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The Costly Loss of Lament

RECENT STUDY of the lament psalms has indicated their enormous theological significance in the faith and liturgy of Israel and in their subsequent use by the church. There is no doubt that the lament psalms had an important function in the community of faith. In this chapter, I will explore the loss of life and faith incurred when the lament psalms are no longer used for their specific social function.

I

We may begin with a summary of the current scholarly consensus. Claus Westermann has done the most to help our understanding of the Psalms, and his work is surely normative for all other discussions.¹ Indeed, his work now has importance that ranks with that of Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel for our understanding of this literature.²

1. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (see chap. 1, n. 4), and also idem, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).

2. On the contributions of Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel, see A. R. Johnson, "The Psalms" (see chap. 1, n. 6), 162-209; John H. Hayes, *An Introduction to Old Testament Study* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 285-317; and Ronald E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (see chap. 1, n. 3), 76-98.

1. First, Westermann has shown that these psalms move from plea to praise.³ In that move the situation and/or attitude of the speaker is transformed, and God is mobilized for the sake of the speaker. The intervention of God in some way permits the move from plea to praise.⁴

Second, Westermann has shown that the lament is resolved by and corresponds to the song of thanksgiving.⁵ Indeed, the song of thanksgiving is in fact the lament restated after the crisis has been dealt with. Westermann inclines to read this correspondence of lament and thanks as a subdued, regimented, and calculated form of response, whereas praise-in contrast with thanksgiving-is unfettered.⁶

Third, whatever one thinks of the contrast of thanksgiving and praise, Westermann has shown how the lament characteristically ends in praise that is full and unfettered. Indeed, the proper setting of praise is as lament resolved. In a sense, doxology and praise are best understood only in response to God's salvific intervention, which in turn is evoked by the lament.⁷

Fourth, Westermann himself has largely begged the question of life-setting for the laments. He is most reluctant to use the category of cult; and when that category is denied, it is difficult to discuss setting in life in any formal sense.⁸

Lastly, Westermann has not explicitly articulated the relational dynamics that go along with the structural elements. But I think it is safe to deduce from his form-critical analysis the following relational

3. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 33, 75, and passim.

4. How that intervention of God happened is unclear. The most formidable hypothesis is that of Joachim Begrich, "Das priesterliche Heilsorakel" (see chap. 1, n. 27). Begrich proposed that a priestly "oracle of salvation" was spoken in the midst of the lament, which moved the speech from plea to praise. On Begrich's contribution, see Thomas M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile* (see chap. 1, n. 27).

5. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 27-30.

6. Harvey H. Guthrie, *Theology as Thanksgiving* (see chap. 2, n. 18), 1-30, in my judgment, has a better understanding of thanksgiving as a vital form of response to God.

7. Guthrie, *Theology as Thanksgiving*, 18-19, shrewdly correlates form-critical insights with sociological realities. In contrast to Westermann, Guthrie regards thanksgiving as a more primal mode of faith than is praise. I am inclined to agree.

8. More recently, form-critical scholarship has moved away from a rigid and one-dimensional notion of setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*) to a much more comprehensive and dynamic notion that would be, I suspect, more congenial to Westermann. On this development, see Rolf Knierim, "Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered" (see chap. 1, n. 1); and Martin J. Buss, "The Idea of *Sitz im Leben*-History and Critique" (see chap. 1, n. 5).

dynamic. In these psalms, Israel moves from *articulation* of hurt and anger, to *submission* of them to God, and finally to *relinquishment*.⁹ Functionally and experientially, the verbal articulation and the faithful submission to God are prerequisites for relinquishment. Only when there is such relinquishment can there be praise and acts of generosity. Thus the relational dynamic vis-à-vis God corresponds to the move of the formal elements.

2. The question of setting in life is not as unambiguous as is our understanding of the genre, perhaps because Westermann has not directly turned his attention to the issue. We may suggest four elements of the scholarly discussion of this matter.

First, Sigmund Mowinckel's temple hypothesis has largely dominated the discussion, and Aubrey Johnson has put the hypothesis to good use.¹⁰ However, such a mode of interpretation has caused a sense of unreality about the laments, as though they are used as play-acting in some great national drama, rather than being the serious expression of the experience of members of the community.

Second, the juridical hypothesis of Hans Schmidt, Lienhard Delekat, and Walter Beyerlin¹¹ is important and has much to commend it. No doubt the language of the lament psalms reflects a juridical concern. However, it is difficult to know how realistically to take the language. The hypothesis has suffered from the inclination to treat juridical language as only imitative. In Psalm 109 the language seems realistic.¹² The appeal for a judge is a real one, and the prayer petition is a request that the actual juridical procedure should be handled in a certain way.

Third, the influential hypothesis of Mowinckel that the "evil-doers" are people who work by sympathetic magic seems to me to be

9. The relinquishment here accomplished is liturgical, rhetorical, and emotional, but I think it is important to correlate that form of relinquishment with the economic relinquishment urged by Marie Augusta Neal, *A Socio-Theology of Letting Go* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975). I believe the two forms of relinquishment are intimately related. It follows then that the loss of lament as a mode of letting go makes the possibility of economic relinquishment more problematic and more likely to be met with resistance.

10. Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien II: Das Thronbesteigungsfest Jahwäs und der Ursprung der Eschatologie* (Amsterdam: P. Schipper, 1961); Aubrey Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1967). Various critiques are summarized in the presentations of Hayes and Clements.

11. Hans Schmidt, *Das Gebet der Angeklagten im Alten Testament* (see chap. 1, n. 9); Lienhard Delekat, *Asylie und Schutzorakel am Zionheiligtum* (see chap. 1, n. 10); Walter Beyerlin, *Die Rettung der Bedrängten* (see chap. 1, n. 10).

12. On the reality of social practice related to this psalm, see chap. 14, below.

quite wrongheaded.¹³ A more realistic sense of social process would indicate that those who are powerful enough to speak such words are the ones who administer, control, and benefit from social operations. This hypothesis again is an attempt to distance the laments from actual social processes. They reflect an idealistic reading of the text.

Fourth, the work of Rainer Albertz and Erhard Gerstenberger seems to me to be most helpful in seeing that the laments are genuine pastoral activities.¹⁴ Albertz has seen that the personal laments function in a *Kleinkult*, a more intimate and familial setting of religious life, apart from the temple and where the personal life-cycle processes of birth and death are in crisis. Gerstenberger has supported such a general sense of setting by placing these psalms in something like a house church or a base community in which members of the community enact a ritual of rehabilitation as an act of hope. This hypothesis has great plausibility and relates the poetry to what seem to be real-life situations.

3. It is still the case that, even in the light of Westermann's great contribution, scholars have only walked around the edges of the theological significance of the lament psalm. We have yet to ask what it means to have this form available in this social construction of reality.¹⁵ What difference does it make to have faith that permits and requires this form of prayer? My answer is that it shifts the calculus and *redresses the distribution of power* between the two parties, so that the petitionary party is taken seriously and the God who is addressed is newly engaged in the crisis in a way that puts God at risk. As the lesser, petitionary party (the psalm speaker) is legitimated, so the unmitigated supremacy of the greater party (God) is questioned, and God is made available to the petitioner. The basis for the conclusion that the petitioner is taken seriously and legitimately granted power in the relation is that the speech of the petitioner is heard, valued, and transmitted as serious speech. Cultically, we may assume that such speech is taken seriously by God. Such a speech pattern

13. Mowinckel's view was articulated in *Psalmenstudien*. It is summarized in *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (see chap. 3, n. 10), 2:4-8.

14. Rainer Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion* (see chap. 1, n. 15); Erhard Gerstenberger, *Der bittende Mensch* (see chap. 1, n. 16).

15. For this understanding of the social power of speech forms, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (see chap. 1, n. 13). For this understanding applied specifically to the lament psalms, see chap. 4, above.

and social usage keep all power relations under review and capable of redefinition.

The lament form thus concerns a redistribution of power. In the following discussion, I want to explore the negative implications of the redress of power. That is, I want to explore the questions: What happens when appreciation of the lament as a form of speech and faith is lost, as I think it is largely lost in contemporary usage? What happens when the speech forms that redress power distribution have been silenced and eliminated? The answer, I believe, is that a theological monopoly is reinforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered, and the outcome in terms of social practice is to reinforce and consolidate the political-economic monopoly of the status quo. In other words, the removal of lament from life and liturgy is not disinterested and, I suggest, only partly unintentional. In the following, I will explore two dimensions of the loss of lament and therefore two possible gains for the recovery of lament.

II

One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of *genuine covenant interaction*, since the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology. Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being. Or in political categories, the greater party is surrounded by subjects who are always “yes-men and women” from whom “never is heard a discouraging word.” Since such a celebrative, consenting silence does not square with reality, covenant minus lament is finally a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense, which sanctions social control.

There is important heuristic gain in relating this matter to the theory of personality development called “object-relations theory.”¹⁶

16. A convenient summary of the theory is offered by Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 82-96. I am grateful to Gerkin for suggesting some lines of my present research. Literature on the theory includes: Otto Kernberg, *Object Relations Theory and Clinical Psychoanalysis* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1976); idem, *Internal World and External Reality* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1981); idem, *Object Relations Theory and Its Applications* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1981); Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971); D. W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, Wis.: International Universities Press, 1965); and Harry Guntrip, *Psychoanalytic Theory, Therapy and the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

The nomenclature is curious and misleading. The theory is a protest against psychological theories that claim that crucial matters of personality formation are internal to the person. Object-relations theory maintains instead that they are relational and external. "Object relations" means that the person must be related to real, objective others who are not a projection but are unyielding centers of power and will. For the very young child, one such objective other is, of course, the mother. For our subject, then, a parallel can be expressed between child relating to mother and worshiper relating to God.

The argument made in this theory is that the child, if she or he is to develop ego-strength, must have initiative with the mother and an experience of omnipotence. This happens only if the mother is responsive to the child's gestures and does not take excessive initiative toward the child. D. W. Winnicott writes:

A true self begins to have life through the strength given to the infant's weak ego by the mother's implementation of the infant's omnipotent expressions.¹⁷

The negative alternative is that the mother does not respond but takes initiative, and then the mother is experienced by the child as omnipotent:

The mother who is not good enough is not able to implement the infant's omnipotence and so she repeatedly fails to meet the infant gesture. Instead she substitutes her own gesture which is to be given compliance by the infant. This compliance on the part of the infant is the earliest stage of the False Self, and belongs to the mother's inability to sense her infant's needs.¹⁸

We can draw a suggestive analogy from this understanding of the infant/mother relationship for our study of the lament. Where there is lament, the believer is able to take initiative with God and so develop over against God the ego-strength that is necessary for responsible faith. But where the capacity to initiate lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God then is omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer is nothing, and can praise or accept guilt uncritically where life with God does not function properly. The outcome is a "False Self," bad faith that is based in fear and guilt and

17. Winnicott, *Maturational Processes*, 145.

18. *Ibid.*

lived out as resentful or self-deceptive works of righteousness. The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility.

I do not suggest that biblical faith be reduced to psychological categories, but I find this parallel suggestive. It suggests that the God who evokes and responds to lament is neither omnipotent in any conventional sense nor surrounded by docile reactors. Rather, this God is like a mother who dreams with this infant, that the infant may some day grow into a responsible, mature covenant partner who can enter into serious communion and conversation. In such a serious conversation and communion, there comes genuine obedience, which is not a contrived need to please, but a genuine, yielding commitment.

Where there is no lament through which the believer takes initiative, God is experienced like an omnipotent mother. What is left for the believer then is a false narcissism that keeps hoping for a centered self but lacks the ego-strength for a real self to emerge. What is at issue here, as Calvin understood so well, is a true understanding of the human self but, at the same time, a radical discernment of this God who is capable of and willing to be respondent and not only initiator.¹⁹

III

The second loss caused by the absence of lament is the *stifling of the question of theodicy*. I do not refer to some esoteric question of God's coping with ontological evil. Rather, I mean the capacity to raise and legitimate questions of justice in terms of social goods, social access, and social power.²⁰ My sense is that, with regard to "theodicy," Israel is more concerned with *dikē* than with *theos*, more committed to questions of *justice* than to questions of God.²¹ Thus the line of

19. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 35-39, understands so shrewdly how the knowledge of God and human creatures are interrelated. On Calvin's attempt to assert the utter sovereignty of God and God's propensity for relatedness, see Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Int* (1977): 19-38.

20. On the social dimensions of the problem of evil and theodicy, see especially Jon Gunnemann, *The Moral Meaning of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979).

21. On the relation of God and justice, *theos* and *dikē*, in the Old Testament understanding of theodicy, see my "Theodicy in a Social Dimension," in Walter

scholarly interpretation from Schmidt to Delekat and Beyerlin is correct in seeing that the lament partakes of something of a claim filed in court in order to ensure that the question of justice is formally articulated. Westermann has seen that the poem of Job largely consists of these charges filed with the rather odd and inappropriate refutations on the part of the friends.²²

The lament psalms, then, are a complaint that makes the shrill insistence that:

1. Things are not right in the present arrangement.
2. They need not stay this way and can be changed.
3. The speaker will not accept them in this way, for the present arrangement is intolerable.
4. It is God's obligation to change things.²³

But the main point is the first: life is not right. It is now noticed and voiced that life is not as it was promised to be. The utterance of this awareness is an exceedingly dangerous moment at the throne. It is as dangerous as Lech Walesa or Rosa Parks asserting with their bodies that the system has broken down and will no longer be honored. For the managers of the system-political, economic, religious, moral-there is always a hope that the troubled folks will not notice the dysfunction or that a tolerance of a certain degree of dysfunction can be accepted as normal and necessary, even if unpleasant. Lament occurs when the dysfunction reaches an unacceptable level, when the injustice is intolerable and change is insisted upon.

The lament/complaint can then go in two different directions. For each direction, I shall cite an extreme case. On the one hand, the complaint can be *addressed to God against neighbor*. Psalm 109 is an extreme case. The psalm is an appeal to the *hesed* (steadfast love) of Yahweh (vv. 21, 26) against the failed *hesed* of the human agent (v. 16). God is a court of appeal through which a "better" juridical process is sought (see v. 6). Whereas human justice has failed, it is sure that God's justice is reliable. But notice that the plea concerns actual, concrete issues of justice, presumably having to do with

Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 174-96, and *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 168-76.

22. Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job* (see chap. 1, n. 48).

23. On such boldness in biblical prayer, see Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer* (see chap. 2, n. 15), 11-14 and passim.

property. On the other hand, the complaint can be *addressed to God against God*. Psalm 88 is an extreme case. Here it is the justice of God that has failed. In such a case, Israel has no other court of appeal, and so with great risk, Israel must return again and again to the same court with the same charge.²⁴ The psalm is relentless, and that must be reckoned a very dangerous act, to keep petitioning the court of Yahweh against its own injustice. In both complaints, concerning failed human *hesed* and unresponsive Yahweh, the issue is justice. In each instance, the petitioner accepts no guilt or responsibility for the dysfunction but holds the other party responsible.

To be sure, these laments/complaints articulate a religious problem. But these speeches are not mere religious exercises as though their value were principally cathartic. Rather, the religious speech always carries with it a surplus of political, economic, and social freight. The God addressed is either the legitimator and the guarantor of the social process (as in Psalm 88) or the court of appeal against the system (as in Psalm 109). The claims and rights of the speaker are asserted to God in the face of a system that does not deliver. That system is visible on earth and addressed in heaven with the passionate conviction that it can, must, and will be changed.

In regularly using the lament form, Israel kept the justice question visible and legitimate. It is this justice question in the form of lament that energizes the exodus narrative. Indeed, it is the cry of Israel (Exod. 2:23-25) that mobilizes Yahweh to the action that begins the history of Israel. The cry initiates history.²⁵ Paul Hanson has shown that the same right of appeal in the form of lament appears in Israel's legal material (Exod. 22:22-24), in which the poor can cry out.²⁶ While the cry is addressed to Yahweh, it is clear that the cry

24. On the daring attempt to make an appeal other than to God, see Job 19:25. Samuel Terrien, *Job: Poet of Existence* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 151, ex-positis such a reading of the text. This adventuresome thought is beyond the characteristic notion in the Old Testament that appeal can only be made once again to the same God. It is remarkable that Israel's rage against God did not drive Israel away from God to atheism or idolatry, but more passionately into prayer addressed to God.

25. On the cruciality of this cry for the shape of Israel's faith, see James Plastaras, *The God of Exodus* (see chap. 3, n. 9), 49-59.

26. Paul D. Hanson, "The Theological Significance of Contradiction within the Book of Covenant," in *Canon and Authority*, ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 110-31. On the dialectic of compassion in response to human need, see now Hanson, "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible," *Int* 38 (1984): 341-79.

is not merely a religious gesture but has important and direct links to social processes. When such a cry functions as a legal accusation, the witness of the tradition is that Yahweh hears and acts (see Ps. 107:4-32). In the Book of the Covenant, we are given two such legal provisions. In the first case (Exod. 22:22-24), Yahweh responds to the cry and “kills with a sword.” In the second case (22:27), Yahweh hears and is compassionate. In both cases, the cry mobilizes God in the arena of public life. In neither case is the response simple religious succor, but it is juridical action that rescues and judges. That is the nature of the function of lament in Israel.

Where the lament is absent, the normal mode of the theodicy question is forfeited.²⁷ When the lament form is censured, justice questions cannot be asked and eventually become invisible and illegitimate. Instead, we learn to settle for questions of “meaning,”²⁸ and we reduce the issues to resolutions of love. But the categories of meaning and love do not touch the public systemic questions about which biblical faith is relentlessly concerned. A community of faith that negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne (which is a conclusion drawn through liturgic use), they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justice questions disappear into civility and docility.²⁹ The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of this speech form is denied.

27. This emphasis on social evil is a departure from the otherwise splendid statement of James L. Crenshaw, *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 1-16. Crenshaw characterizes the issue only with reference to “moral, natural, and religious” evil. I believe such a characterization is inadequate because of the great stress in the Old Testament on social justice and injustice.

28. Fascination with “meaning” was especially advanced by Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1952), 41-42 and passim. In retrospect, Tillich’s triad of death, guilt, and meaningfulness, as it applies to the modern period, is uncritically idealistic. A more materialist sense of social reality could not settle so readily for the category of “meaning” as the modern agenda.

29. On the function of civility as a mode of social control, see John M. Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), and Norbert Elias, *Power and Civility* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

IV

I have pursued the loss of lament in two directions. On the one hand, I have argued in a psychological direction about object relations and ego development. On the other hand, I have argued in a sociological direction concerning public, social questions of justice. I do not intend that the question of lament should be slotted as, or reduced to, either the psychological or the sociological dimension. Rather, the lament makes an assertion about God: that this dangerous, available God matters in *every* dimension of life. Where God's dangerous availability is lost because we fail to carry on our part of the difficult conversation, where God's vulnerability and passion are removed from our speech, we are consigned to anxiety and despair, and the world as we now have it becomes absolutized. Our understanding of faith is altered dramatically depending on whether God is a dead cipher who cannot be addressed and is only the silent *guarantor* of the status quo, or whether God can be addressed in risky ways as the *transformer* of what has not yet appeared. With reference to psychological issues, ego development is not dependent solely on a "good-enough" mother³⁰ but on a God whose omnipotence is reshaped by pathos.³¹ With reference to social questions, the emergence of justice depends not simply on social structures but on a sovereign agent outside the system to whom effective appeal can be made against the system. Ego-strength and social justice finally drive us to theological issues. A God who must always be praised and never assaulted correlates with a development of "False Self" and an uncritical status quo. But a God who is available in assault correlates with the emergence of genuine self and the development of serious justice.

30. Winnicott, *Maturational Processes*, characteristically speaks of the "good-enough" mother. He does not present a model of a perfect mother, but one who intuitively responds to the initiatives of the child. Winnicott observes that mothers characteristically operate in this way.

31. A variety of writers, such as Abraham Heschel, Dorothee Sölle, Kamo Kitamori, and Jürgen Moltmann, have now identified pathos as the mark of God that reshapes God's omnipotence. Elsewhere, I have suggested that the tension between God's omnipotence and God's pathos may be the shaping problem for doing Old Testament theology. See "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation" and "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," in Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 1-44.

V

Finally, I conclude with some brief comments on Psalm 39, to see how these claims are worked out in a specific text. Psalm 39 is a lament that makes petition to Yahweh. The speaker announces a long-standing intention to keep silent (w. 1-3a). But the practice of restraint had only contributed to the trouble. In verse 3b, finally there is speech because the submissive silence is inadequate. In verse 4, the speaker names Yahweh for the first time. In that moment of speech of bold address, things already begin to change. The cause of trouble has now become an open question in the relationship. The speaker resolves no longer to be dumb in the face of wickedness, and that resolve creates new possibilities. Verses 4-6 are a meditation on the limits and transitoriness of human life. There is an appeal to know the end, that is, the outcome, but it is not a very vigorous statement. It is still reflective, without great self-assertion.

The mood changes abruptly in verse 7, where God is addressed for the second time. The text has *ʔadonai*, but some evidence suggests a second reading of *Yahweh*. But the crucial rhetorical move is *weʿattâ* (and now).³² A major turn is marked as the speech moves from meditation to active, insistent hope.

And now, what do I hope for (*qwh*)?
My hope (*yhl*) is in you.

The focus on Yahweh is an insistence that things need not and will not stay as they are. This is followed in verse 8 by a powerful imperative, *nsl* (snatch or deliver). In verse 9, the petition grows bolder because now the speaker is able to say, “*You have done it.*” The silence has turned to accusation, but the accusation is a form of active hope. Verse 11 returns to a more reflective tone. Then, in verse 12, the third reference to Yahweh is again a vigorous imperative:

Hear my prayer, Yahweh
to my cry give ear,
at my tears do not be silent,
for I am a sojourner with you.

The speech that has ended the silence is a strong urging to Yahweh. As the speaker has refused silence, now the speaker petitions Yahweh

32. On the rhetorical power of the conjunction, see James Muilenburg, “The Form and Structure of the Covenantal Formulations,” *VT* 9 (1959): 74-79.

also to break the silence (v. 12). The speech of the petitioner seeks to evoke the speech and intervention of Yahweh.

The psalm ends with the terse ‘inertia (I will not be). The urging is that God should act before the speaker ceases to be, as a result of a process of social nullification. Whether the speaker ceases to be depends on Yahweh’s direct intervention against powerful forces that practice nullification.

I submit that this psalm makes contact with both points I have argued. On the one hand, the speaker moves from silence to speech.” The speech consists of a series of bold imperatives, and in verse 9 it states a clarification that may be read as an indictment of God: “You have done it.” The psalm evidences courage and ego-strength before Yahweh that permits an act of hope, expectant imperatives, and an insistence that things be changed before it is too late.” The insistence addressed to Yahweh is matched by a sense of urgency about the threat of not-being. I take this threat to be social and worked through the social system.

On the other hand, the justice questions are raised. They are raised as early as verse 1 with reference to the wicked (*rāšā*). We are not given any specifics, but the reference to “guest” in verse 12 suggests that the question concerns social power and social location that have left the speaker exposed, vulnerable, and without security (except for Yahweh).” Yahweh is reminded that Yahweh is respon-

33. Robert Alter also has seen that the movement of silence and speech is crucial in this psalm: “On the contrary, the ancient Hebrew literary imagination reverts again and again to a bedrock assumption about the efficacy of speech, cosmogonically demonstrated by the Lord (in Genesis 1) who is emulated by man. In our poem, the speaker’s final plea that God hear his cry presupposes the efficacy of speech, the truth-telling power with which language has been used to expose the supplicant’s plight.... The first two lines present a clear development of intensification of the theme of silence—from a resolution not to offend by speech, to muzzling the mouth, to preserving (in a chain of three consecutive synonyms) absolute muteness. The realized focal point of silence produces inward fire, a state of acute distress that compels a reversal of the initial resolution and issues in speech” (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* [New York: Basic Books, 1985], 67-73).

34. Erhard Gerstenberger, “Der klagende Mensch” (see chap. 1, n. 11), has shown how the complaint (in contrast to a lament of resignation) is in fact an act of hope.

35. José Miranda, *Communism in the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), 44, has concluded, “It can surely be said that the Psalter presents a struggle of the just against the unjust.” His argument is an insistence that *rāšā* must not be rendered as a religious category, because it concerns issues of social power and social justice.

36. On the social situation of the *gēr* (sojourner), see Frank Anthony Spina, “Israelites as *gerim*, ‘Sojourners,’ in Social and Historical Context,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O’Connor (Winona Lake, Ill.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 321-35. Not unrelated to that social status, see Spina’s more

sible for such a sojourner and is called to accountability on his or her behalf because “I am your passing guest [= sojourner].”

On grounds of both ego-assertion and public justice, Psalm 39 causes a change in heaven with a derivative resolution of social systems on earth. This psalm characteristically brings to speech the cry of a troubled earth (v. 12). Where the cry is not voiced, heaven is not moved and history is not initiated. The end is hopelessness. Where the cry is seriously voiced, heaven may answer and earth may have a new chance. The new resolve in heaven and the new possibility on earth depend on the initiation of protest.

VI

It makes one wonder about the price of our civility, that this chance in our faith has largely been lost because the lament psalms have dropped out of the functioning canon. In that loss, we may unwittingly endorse a “False Self” that can take no initiative toward an omnipotent God. We may also unwittingly endorse unjust systems about which no questions can properly be raised. In the absence of lament, we may be engaged in uncritical history-stifling praise. Both *psychological inauthenticity* and *social immobility* may be derived from the loss of these texts. If we care about authenticity and justice, the recovery of these texts is urgent.

36 *note continued...* extended study on social rage, “The Concept of Social Rage in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1977). This psalm may be related to social rage around the question of theodicy.