



Biblical & Contemporary Lament: Examples and Resources

By Nancy C. Lee

Slavery & Civil Rights

The most influential use of the Exodus and lament psalm tradition in the U.S. has been African-American churches' spirituals and gospel traditions, which were instrumental in the period of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and in the civil rights movement. Spirituals influenced the blues, which in turn influenced many popular music forms.¹ For example, there is the famous spiritual, "Go Down Moses" that can be listened to, by the singer, Paul Robeson. Thomas A. Dorsey, considered the 'father of gospel' wrote the lament, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," after his own personal tragedies. Mahalia Jackson sang his song years later for the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.

*"Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn . . ."*²

You can see the description of distress in these words, and the direct address to God.

The hip hop artist from Chicago, Common, performed "A Dream," a song that laments urban struggles and pays tribute to Martin Luther King's legacy.

Lament and Genocide

Lament has obviously been an important form of expression for Jews in relation to the Holocaust (Shoah) and for other peoples experiencing genocide, such as in Armenia, Cambodia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Sudan.³ A few examples will illustrate. On the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website can be found songs of lament sung by Jewish prisoners in the concentration camps. Genocide continues in Sudan today even though the country's president has been indicted for crimes against humanity.

"Song for Sudan"
Anonymous

*. . . the planes dropped the bombs before daybreak—
the janjaweed stormed
with the dawn.
those who could*

¹ For a fuller treatment of this, see N. Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation*.

² "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," words and Music by Thomas A. Dorsey c 1938 (Renewed), Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp.

³ Observers are concerned that the Democratic Republic of the Congo is at risk for genocide where five million people have died in conflicts there; for reports on the situation there, see the website:
<http://www.genocidewatch.org/drocongoh.html>.

*fled to the forest
to hide till they'd gone.
returning to ruins by moonlight
she found she was orphaned and then—
there they began their exodus out of sudan . . .
she watched herself widowed while guarding their sleeping
children—
. . . magboula rocks under the tree
no food for the child she cradles—staring at me.
what will it take to remember—what we said we'd never forget.
never again, is now,
once again in sudan . . .⁴*

Lament over War and Violence

It is apparent that many of the laments in the Bible, and around the world, relate to the suffering caused by conflict, violence, or war. The earliest known written composition in human history, “Lament to the Spirit of War” by the poet Enheduanna in Sumer, complains of war’s devastations (see the web link following this article).

There is a popular stereotype that the Old Testament presents a God of anger and war and the New Testament, in Jesus, a message of peace and nonviolence. However, most scholars will say that this notion does not hold up in the face of the evidence of the entire Bible.⁵ While there is no doubt that ancient Israel participated, as did the cultures around it, in a version of holy war, there are also texts of peace in the Hebrew Bible. Here are some examples. Isaiah’s famous lines are quoted also in Micah 4:1-3:

*[God] shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isa 2:4)*

Isaiah also laments the breaking of a peace treaty between Israel and Assyria:

*Listen! The valiant cry in the streets;
the envoys of peace weep bitterly.
The highways are deserted,
travelers have quit the road.
The treaty is broken,
its oaths are despised,
its obligation is disregarded.
The land mourns and languishes;
Lebanon is confounded and withers away;
Sharon is like a desert;*

⁴ “Song for Sudan” (anonymous), performed by the international ensemble of Moussa Traore, Balla Tounkara, Dave Mattacks, Richard Thompson, Mikael Merska, Laura Cortese, and Adrian Aquirre (*Fishweasel Music, ASCAP, 2004*).

⁵ While Jesus in his life followed a route of nonviolence, the portrayal of him in the book of Revelation is as a powerful cosmic warrior prepared to kill.

and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves. (Isa 33:7-9)

In the 1960s in the United States, the music of Bob Dylan was noted for its prophetic lament over social injustice and war. For example, a famous song about U.S. involvement in Vietnam was “Blowin’ in the Wind.” Like the biblical lament psalms, it raised many questions, that remain unanswered.

*. . . Yes, ’n’ how many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
. . . Yes, ’n’ how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?⁶*

After the devastation and deaths of September 11, 2001 in New York, a lament song by Bruce Springsteen (though written before the event) seemed to speak to many Americans, “My City of Ruins.” Meanwhile, Iraqis suffering from the U.S. war wrote lament poems, too, such as “Tears on a Sad Iraqi Face” by Lami’ah Abbas Amarah, and Dunya Mikhail wrote lament poems about the impact of the war on Iraqi children.⁷

Lament for New Orleans

A couple of months ago, the Society of Biblical Literature returned to New Orleans for its annual meeting. It was heartwarming to see the city doing well, how neighbors (from all over the country) have pitched in to help rebuild homes. Yet it was heartbreaking to see the ever-present injustice of devastation still in abandoned, outlying neighborhoods. A group of New Orleans poets came and presented their lament poems about Katrina; most had lost their homes. They were Dave Brinks, Megan Burns, Niyi Osundare, Bill Lavender, Jerry W. Ward, Jr., and Mona Lisa Saloy. It is after hearing their poetry than one realizes how much of that horrific reality, the moment to moment details and suffering, the monumental meanings and meaninglessness, the world would not know or understand without their laments.⁸

Since 2005, the beloved blues singer of New Orleans, Irma Thomas, revived Bessie Smith’s old song, “Back Water Blues” that bewailed anew a flood of long ago. And Charlie Miller, a great trumpet player of New Orleans, performed a piece called “Prayer for New Orleans.” In all their laments, and others too, is courageous resilience, hope, and transformation.

Audio-Video Resources and Web links

For a video of Haitians’ singing in the midst of the earthquake disaster, go to the NPR/CNN link: http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwoday/2010/01/haiti_earthquake_singing_faith.html?ft=1&f=103943429

⁶ “Blowin’ in the Wind” by Bob Dylan (copyright 1962; renewed 1990 Special Rider Music).

⁷ Lami’ah Abbas Amarah, “Tears on a Sad Iraqi Face,” trans. Salih J. Altoma, in *Al Jadid* 3, no. 21 (1997); Dunya Mikhail, “The Artist Child,” and “Transformations of the Child and the Moon,” trans. Elizabeth Winslow, in *The War Works Hard* (New York: New Directions, 2005; orig. publ. in *Almost Music*, 1997), 54–55, 71.

⁸ Dave Brinks, *Caveat Onus: Meditations* (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2009); Megan Burns, *Memorial & Sight Lines*, (New Orleans: Lavendar Ink, 2008); Niyi Osundare, *Tender Moments: Love Poems* (Ibadan: HEBN Publishers Plc, 2006); Bill Lavender, *I of the Storm* (New Orleans: Trembling Pillow Press, 2006); Jerry W. Ward, Jr., *The Katrina Papers* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008); and Mona Lisa Saloy, *Red Beans and Ricely Yours* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State Univ., 2005).

The refrain of the song there, with the words "Nou pa kapab Pe," is translated "Let us not be afraid."

To see John Hollow Horn's quote, go to http://www.republicoflakotah.com/?page_id=668

Enheduanna's "Lament to the Spirit of War" (c. 2200 BCE), translated and adapted by Daniela Gioseffi; for an audio reading, go to <http://audiopoetry.wordpress.com/2007/02/01/lament-to-the-spirit-of-war/>

For a biography of Paul Robeson and song excerpt of "Go Down, Moses," go to <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Performing/robeson.cfm>; full audio performance: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtLcELU1brA>

To listen to an excerpt of "Blowin' in the Wind" by Bob Dylan, go to his website: <http://www.bobdylan.com/#/songs/blowin-wind>

To see Mahalia Jackson's performance of "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," go to http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4ydis_mahalia-jackson-take-my-handprecio_music

To watch Common's video "A Dream," produced by Will.i.am for the film, *Freedom Writers*, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBa55sDTiA>

For lament songs from the Holocaust, also by Romani and other peoples, go to http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/music/detail.php?content=zunem_shtrain

For a lament song about the genocide in Rwanda, see Suzanne Nyiranyamibwa, "Lament of Victims of Genocide," <http://www.orwelltoday.com/rwandapoemgenocide.shtml>

To read the poem, "Tears on a Sad Iraqi Face" by Lami'ah Abbas Amarah, go to <http://leb.net/~aljadid/poetry/Tears%20on%20a%20Sad%20Iraqi%20Face.html>

For a performance of Bessie Smith's old song, "Back Water Blues" by Irma Thomas of New Orleans, go to <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5703300>

For a performance of Charlie Miller's trumpet blues piece, "Prayer for New Orleans," (following the interview of him there) go to http://www.charliemiller.us/prayer_no/prayer_no.html

Biblical Psalms that contain some element of the lament genre:

(the psalms marked with an asterisk are confessional in nature; 15%):

Psalm 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 22, 25*, 26, 27, 28, 31, 32*, 35, 36, 38*, 39*, 40, 41*, 42, 43, 44, 51*, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69*, 70, 71, 72, 74, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85*, 86, 88, 89, 90*, 94, 102, 106*, 108, 109, 119, 120, 123, 125, 126, 129, 130*, 137, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, and 144.

Active Learning

Now that you see what lament is in the Bible and has been through human history, what songs do you know today that might be generally categorized as 'laments'? How come? What parts of the song fit, or don't fit, forms of the genre, whether secular or religious? How have modern

artists adapted the genre for today's needs? Listen together to songs students bring in, from different musical styles (blues, rock, hip hop, country, classical), and see if they can identify lament elements in the lyrics or music.

Encourage students to write their own lyrics about suffering or loss, learning from the examples of biblical singers and prophets, and artists today.

Nancy C. Lee is professor of religious studies (with specialty in Hebrew Bible) at Elmhurst College in Chicago.