

Trajectory to Reorientation on Lament Psalms in Christian Worship

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Abstract

Different cultures and traditions have developed means of handling issues of distress. The Old Testament tradition is not left out – a lament for the Israelites' community is the answer. By lament, the focus is on the category of Psalms located within the worship setting that bemoan distressing situations of life and plead for divine intervention. No doubt, Nigeria is experiencing security challenges, and the Christian community seems to be mostly plagued because of its faith. Unfortunately, the Old Testament lament tradition which the translated into the New Testament is fast eroding from Christian worship, hence the costly loss of lament by Brueggemann. As a means of rekindling the flames, therefore, this paper cross-examined the efficacy of the lament in Christian Worship. A conceptual research method was adopted for the study as already existing information on lament psalms was accessed, observed, and analyzed. This paper demonstrated a paradigm shift from worship to entertainment in Christian gatherings which negates the active participation of individuals in worship but encourages a paint-up expression of goodness. Therefore, mobilizing the lament psalms in the face of distress will help initiate a healing process within the Christian community in Nigeria, and promote social cohesion, support, and solidarity among believers and the society around them.

Keywords: Christian Worship, Entertainment, Lament Psalms and Reorientation

Introduction

Contemporary realities of the present century warrant indignation and moral outrage. The present Nigeria is passing through a time of severe hardship, security challenges, hunger, political and economic instability. National and international dailies frequently feature Nigeria with series of breaking bad news topmost of which include: banditry, Fulani herdsmen, Miyetti Allah and Boko haram attacks, leaving lots of people displaced, exiled, abused poor, hungry, depressed and anxious. What has been described as ethnic cleansing in southern Kaduna has continued unabated and spreading speedily to other parts of the country. The crime pandemic is accelerating by the day and the security situation is very challenging as kidnap, cyber theft, armed robbery and rape are becoming the new normal. This is not to undermine the issues of natural disasters such as floods.

Therefore, the need for healing is paramount. Different cultures and traditions have a way of dealing with issues of distress. The Old Testament tradition is not left out – a lament for the Israelite community is the answer. Thus, Ackermann (2003:100) views lament as a language for dealing with the problem of suffering, although not solving it. Through the channel of lament, raw emotions are released arising from the intensity of the agony felt. It is important to note that apart from mourning, several times the psalmist's lament comes in the form of a protest in the face of injustice, persecution by enemies, individual and communal disaster. Dike (2020: 37) rightly classified imprecation as a sub-type of lament Psalms and described it as a tool for calling for divine justice in the face of injustices in life. The methodological tool of the conceptual review was adopted for the study as already existing information of lament psalms is accessed, observed and analysed below.

The Genre of Lament Psalm

According to Ringgren (1963: 11), Gunkel is considered to be the first to have brought a re-ordering to the book of Psalms. Before his works, the Psalms were considered to be the writings of David, reflecting certain episodes in his life. When the theory of the Davidic authorship was abandoned, scholarship shifted to the perceptions of the Psalms reflecting events either in the history of Israel as a whole or in the lives of certain individuals. Gunkel introduced the idea that the Psalms could be classified into certain categories or types, each of which had its specific features in style and content. Form criticism attempts to discover the underlying oral form of the biblical text including its setting (social and cultural) and function. From this background, an individual psalm can be designated into specific categories: hymn, lament, or thanksgiving psalm. This approach does not only help in the interpretation of the individual texts, but it also provides a convenient way of covering the psalms by studying each of them separately.

The genre of lament therefore are those psalms that present petitions to God for his divine intervention. Johnston (2005: 63-65) designates this genre as psalms of distress describing the supplicant as helpless and occasionally hopeless; surrounded by enemies, physical suffering, punishment from God and crying out for relief and deliverance. In all, there is a variety of descriptions of the genre among scholars such as complaint, petition, and distress.

The list of lament psalms includes Psalms 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 22, 25, 26, 27:7-14, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 40:13-17, 42, 43, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 87, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, 143.



These psalms are generally structured to include: an open address to God, a description of the distress of crisis, a plea for divine intervention with reasons, a confession of trust and a vow. By turning to God, the distressed expresses both profound need and profound trust and refuses to allow a deadly prayerlessness to develop. He longs for a continuing communion with God: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Psalm 22:1). The Psalter specifically describes isolation, shame, despair, danger, physical impairment, and death as causes for lament.

Notice also that whether protest, complaint, sad resignation or even an expression of guilt as is the case with the penitential forms of lament, the prayers are voiced out of loyalty to God and expect a responding loyalty from God, an expectation that arises from a covenant relationship. This is where Old Testament lament differs from the laments found in ancient Near Eastern texts.

One other important element of the lament psalms is the frankness or honesty with which the supplicant comes before God. No pretence, no politeness so to speak but a release of rage in the context of faith, demanding God’s answer. Used as a prayer book, the Old Testament regularly assumes that this is a proper, legitimate form of prayer inviting worshippers to vent their frustration and pour out their feelings before God (Brown, 2005:29).

The Theology of Lament and Divine Intervention

History has records of many people who refuse to acquiesce to suffering but bring their complaints and questions to God, requesting him to act and he surely does. Instances include Job, who in his suffering, could not hold his peace but wrestled with God, and secured a response. In his agony, he cursed his day of birth saying “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said” (Job 3:3) spoken when he was agonized. The same goes with the Supplicant of Psalm 22 who knows that “God does not regard suffering as an ideal”, but asserts that “(the LORD) has not despised the affliction of the afflicted, and has not hidden his face from him.” By turning to God, the supplicant expresses both profound need and profound trust and refuses to allow a deadly prayerlessness to develop. He longs for a continuing communion with God: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Psalm 22:1). It seems indeed that God expects the complainant to complain.

From the ongoing, one would view lament as an emotional expression of suffering. While this is not wrong, it carries an incomplete notion about lament because the biblical laments are the product of theology. Mark Vroegop (2020) has rightly remarked that it takes theology to lament. He argues that lament fuses feeling and doctrine. The supplicants lament not just because of their pain-filled tears, but also because of the character of Yahweh the God of Israel.

God's characteristics therefore form the rationale for divine intervention. The supplicant's petition appears in the prepositional phrase: "Help me on account of your grace ...Lead me according to your righteousness" (Ps. 5:5, 9). Generally, the grace, steadfastness, righteousness, name or speech of YHWH emerges, which according to Gunkel is understandable since the one praying would hope for help based upon these qualities.

Apart from God's qualities, the supplicant occasionally presents himself as being vulnerable to the danger of his enemies and sees his salvation only in God's intervention. The supplicant's confidence in God, his innocence and penitence all constitute rationale or motivations for God's intervention. In the view of Mowinckel (1962:198) view, the lament as well as the prayers aim to smooth the face of God, that is to placate him and touch his heart. In different ways, the psalmist tries to provide God with reasons for granting his request.

Remarkable in the lament is the fact that the silence (or absence) of God does not drive Israel away from prayer. Instead, it drives them to a more earnest intense passionate prayer to the very God who will not answer. This is well expressed in Psalm 88 in which the supplicant is driven to greater and greater intensity and desperation with little or no sense of relief. What is equally played out here is Israel's belief that all hope is not actualised within the bounds of historical reality. Hence, the supplicant continues to wait and trust in God even when God seems to be silent.

Longman III (1988:), sees God's covenant relationship with Israel as the basis of lament. Though there are relatively few psalms which explicitly reflect on covenant as a major theme, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the supplicant speaks out of the context of the covenant. Thus, Longman III maintains that the covenant motif ties together many strands of the theology of the Psalms.

Another interesting insight comes from Drijvers (1964:139) who places the theology of lament from the perspective of Israel's anthropomorphism in which Yahweh was known above all as a personal living God. Against the notion of an unmoved prime mover, who had withdrawn himself from man and his world, Israel's belief in God is upheld in a living experience of his personality and mighty presence. This does not suggest ignorance of God's transcendence on the part of Israel rather, it is in her anthropomorphism that the uniqueness of her understanding of God is revealed. The supplicants continuously bring to the fore, the notion of how immediate, real and personal God's intervention is, and how near and living is Israel's God. No doubt, the one praying speaks to God as if he is interacting face-to-face with him.



The New Testament Use of the Lament Psalms

The New Testament Community was very conversant with the lament psalms and usage. Jesus Christ was found lamenting over Jerusalem (Luke 13:35). He quotes from the Psalms while dying on the cross (Luke 23:46). His words and actions when he heard about the death of Lazarus function as a lament. John presents a Jesus who is moved with emotion that ranges from grief to anger over the death of His friend Lazarus (11:33-35). In his lament, Jesus calls out to God to hear His prayer in the current situation, at the same time expressing His trust that God will respond (John 11:41-42).

Another instance of Jesus lamenting is in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion (Matt 26:36-46; Mark 14:42-42; Luke 22:39-46). Though this may not be viewed as a formal liturgical lament like those found in the Psalms; however, the contents of his prayer fully express lament elements and language. Jesus notes to his disciples that something is wrong: “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake” (Matt 26:38; Mark 14:34). As an invocation distinctive of the lament psalms, Jesus directs his prayer to God using the personal term “Father” (Matt 26:39a; Luke 22:42a) or “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36a). Thus, readers cannot miss a plea to God for help and a request that God change the current situation as Jesus prays to the Father to “remove this cup” (Mark 14:36b; Luke 22:42b) or to “let this cup pass” (Matt 26:27b). Jesus also expresses His trust in God's will when Jesus declares, “not what I want but what You want” (Matt 26:39c; Mark 14:36c) or “not My will but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42c).

Moreover, the cry of Jesus “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34) when examined from a lament perspective, displays a full range of lament. Jesus cried to the God with whom He is in a relationship and laments the rupture in that relationship. Through the words “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46), Jesus once again demonstrates the intimacy of his relationship with God and expresses confidence that God will respond and deliver him from this trial. The writer of Hebrews confirms that God heard and responded to Jesus's prayer (Heb 5:7). While not formal laments as the Psalms are, several passages in the gospels record people crying out to Jesus to change their circumstances; thus, these cries function as laments (Matt 9:27, 15:22, 17:15; Mark 10:47; Luke 17:13, 18:38-39, 23:42). These functional laments use language that distressed people typically direct at God, but in the New Testament, people direct this language to Jesus, who hears and responds to such cries. These laments and Jesus's responses to them act as prophetic markers showing the introduction of Jeremiah's new covenant and the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. In both the Psalms and the New Testament, the presence of enemies prompts lamentation. They occasion the lament prayer in Acts 4:23-31. Peter and John had just returned to their

friends (Acts 4:23) from a confrontation with a council of leadership in/ Jerusalem at which council members threatened the disciples and told them that they were not to spread the name of Jesus (Acts 4:5-22). With their friends, Peter and John responded by praying to God. Their prayer begins with an invocation to God, the Father (Acts 4:23, 24), it laments enemies that stand against God in generalities (Acts 4:25-26) and specifics (Acts 23:27-28), and it asks God to respond to these threats (Acts 4:29a) by giving his servants power to continue to spread the Word of God and to perform signs, miracles, and wonders (Acts 4:29b-30a). The prayer concludes with an inclusive statement that this group has prayed all in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:30b). God then responds to this prayer by filling his servants with the Holy Spirit to speak with boldness (Acts 4:31)

Paul clearly lamented his suffering in the broadest sense by crying out to Jesus to have that suffering removed. By making his request three times Paul shows his intense desire for deliverance. Jesus responds to Paul by saying, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9), thus revealing to Paul that his suffering has a greater purpose and will remain – a concept that is equally characteristic of the lament psalms. Revelation 6:10 is another example of a new prayer of lament in the New Testament. Martyrs under the altar lament to God: “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” This lament is uncomfortable for some because of the imprecatory language that it contains. Laments are one of the many ways that believers in the Bible interact with the God with whom they are in a relationship. The apostles actively promoted the recitation and singing of psalms whenever the church gathered for worship (1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16). They also quoted Psalms in their prayers (Acts 4:25-26).

Lament in Contemporary Christian Usage

The discussions above have demonstrated how the New Testament believers including the Lord Jesus Christ himself made use of lament. However, there has been rising concern about the negligent use of the lament in contemporary Christian worship. Brueggemann (1986: 60) has rightly observed that one loss resulting from the absence of lament is the loss of the genuine covenant interaction as the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is programmed to speak only praise. The alarm notwithstanding, the flame of lament has continued to dwindle in Christian worship. Have Christians learnt to suffer without lamenting? Why has this happened?

Ideally, worship is an act of ascribing worth, homage, reverence and devotion to a deity. However, **Christian worship according to Just Disciple (2019), has been described as both an attitude and action of giving God the adoration, reverence,**



and homage, worthy of Him. It takes the form of many different practices, lifestyles, and events in both the individual and the congregation. Meanwhile, entertainment has been defined as an activity designed to give pleasure, enjoyment, diversion, amusement, or relaxation to an audience, no matter whether the audience participates passively as in watching an opera or a movie, or actively as in games (Your Dictionary). Entertainment is not limited to the cinema room. In fact, it takes place both formally and informally including in religious settings. When applied to Christian worship, entertainment provides excitement and a diversion from the mundane problems of life so that one has the feeling of happiness and merriment while in worship.

Grace is also ministered in worship as the church draws near to God, and the Lord draws near to the congregation. Grace here is many-sided - regenerating grace, renewing grace, reviving grace among others. All these lead to the transformation of lives. Several elements of worship are viewed as means of grace such as prayer, fellowship, Bible, giving, and worship among others. No doubt, entertainment can stir emotions, but God uses the means of grace to change human affections. Moreover, while entertainment may be able to draw a crowd or captivate a congregation, only the means of grace will draw people to Christ and conform them to His image. Moreover, the grace of God in worship produces the deepest and produces authentic awe in the light of the revelation of God. This lies the beauty of worship that is infinitely more powerful than entertainment.

Unfortunately, some present Christian leaders tend to favour entertainment in the place of worship simply because it appears more appealing to many. Thus, writing about entertainment, Max Lucado (2005), states that the thought that the people who are sitting in church pews are going to be there every Sunday should be abolished. We have to arrest their attention. He emphasised the need to use every device possible to reach them and to teach them and should not be so apologetic about entertaining them. No wonder the nineteenth-century pastor Charles H. Spurgeon (1993) said that the devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the church that part of her mission is to provide entertainment for the people, with a view to winning them. The result is part of the reason for the decline in the usage of lament in Christian worship.

Both from the Old and New Testament usage, lament as a worship element works in providing adherents with psychological functions that enable individuals with emotional stress that would otherwise lead to depression and social instability to cope with the circumstances of life. Thus, when faced with an utter loss of words and an oversupply of volatile emotions, the reliable and profoundly relevant laments of the Hebrew scriptures become the option.

Within the last ten years, the Nigeria Church has faced serious security challenges arising from the insurgency of banditry, Fulani herdsmen, Miyetti Allah and Boko Haram. No doubt, everyone in Nigeria is having a share of the trauma of the insecurity ravaging the country, however, Open Doors (2022) observes that Christians are often particular targets because of their faith. Moreover, the paper is focused on the Christian community in Nigeria as part of the world's recognized users of the Book of Psalms. Worthy of mention in this work include the following:

Sunday 25th December 2011 witnessed an explosive attack on St. Theresa Catholic Church, Madalla just after 8 a.m., which left 35 people dead and 52 wounded. The same day, a radical Muslim sect claimed the attack and another bombing near a church in the restive city of Jos, as explosions also struck the nation's northeast. The 6th January 2012 Deeper Life indiscriminate shooting claimed by Boko Haram, left six persons dead and many others wounded (Accord, 2012). The October 28, 2012 records of a suicide bomber who drove a vehicle packed with explosives into a Catholic church in northern Nigeria on Sunday, killing at least nine people, more than 100 wounded and triggering reprisal attacks that killed at least two more (Reuters, 2012). The most recent is the Gunmen attack on St Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo town in Ondo State killing at least 50 people (Aljazeera News, 2022). During all these challenges, both the government and the church seem incapacitated to handle them (Enweonwu and others 2021). Few reprisals from the Christian communities ended in deadlocks as more casualties.

Meanwhile, one would expect a well-articulated chronicle of the lamentable situation of Christians in the country from the Christian Association of Nigeria. Thus far, no such records, and no efforts to lobby or persuade the government to do the needful. However, the church seems to be ignorant of one of the tools she needed most at this time – lament. The Old Testament has been used to illustrate the potency of lament in the face of distress. The New Testament presents a weeping and groaning Jesus who could not hold back lament when it was needed most. The apostles are not left out. The saints triumphant in heaven continue to plead before God “How long?”

Thus, by mobilising lament in the face of the distress of death and extinction, the Christian community would have put her faith into action by employing God to act in the defence of the church and the larger society. Moreover, speaking out about the distress of the Christian community is another way of telling the ugly story of the security challenges. This way, the world will know what the Christian community in Nigeria is going through. Who knows who will read it and come to her rescue?



Conclusion

Thus far, the study has examined the relevance of lament within the context of contemporary Christian worship. The paper asserts that lament as a ritualistic element works in the functionalist assessment, providing religious adherents religious psychological functions that enable individuals with emotional stress that would otherwise lead to depression and social instability to cope with the circumstances of life. The paper finds that while the country is plagued with security challenges, the Christian community is mostly on the receiving side due to its faith. The paper further asserts that the church in Nigeria seems silent in the midst of deaths and dying.

Why trust in God if He cannot be mobilized in the face of life-threatening danger? It will only amount to hypocrisy to appear before God, painting up a feel-good disposition by way of entertainment when in reality being eaten up by pain and distress. Or what is the evidence of trust in God if the church cannot call on him to make good His promises? Many Christians have relapsed into deadly prayerlessness and even atheistic tendencies due to the unvoiced anguish of life. Therefore, the paper maintains that the negation of lament is a disservice to the Christian community and to individual worshippers. It further advocates for the mobilization of lament, which can initiate a healing process for the distressed, and promote cohesion, support and solidarity.

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