Teaching the Bible:
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Lament in the Bible and in Music and Poetry across Cultures Today
by Nancy C. Lee

In the enormous tragedy of Haiti from the recent earthquake, the media showed Haitians who survived the ruin soon walking together and singing fortifying songs. Several individuals pulled from the rubble began singing in the midst of their plight—profound signs of human resilience. The heart-wrenching situation of vast suffering and deaths in Haiti raises the importance of songs of lament to an acute level.

We often use the term "lament" in everyday conversation, yet it is an ancient human phenomenon of expression with a long and wide-ranging history as well as an ever-present reality. In biblical and other cultures, lament was a specific practice of oral utterance that sometimes produced written lyric texts for which we can identify genres. Comparison of cultures suggests that in biblical times the social settings for lament singing would have been in informal gatherings of the community and also in formal temple (or sanctuary) and funeral settings.

Though tradition suggests that King David was a musician/lyricist, and some of the psalms likely reflect his creativity, laments are largely anonymous. Members of the community—gifted individual and choral singers and/or temple liturgists—likely created and innovated upon lament psalms as offerings to worship. Priests and prophets may also have contributed their voices to the laments because of their responsibility to address the people's concerns. How much control was exerted over temple songs by the royal or religious leadership at different times is uncertain.

Genres of Lament in the Bible

Lament in the Hebrew Bible is an expression of sorrow, a description of distress, or a protest about injustice. We can identify two main **genres of lament** in the Bible (and beyond) that serve such purposes. These genres may be in poetic or musical lyric form:

- lament as **prayerful plea** to God for help and/or a complaint to God over social injustice
- lament as a **dirge** about the death or destruction of something or someone

The first (lament as prayerful plea) is far more common in the Bible and is especially found in the Psalms and in the collection of the book of Lamentations, while the second form is very rarely included (like David's dirge or lament song for the deaths of King Saul and Jonathan). An example of a modern dirge today would be Elton John and Bernie Taupin's song "Candle in the Wind," composed for Marilyn Monroe, with new lyrics composed for the death of Princess Diana.

However, the prophets, who were creative lyricists, took the dirge form and applied it to their own nation, ancient Israel, in their prophetic chants or songs. When they felt compelled to express God's displeasure over unethical, unjust, or unfaithful behavior, the prophets often would sing a death-song over the nation as a warning (a "communal dirge"). Jeremiah's song in Jeremiah 4:23–26 fits this bill. Jeremiah, however, even broadens this use of dirge by pointing to the death of all creation, which makes Jeremiah's oracle a "cosmic dirge."

In their dirge laments and judgment oracles, the prophets asserted that if the people did not change their ways, God (YHWH) would allow unfortunate sociopolitical consequences, even war itself, to bring the nation's collapse as punishment for their misdeeds. While a theology of attributing war and disaster to God's punishment is problematic, one can imagine the response if a prophet today sang a death-song over one's country, saying that the nation was dying like a person. No one would want to hear that, but it would get people's attention. It is also the case that the prophets spoke out of great compassion for those oppressed by the powerful, giving voice to a lament on behalf of the voiceless over injustice (Jeremiah 22:13–19)

The prophets also prayed to God with pleas for help in the "prayerful plea" form of lament.

Yet other voices lamenting to God (in the biblical books of Lamentations and Job, for example) challenged a God so angry as to allow "punishment" in this way. Ecclesiastes (a book within biblical wisdom literature) reflects a developing understanding of this issue, namely, that humans cannot know God's mind or explain God's actions. That is, understanding the whims of fate, evil, suffering and destruction—as God's choice to punish or to prevent injustice—is simply beyond human knowledge.

While ancient Israel has a long history of lament, as we will see, other cultures around Israel, and other traditional cultures around the world, also used lament in the basic forms of prayerful plea and dirge.

Prebiblical Lament

Ancient Mesopotamian cultures produced some classic laments. Just over four thousand years ago, in the area of modern-day Iraq, the ancient Sumerian city of Ur fell. The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur describes the destruction of the kingdom by an enemy army from the east that brought great suffering upon the people. In this excerpt, the singer paints a picture of civilians suffering in war, an image that continues to resonate with readers today:

> The storm immobilizes them, the storm does not let them return. ...
> The bright time was wiped out by a shadow.
> On the bloody day, mouths were crushed, heads were crashed,
> The storm was a harrow coming from above, the city was struck
> (as) by a hoe.
> On the day, heaven rumbled, the earth trembled, the storm
> worked without respite,
> The heavens were darkened, they were covered by shadow,
> the mountains roared,
> The sun lay down at the horizon, dust passed over the mountains,
> The moon lay at the zenith, the people were afraid. ...
> Large trees were being uprooted,
> the forest growth was ripped out,
> The orchards were being stripped of their fruit,
> they were being cleaned of their offshoots. ...
> [...] they piled up in heaps [...] they spread out like sheaves.
> There were corpses (floating) in the Euphrates,
> brigands roamed [the roads]. ...
> ... (As) the day grew dark, the eye (of the sun) was eclipsing,
> (the people) experienced hunger. ...
> The trees of Ur were sick, the reeds of Ur were sick,
> Laments sounded all along its city wall.

Daily there was slaughter before it. ...
"Alas, what can we say about it, what more can we add to it?
How long until we are finished off by (this) catastrophe?"[1]

If we ask what songs or lyrics today might fit the "lament" genres, a good signal is whether or not they contain a description of distress. While contemporary songs in Western culture are often secular in nature and may not refer to God, they may still fit the lament genre in their description of suffering and/or call for justice.

Exodus and Lament Psalms

Out of slavery, their cry for help rose up to God. (Exodus 2:23)

There are traditions of lament in the biblical books of Exodus and Psalms that provide the paradigm or model for biblical lament. While the first sound of lament in the Bible is the cry of the blood of Abel, who is slain by his brother Cain in the book of Genesis, it is the liberation narrative of Exodus and the pervasive laments in the Psalms that have most influenced Jewish and Christian forms of worship and helped shape secular movements for social justice worldwide.


("Cain and Abel," Titian, 1542–1544; Santa Maria della Salute, Venice)[2]

The exodus/liberation experience of the Hebrew slaves in bondage in Egypt (ca. 1300 B.C.E.; Exodus 1–15) is a story that moves from suffering and lament to rescue by a God characterized as both compassionate and all-powerful, a God who intervenes against injustice to answer the people's cries. It should be noted that the biblical materials present Moses as quite adept at lament and complaint, as in the following:

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[1] Piotr Michalowski, trans., *Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 39–62; cited in Nancy Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 24–26.

[2] See http://www.artbible.info/art/large/599.html; Art and the Bible © 2005–2009 artbible.info.

> Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery." (Numbers 11:11–15)

With the people's experience of slavery and their subsequent praise and thanks to God for their liberation, (see Exodus 15), we see the lament-to-praise pattern that is so common in the Psalms. Not only Jewish tradition, but Christian and Muslim sacred texts also recognize the importance of the exodus and the lament as prayerful plea pattern. For example, in the Qur'an, Abraham expresses faith in a God who responds to prayers of need: "Praise be to Allah,[3] Who hath granted unto me in old age Isma'il and Isaac: for truly my Lord is He, the Hearer of Prayer! (Sura 14:39).

Lament in the Psalms

While the Psalter is divided into five books (1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 107-150) and individual psalms are given headings, these do not always correspond to the genres of the individual psalms. Commentators differ on how many psalms to designate as laments in the Psalter—some as few as one-third. While there are numerous types of psalms (especially related to content or purpose; e.g., wisdom, royal, Torah, enthronement psalms, songs of ascent to Jerusalem, and songs of praise/thanks, hymns), it is still the case that nearly half the psalms (73 of 150) include the essential element of lament: the prayerful plea to God for help.

The makeup of the Psalter suggests that an intentional balance between lament and praise elements was built into the canon when it was crystallized. Laments may be by an individual or a communal voice.

While there are a number of parts that may make up a lament, the description of distress and the plea itself are most essential. The following is an outline of the typical literary structure of lament as prayerful plea found in the book of Psalms:

(1) address to the deity (*second-person speech*)
(2) complaint or description of distress, often with questions
(*to or against the deity, about one's enemies, or about one's suffering*)
(3) expression of trust in the deity and/or remembrance of past saving actions
(4) plea/petition to the deity
(*uses imperative verbs; may include call for vengeance*)

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(*line inserted to suggest possible transition, lamenter was helped*)
(5) assurance of being heard
(6) vow of praise
(7) praise of the deity

Asking God questions such as "Why?" in moments of distress is common in the Psalms. It is profoundly important that the most common reason for a person's lament of suffering in the

[3] "Allah," of course, is simply the Arabic term for "God," cognate to "Elohim" in Hebrew. Quotation from the translation of the Qur'an by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

biblical psalms is that he or she is being mistreated or oppressed. The lament psalms are preoccupied with justice. This raises questions about the vulnerability and social status of the composers/singers. Psalm 13 is an example of a lament (the numbers correspond to the characteristic parts of a lament, above):

How long, O Lord? [1 and 2]
Will you forget me forever? [1 and 2]
How long will you hide your face from me? [1 and 2]
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long? [1 and 2]
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? [1 and 2]
Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! [1 and 4]
Give light to my eyes, or I will
sleep the sleep of death, [4 and 2]
and my enemy will say,
"I have prevailed"; [2]
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. [2]

But I trusted in your steadfast love; [3]
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. [6 and 7]
I will sing to the Lord, [6 and 7]
because he has dealt bountifully with me. [5]

The line here added in the middle of Psalm 13 above signals the transition from lament to praise, which may indicate that God intervened or help came for the lamenter; this change is further indicated by a shift in verb tense from imperatives to verbs of past or completed action. Not every lament has this movement.

As mentioned earlier, some writers of lament are left hanging, waiting for a response or intervention. Indeed, some 44 of the 73 lament psalms remain unanswered.

It is possible that some of the self-standing praise and thanksgiving psalms are the lament singers' or others' responses to their perception of God's intervention for which they had prayed. Little is known about how the psalms were sung, but the best approximation would be from the traditional tunes passed down through Jewish synagogue practice.[4] Of course, once written, songs (psalms) would have been sung and resung, innovated and revised along the way to meet the needs of the community members over many generations.

Lament forms are embedded in the New Testament as well, though they are not as prevalent as in the Hebrew Bible. The most famous New Testament lament is Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46b), a quote from Psalm 22.

Laments for the Earth

The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;

[4] See A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historica*
Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Year*
Margot E. Fassler, eds., *Psalms in Community: Jewisl*
(Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant. …
The mirth of the timbrels is stilled,
the noise of the jubilant has ceased,
The mirth of the lyre is stilled. …
The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is torn asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.
(Isaiah 24:4–5, 8, 19 NRSV)

These words from the prophetic book of Isaiah[5] lament for the earth itself. It is not just a modern problem that human insensitivities and wrongs have a detrimental effect on earth's natural processes, even threatening her collapse. One might say that people today who are concerned about saving the earth have a prophetic vision and are in tune with a lament of the earth. In verse 19 above—"the earth is violently shaken" (*mōt*)—there is a hidden wordplay in the original Hebrew language, as the verb for "dying" also sounds like *mōt*: *the earth is dying*.

In verse 20b, the lament continues, "transgression lies heavy upon her; she falls and will not rise again." Such strong expressions from the prophets are not unusual; they often used lament, for they believed that God was saddened by the situation, was angry toward the leaders and people for damaging precious gifts given to humankind. The prophet Jeremiah used lament more than any other prophet; he even included a lament of nature; here he echoes the Genesis 1 account of creation, reversing its rhetoric, as he envisions unfolding destruction in his time (ca. sixth century B.C.E.):

I look upon the earth, and behold!—"waste and void,"
and unto the heavens and there is no light!
I look to the mountains, and behold! they are quaking,
and all the hills shaking.
I look and behold! there is no "adam"![6]
and all the birds of the heavens flee.
I look and behold! the garden-land a desert!
and all its cities are pulled down,
on account of YHWH,
on account of his burning anger. (Jeremiah 4:23–26, my trans.)

In another text, Jeremiah laments:

How long will the land mourn,
and the grass of every field wither?
For the wickedness of those who live in it
the animals and the birds are swept away. (Jeremiah 12:4 NRSV)

A few lines later God is portrayed as lamenting (the "shepherds" refer to the leaders, and the vineyard is the people in the land of Israel):

Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard,

[5] Sections of the book of Isaiah date anywhere from the eighth century to the sixth century B.C.E.
[6] I differ in my translation here from the NRSV ("there was no one at all") by translating "there is no '*adam*'" more directly from the Hebrew, so as to show the poet's implied allusion to the Genesis rhetoric.

they have trampled down my portion,
they have made my pleasant portion
a desolate wilderness.
They have made it a desolation;
desolate, it mourns to me.
The whole land is made desolate,
but no one lays it to heart. (Jeremiah 12:10–11 NRSV)

It is common for modern literary critics to see such poetic references to the destruction of nature as metaphors implemented for rhetorical effect, as primitive personification, or as merely suggestive of "apocalyptic" thinking. Yet it is perhaps truer to the worldview of a traditional people who did not separate the sacred from the secular to say that they were closely dependent on nature's processes and in relationship to them. They moved within a spiritual realm that linked just/ethical human behavior and respect/stewardship of earth. The land could be damaged, threatened, lost; nature came about, in the biblical worldview, by God's creating—and remained an ongoing, balanced expression of divine energy and purpose entrusted in part to humans. The prophets did not foresee the worldwide destruction of the earth in our day, but their words resonate with contemporary concerns and issues.[7]

A lament akin to these above, and also prophetic in its compassion and warning, is that by Native American leader John Hollow Horn, who was Lakota:

Some day the earth will weep,
she will beg for her life,
she will cry with tears of blood.
You will make a choice,
if you will help her or let her die,
and when she dies, you too will die.[8]

In the New Testament, the notion of the interdependency of nature and humanity, of their mutual lamenting and fate, is suggested by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (8:19–23 NRSV).

Lament forms in the Bible have had a lasting impact on faith communities in the Abrahamic traditions through history until today. Secular songs and poems across cultures today share some of the essential features of such lament that serve to help human beings both process sorrow and call attention to suffering and injustice. The accompanying article, *Lament Examples and Resources*, takes you to some websites for performance viewing and listening.

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[7] As depicted in Genesis 1, in God's speeches in the book of Job, and in a number of psalms.
[8] From, James Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep, A History of Native America*. (Grove Press, 2000).

and collaboration with teachers in the U.S. and worldwide. Visit www.o-livestream.com for more information, or email: foundation-ttt@comcast.net.

This essay includes excerpts from Dr. Lee's forthcoming book (Fortress), Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation*, a survey of lament in the Abrahamic sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with examples of lament in poetry and song from over thirty cultures worldwide. The book has a companion website for teachers and students with links to performances of laments.*