love of Yahweh towards an unfaithful, obstinate Israel, affirming that God's justice is restorative not punitive."<sup>29</sup>

Joel is a particular mystery in the Book of the Twelve. There is no external evidence for the historical setting of the prophet or the identification of the individual whose name is symbolic of his prophetic calling to the nation of Israel (*Jo-el* = "Yah is God"). The locust plague that is described could have been a historical event – a common and devastating occurrence in an agriculturally based community like Israel – but it could also be metaphoric of any of the attacks by foreign armies that were experienced by Israel and Judah over their history. Whatever crisis is in the background of the book, the prophet understands it as God's judgement, describing it as "the day of the Lord." This is a motif used by most of the books in the Twelve, both in contexts of judgement and promise, understood as decisive moments in which God acts rather than a single incident in history. Multiple editorial editions of each of the prophetic books can be understood as new contexts calling for adaptation of existing traditions – whether the context is crisis or renewed hope.

The prophet Joel uses his particular decisive moment as an impetus for calling his community to repentance. The artistry of the book is seen in its vivid description of a locust plague that represents "that day" with its chilling portents of blood, fire and smoke (Joel 1:15; 2:1,11), followed by an extravagant description of the restoration that would come from God's hand, also described as "that day" (Joel 3:18). The analysis of Joel is the recognition that national crisis should be understood as judgement on the community. Joel's activism is seen in his call to prayer and repentance, marked by mourning and fasting (Joel 2:12–17). These are responses of grief,

---

29 De Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 132.

acknowledging that something in the relationship between God and his people has ended. But the analysis includes the larger picture beyond grief, so that the book of Joel also actively envisages new possibilities, including an egalitarian future community of faithful prophets and prophetesses (Joel 2:28–29).

The book of Habakkuk begins in confusion and complaint in the context of social and political crisis but ends in faith and worship, despite the expectation that the crisis will continue (Hab 1:2–4; 3:16–19). As we read the book through, we see that the prophet's character develops, both in confidence and humility. In the opening chapter the prophet's response to his context is typical of grief, with questions that cannot be satisfactorily answered and anger against the forces that have resulted in the crisis. Again, the language is artistic, with compelling imagery of invading armies intent on conquering and destroying innocent victims. The beginning of the second chapter presents the prophet as one prepared to offer his own analysis: at watch on siege works waiting for God's explanation and ready to answer (Hab 2:1).<sup>30</sup> The prophet is vindicated when he receives messages of judgement on this invading enemy, attesting to the Twelve's overarching message of God's providence over the history of the Israelites and their surrounding nations. The third chapter turns to theophany and worship, describing the prophet's vision of the God who will save his people, coming in power and victory. The response to that vision is a conventional but beautiful confession of faith (Hab 3:17–19). This confession claims that despite a setting of crisis God enables a response of faith and action. This final chapter in Habakkuk is written with liturgical rubrics found in the book of Psalms, suggesting that worship is an appropriate response and a helpful resource in times of crisis and grief.<sup>31</sup>

### **Lament psalms – Making space for grief in worship**

We turn, finally, to the Psalms of lament. Biblical laments are used both for mourning and protest. Mourning over death is a natural human reaction, but the Old Testament frequently merges death with injustice,

---

30 Cf. Jeanette Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk: Faithful Re-enactment in the Midst of Crisis* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012), 180.

31 Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Towards a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 215.

enabling lament to be a characteristic response to a variety of experiences. Importantly, the Old Testament shows us that lament was incorporated into the liturgical life of Israel. A third of the psalms in the biblical Psalter are laments: prayers prompted by individual experiences such as illness or attack by enemies and lament psalms that clearly had their origin at the communal level, especially in relation to national disaster such as famine, drought or threat by political enemies.

Form-critical studies of Biblical laments have identified a common structure across a variety of lament prayers. Typical laments include a direct address to God, a complaint, words that reassure the speaker, motivation clauses for God to act, a petition for justice or vengeance and a vow of praise anticipating God's intervention.<sup>32</sup> Such uniformity in structure is evidenced by the observation that of the many lament psalms, Psalm 88 is the only instance of a lament that does not end with an expression of praise or hope.<sup>33</sup>

As we look for biblical resources for responding to crisis and grief, we can observe some important aspects of the lament genre. Naturally there is some overlap with the discussion of the book of Lamentations above, and it is worth reiterating the lament allows us to live in the moment, filling the gap between the traumatic event and reflection on the event. The biblical witness gives permission for grief, as succinctly noted by Clifton Black:

An impatient, death-denying society demands that sufferers “get over it”. Across millennia, by contrast, the psalmist asks over and over again, “How long, O Lord? How long?” In this life are things for which there’s no getting over; such belong to the land of lament.<sup>34</sup>

But let me make some further observations about the characteristic form of the lament. First, lament is prayer. That is, it is addressed to God. The petitioner turns to God in profound need and profound trust. Despite the experience of trauma or suffering, the speaker of the lament psalm longs

32 Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 64.

33 Cf. de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 63.

34 C. Clifton Black, “The Persistence of the Wounds,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 55.

for a continuing conversation with God: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Ps 22:1, JM). Lament prayers give voice to pain from within the reality of a covenant relationship: “Language that can lead us out of the temptation to apathy, muteness, anger, and that does not resort to atheism.”<sup>35</sup>

The second thing to notice is that despite, or perhaps because of this relationship, these prayers are not polite. They allow an honesty of expression including the release of rage, invective or desire for vengeance. From within the context of faith, they demand an answer from God. Brueggemann describes them as daring, assertive, forceful petitions:

The Old Testament regularly assumes that this is a proper, legitimate form of prayer and that Israel (and by extension, the faith community today) has a right and an obligation to ask of God in insistent ways.<sup>36</sup>

Thirdly, laments are profoundly hopeful. Although expressing the deep anguish of loss, sorrow, anger, pain and death, the laments nonetheless generally have a structure that leans towards trust and hope for newness. As John Swinton states, “lament provides us with a language of outrage that speaks against the way things are, but always in the hope that the way things are just now are not the way they will always be.”<sup>37</sup> The exception mentioned above, Psalm 88, is an especially bleak lament that ends with the phrase “my companion is darkness” (Ps 88:18, my translation). The fact that this psalm is retained in the Psalter reminds us that for some, grief is never resolved and hope, and praise may never be experienced. And yet even this psalm retains the relationship between petitioner and God in the opening line “O Lord, God of my salvation” (Ps 88:1, NRSV).

For all these reasons, lament belongs in worship as a response to crisis and grief. Lament enables trauma or injustice to be named where otherwise space is not allocated or ordinary words are not enough. The presence of lament in the Psalter also reminds us of the value of song, since the Psalter

---

35 Denise M. Ackermann, *After the Locusts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 108.

36 Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*, 118.

37 John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 105.

was the songbook of the Old Testament. A lament can also be a cry of helplessness or despair, such as a Negro Spiritual or the achingly beautiful Senzenina, heard first in the context of apartheid but still sung in South Africa as the country struggles with the AIDS epidemic and other social ills.<sup>38</sup> Bringing the practice of lament back into public worship reclaims a resource that was certainly once a feature of the public cultic life of Israel. It is interesting to notice that an “enemy” is rarely specified in lament psalms. This gives them a generic nature that is open to being used by communities of all eras in response to a variety of situations, whether invading cancer cells, the shock of sudden death, sectarian violence, or terrorist attacks. Using lament faithfully is recognizing that there is no easy fix but we can trust in God who is able to create a clean heart and renew our spirit (Ps 51:10). Lament and complaint before God is not a denial of faith but the honest expression of faith that has been wounded by circumstances leading to grief.

### 3. Conclusion

Not everyone “owns grief” in the same way. Biblical writers who were responding to different contexts of loss and grief can be read as contextual theologians, responding in different ways to their individual contexts. The responses that I have explored correspond to recognisable stages in the grieving process: inarticulate silence which is tempered by the solidarity of others who are prepared to share the silence and by a knowledge of God’s presence within the experience (Job); the eloquence of carefully structured poetry that enables but simultaneously contains the expression of pain (Lamentations); rediscovering symbols that mediate faith as a means of a community surviving crisis (Priestly Literature); analysis of the context and active involvement as models of faith amidst grief and crisis (prophetic witness); and the commemoration of grief as both mourning and protest within our liturgical contexts (lament psalms).

Many of these perspectives have resonated with my own experiences of grieving and have been observed in the grief of others: the intangible yet comforting sense of the presence of God; the eloquence of Isobel de

---

38 See West, “Senzenina? From Lament to Restoration.”

Gruchy's poetry found in *Led into Mystery*; worship services that honour grief and pain and allow questioning and doubt; the opportunity to explore and theologically analyse the experience of grief in conference papers and articles. Interestingly, the Old Testament has little to say about "eternal life" – its focus is predominantly on life lived in the present. David Hunter's study on the signs in John's Gospel veered away from the usual interpretation that the signs speak of eternal life; instead he understood that "the world is the realm in which God's life-giving character is expressed."<sup>39</sup> Having come to this conclusion in his work, David handed the mystery of death to God and allowed his last few months to be guided by the question "How can I live *this* part of my life well?" This question serves us well in our own contexts of crisis – whether personal or communal – as we seek fullness of life when we are being led through grief.

## Bibliography

Ackermann, Denise M. *After the Locusts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

Bartholomew, Craig G. and David J. H. Beldman, eds. *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

Bevans, Stephen B. *Models of Contextual Theology (Revised and Expanded Edition)* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).

Black, C. Clifton "The Persistence of the Wounds," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 47–58.

Brett, Mark G. *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

Brueggemann, Walter. *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

39 David Hunter and Jeanette Mathews "Signs of Life" in *Into the World you Love: Encountering God in Everyday Life*, ed. Graeme Garrett (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007), 90. Author's emphasis.

Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance studies: Interventions and radical research," in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 311–322.

De Gruchy, John W. *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

De Gruchy, John W. *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* (London: SCM Press, 2013).

De Gruchy, John W. "Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death," Public Lecture 19 November 2013. [Online]. Available: <http://www.livedtheology.org/resources/audio> [Accessed: 25 July 2014].

Habel, Norman C. *The Book of Job* (London: SCM Press, 1985).

Holness, L. and R. K. Wüstenberg, eds. *Theology in Dialogue: The Impact of the Arts, Humanities, and Science on Contemporary Religious Thought (Essays in honour of John W. de Gruchy)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Hunter, David and Jeanette Mathews. "Signs of Life," in "Into the World You Love": *Encountering God in Everyday Life*, ed. Graeme Garrett (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007), 78–92.

Klein, Ralph W. *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

Lee, Nancy C. *The Singers of Lamentations: Cities Under Siege, from Ur to Jerusalem to Sarajevo* (Boston: Brill, 2002).

Linafelt, Todd. *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament and the Afterlife of a Biblical Book*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Mathews, Jeanette. *Performing Habakkuk: Faithful Re-enactment in the Midst of Crisis*. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

Mathews, Jeanette. "Framing Lament: Providing a Context for the Expression of Pain," in *Spiritual Complaint: The Theology and Practice of Lament*, eds. Miriam J. Bier and Tim Bulkeley (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 187–204.

Mathews, Jeanette. *Prophets as Performers: Biblical Performance Criticism and Israel's Prophets*. Biblical Performance Criticism Series (Eugene: Cascade, forthcoming).

Mosala, Itumeleng. *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

Pleins, J. David. "Poor, Poverty (Old Testament)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 5, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 402–414.

Schuele, Andreas. "Sabbath," in *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* Vol 5, ed. Katharine D. Sakenfeld (New York: Abingdon, 2009), 3–10.

Seitz, Christopher R. *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

Swinton, John. *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

West, Gerald O. "Senzenina? From Lament to Restoration in Job 42:10–17 and in the Context of HIV and AIDS." *Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting*. Atlanta, USA, 2010.

Westermann, Claus. *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981). Led through grief – Old Testament responses to crisis