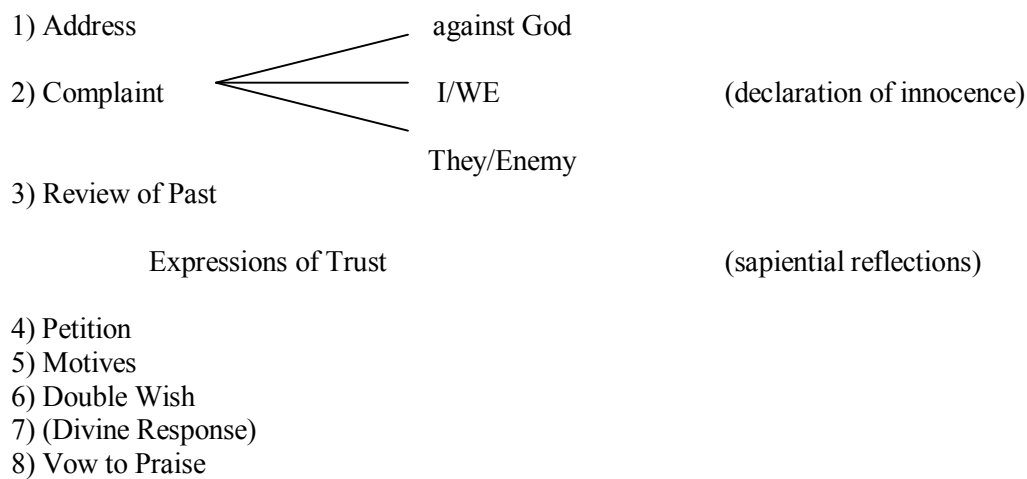


(3) THE PSALMS OF LAMENT

The psalms of lament by far make up the largest part of the Psalter. The origin of this form of prayer can be recognized in many other parts of the OT. For instance, the paradigm of a lament is discernible in the founding experience of the Exodus. The Israelites cried to the Lord and the Lord delivered them. No doubt the settings that would give occasion for communal and individual prayers of lament would have been liturgical celebrations over critical situations.

Liturgical actions arose because of the precipitation of various crises, whether they be military, agricultural, pestilence, or even personal dilemmas. What is interesting in the study of these lively and earthy poems of lament is the inner structure that gives shape to these prayers. The structure is not merely an external envelope to a human experience, but it captures as well the qualities of the inner dynamic of the prayer itself. The structure of the lament is not arbitrary. It is an expression of the dynamic of lament prayer.

Westermann outlines the structure of a lament quite succinctly:



Not all of these elements are present in exactly the same order. Each psalm of lament has its uniqueness, yet the laments follow an internal logic and a dynamic that are quite consistent. Each lament concretely embodies the dynamic of the lament in its own unique manner.

1) **Address:** Laments are prayers addressed to someone named, someone who is known, someone who is and has been close to the psalmist. With the name, contact is made. The other cannot help but hear. This name is one of the signs of the immediacy of God. In the psalms this address is very simple. "My Lord, My God". Large introductions are not necessary. Proximity and familiarity are presumed. In Babylonian and Egyptian laments often we find elaborate introductions. The address in the Hebrew psalter is not always expressed through the 2nd person, the I/Thou. At times the 3rd person is employed as in Ps 142. "I cry with my voice to the Lord".

A reference to the past may accompany the opening address. The Lord who is the "God of our Ancestors" is a frequent refrain in the historical books as well as in several psalms. An immediate cry for help can be associated with the opening address. Ps 140, Deliver me O Lord from evil ones. Ps 80, Give ear O Shepherd of Israel. There can even be an immediate accusation. Ps 22, O God, my God, why have you abandoned me? The naming of the Lord immediately opens the dialogue to what is important for the psalmist. There is no neutrality or wavering. The address implies a familiarity that is both personal and intense, expressing a fundamental trust and hope that the psalmist will be heard.

2) **Complaint:** The complaint or lament proper is expressed in the three primordial relations of human beings: being in relationship to God, to oneself and to others. In the first case, that is in relationship to God, the psalmist accuses God of going back on his word, of having abandoned the psalmist to injustice. Such questions imply accusations as 'how long will you hide your face? Why? Will your anger burn forever?' (Note Jeremiah 20:14-18 -- Cursed be the day I was born. Jer 20:7 -- O Lord you deceived me and I let myself be deceived, cf. Job 3:1-9).

a) There was clearly a development in the propriety of accusing God directly in the psalms of lament. Such accusations are a sign of an early origin. Perhaps they can best be understood in the context of the anger and the jealousy of lovers. Accusing God presumes an intimacy that casual acquaintances would of course consider outrageous. Here, as in the address, the accusation rests on great expectation and trust in God. God must simply be waiting for the psalmist's cry for help. Trust may have been broken, but the psalmist's cry of outrage or at least complaint presumes the possibility for brokenness to be redressed.

b) Perhaps the mode of complaint most poignantly associated with the lament is the outpouring of the psalmist's trouble. All the fragility and solitude and vulnerability of human existence find their expression in the personal lament of the psalmist. The trouble described may of course originate from several sources. There is personal suffering from false accusations in which the psalmist is at a loss in defending himself. There is moral suffering in which the psalmist recognizes the source of calamities in having been cut off from God due to sin. Finally there is the source of physical suffering due to sickness. A prevalent experience in the personal outpouring of the soul is shame - the experience of utter helplessness and nakedness in face of the trouble that plagues the psalmist.

The images employed for the outpouring of the soul revolve around the human body that suffers, thirsts, bones that are shaken etc. In this mode the psalmist places the request for God's help in the most tender and delicate language. The outpouring of the human soul is meant to appeal to the compassion of God. In the previous mode describing the psalmist's relationship to God the appeal was addressed to the sense of justice and fairness. How could God in justice leave the psalmist in the lurch? But here in the personal outpouring of the soul the language switches from accusations to expressions of a broken spirit in need of aid.

c) Considerable space of the complaint is given to a description of the immediate source of danger and threat which originates from the other, the enemy. This description of the enemy though complex is actually quite stereotyped and repetitive. The enemy is one that surrounds the psalmist. They are like animals waiting in secret to pounce on the psalmist who acts as an unsuspecting prey. They are dogs harassing the psalmist, waiting lions, powerful bulls of Bashan. At times they are described with images of military exploits. The enemy is a powerful army wielding swords, enclosing in on the helpless victim.

Here the psalmist is clearly portrayed in his relationship to others as a helpless victim who needs to be saved by another power. Only God's miraculous intervention can save the psalmist from the turmoil and tragedy that encompass him. The psalmist is on the brink of death. Sheol, death, the pit lay before him. Traps of several kinds have been laid in store for the psalmist who is to be caught as an animal. The enemies can be described finally in terms of the court scene. They are powerful accusers who practice deceit and bribery against whom again the psalmist is helpless. The psalmist is abandoned even by close friends, those who eat at his table. They mock, deride and sneer at the hapless victim. They accuse the psalmist with lies and deceits and only God can defend him.

No specific details are given that would identify the enemies with a particular group. Even in community laments referring to a specific act like the destruction of the temple by Babylon the enemy is described in general terms as if the significance of the destruction goes beyond its history to a crucial relationship among Israel-God-Enemy.

The uniformity of the enemy in the psalms is quite striking. They are always many. They lay traps, they are inhuman reducing the psalmist to inhumanity. They are godless yet they are powerful. Only God's justice can bring them to truth, to conversion, to life. Only God can help the psalmist come to life.

For many contemporary readers of the psalms this call to trust in God's intervention may appear dangerously close to helpless passivity. But we should understand this form of lament as an activity of trust in crisis. The laments address a moment within the dynamics of crisis in which trust is laid squarely on God. This does not mean that the psalmist or the community has not been highly active in pursuing justice up to this point. The declaration of innocence, the review of the past, the vow to praise God are all elements recalled in the laments which point to the active engagement of the community to seek actively the justice of God. But the lament itself is not a call for action on the part of the psalmist (except perhaps the conscious and deliberate act itself to trust in God). In a moment of crisis, the lament is a call of the people for action on the part of God within the community.

In the community laments the enemy has already achieved partial victory such as the Babylonians reducing the temple to rubble (Ps 137). But in the individual laments the danger of the enemies is forever immanent. The enemy is forever threatening. They are from without, from within, from friends, from people of the same group. Westermann identifies Hellenistic tendencies as the source for much of the imagery that describes the enemy in individual laments. Whatever was tearing people away from the covenant was tearing apart the psalmist. However, we cannot be sure of such a conjecture. It does point to the fact that the enemy reduced to animals can refer to tendencies, structures and to people committed to them that renders life intolerably unjust or unacceptable. This mode of complaint combines the former two in that the psalmist is appealing at the same time both to God's compassion and to God's sense of justice. In describing the powerful, godless enemies, the psalmist is appealing to God's sense of justice to thwart the arrogant. In describing oneself vis-a-vis the enemy as a victim who stands alone against the onslaught of a powerful, unjust enemy, the psalmist is appealing to the compassion of God as well. Even the psalms of repentance (e.g. Ps 51) follow closely the dynamic of laments. But in these psalms the enemy is not someone from without but rather the shame and guilt of individual or communal sin.

3) **Review of past:** The lament is voiced from the standpoint of hope and trust. Even the most extreme forms of lament turn to God precisely because the psalmist hopes in the faithfulness and power of God. This hope is expressed in the structure of laments in recalling former acts of love and aid. (Ps 22:4-5) Trust can be expressed in a declaration of the power and goodness of God as in 74:12-17, You did divide the sea, You crushed the head of Leviathan, You have fixed all the bounds of the earth etc. Either the psalmist appeals to salvation events where the LORD had shown particular favour to Israel or he appeals to the power of God expressed through images of creation. In both cases the psalmist trusts the compassion and power of God to intervene on behalf of the psalmist. These declarations of trust can be interspersed anywhere throughout the psalms of lament. As we have seen a declaration of trust is already implicitly implied in the address itself and as we shall see in the vow to praise at the conclusion of the psalm. In the most desperate of psalms (Ps 88), only the opening address contains an expression of trust and hope of being heard. This aspect of the psalm shows an inherent dynamic of the psalms of lament. Essentially the lament and the petition are grounded in the psalmist's trust and hope in God. In this way they are also an expression of trust and hope in the very act of lamenting and petitioning God to intervene.

4) **Petition:** In light of the trust which is the foundation of the lament, the psalmist then makes known the specific petition. Here we often see duplicated the pattern of the address that moves into the lament. The psalmist calls for God's attention, "Listen to my cry", "Turn your face to me", "Give heed to my supplication" etc. The actual petitions correspond to the specific elements that were formulated in the lament proper. "Save me from my distress", "Do not let me go down to Sheol", "Save me from my enemies", "Save me from the traps that lay before me", "Forgive my sins" etc.

5) **Motives:** The specific petitions often blend in with expressed motives as to why God should give heed to the petitions. Here the additional motive from those already given in the lament proper is that God will benefit from this intervention on the psalmist's behalf. "For the sake of your name", "What will the nations say? But a reiteration of the helpless victim continues even here as a prime motive for God's speedily intervention, "For we are helpless". In these expressed motives the psalmist appeals to the identification between the people and the LORD, between the psalmist and the LORD. Can this bond that has united them together through so much history now be broken and destroyed?

The understanding underlying these motives is that God cannot risk the destruction of his people, for in that case the great work of God will be defeated. For this reason some of these motives appear to correspond quite closely to the opening accusation of God's distance. The origin of this motive in the historical books is the argument of Moses which was used to hold back the wrath of God from destroying the people after their apostasy (*Why should the Egyptians say ... Ex 32:11*).

6) **Double-wish:** This term simply gives expression to the manner in which the petition is often synthesized nearing the end of the prayer. The concluding petition is double-edged. The unifying factor in the petition is the longing for God's salvation. But God's saving act itself will have to have a double-edge: the saving of the psalmist implies the destruction of the enemy. Such utterances could of course already have been integrated into the petitions or into the lament itself. Often the psalmist calls upon God - to punish the enemy in the very ways that the enemy has hoped to destroy or vanquish the psalmist.

This is the particular feature of a lament that many Christians find difficult to pray, for it involves the cursing of one's enemies. A distinction must be drawn between using the texts that call for vengeance in community worship and praying them in personal prayer. Facing the evil in the world head on demands fortitude and clarity. Shunning this responsibility under the appearance of passivity is definitely not what is understood in the Christian call to love one's enemies. The reality of enemies in our lives that calls forth vengeance can help to clarify for us the distinction between right anger that yearns for the life of God and for oppression to cease and vengeful anger that only wants to punish and destroy. As Christians we may judge that a new element has entered such prayers that would follow the dynamic of laments. We are called to forgive our enemies, to bless those that curse us. But let us not confuse forgiveness with passivity or shallowness. Right anger calls us to face evil *square on*, pray for its elimination, for the building up of the people of God and for welcoming the kingdom in our midst.

7) **Divine response:** In some of the psalms of lament there is a turning point at which time it seems that the psalmist has received assurance that the lament and the petition have been heard. This turning point in the psalm reflects the reality of God's intervention, of God's personal touch in the prayer of the psalmist God has communicated presence and confidence that gives hope to the one praying even though the situation has not concretely been radically transformed. The origin for such intervention could be located in the giving of oracles by the temple priests.

85:4-7,8	Let me hear what the Lord God will speak.
60:6-8	God has spoken in his sanctuary.
81:5	I heard a voice I had not known.

These examples point to the possibility of an oracle being given during the actual praying of a psalm of lament. This turning point then moves quite smoothly into praising God for his compassion, goodness and power. It blends in with the conclusion of the psalms of lament which have the psalmist vowing to praise God for the intervention that will surely take place.

8) **Vow to Praise:** The psalmist has had the assurance of being heard. A consolation gives hope in the midst of difficulty. The basic trust that has motivated the psalmist to address God in the midst of anxiety and

turmoil now bursts forth in confidence and praise. In fact this very act of praising God is one of the motives for asking for God's intervention. "Save me that I might announce and declare your power and the glory of your name". "Can the dead in Sheol sing your praises?" The identity between the psalmist or Israel and God is complete. The one who prays gives glory and praise to God because both are intrinsically bound together through the covenant, through the history of salvation. Sometimes the vow of praise is expressed as simply as was the address at the beginning of the psalm. "I will give praise to your name forever"(142:7). Or the vow can be extended to the extent that it practically becomes a psalm of praise, as is the case in Ps 22 (cf Ps 88, the most dismal of the laments).

The dynamic of the psalms of lament clearly revolve around a deep sense of trust in the LORD. It is trust and familiarity that brings the psalmist who is at the brink of despair to pour out his heart before God. It is trust and hope that carries the psalmist through the dynamic of the entire lament to explain the plight in the three-fold relationship of God – Self - Other. It is hope and trust that brings the psalmist to petition the LORD to intervene and to cope with the enemies of the psalmist. Finally it is trust in the LORD that induces the psalmist to praise God for his intervention that assuredly will take place. The expression of confidence that pervades the psalms of lament, even the most anguishing ones, has generated its own particular psalm, namely the psalms of trust or confidence. These psalms do not have a unique form as that of the laments. Instead they concentrate on presenting images that give expression to the confidence and trust that the psalmist has in God. Perhaps Psalm 23 is the best known psalm of confidence.

Laments: 7, 13, **22**, 28, 31, 55, 56, 57, 61, 142, 143. Community Laments, 12, 44, 58, 60, 74.

Enemies 3, 5, 7, 35, 59, 64, 120. Curses: 130, 140, 141.

Sickness, penitential, 6, 38, 39, 43, **51**, 130.

(*sinking in mire* 69, 88; *preserve my innocence* 141, 26, 7, 15

court proceedings: 12, 55, 64, 142, (54--59, 109, 140, 143)

1Sam 1:9ff; 2Sam 1:19ff; Exod 32:11; Daniel 13:42.

Trust: 11, 16, 23, 27, 46, 91 (rescue), 121 (the hill), 125 (Zion), 131 (child at mother's breast), 42, 62, 63 (longing, satisfaction). (4 trust wisdom; 14, 52 lament wisdom).

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From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life: 67-83

The Formfulness of Grief, 84-97

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