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Biblical lament is too mysterious to equate cheaply with psychological complaint. Nor can it be comprehended exhaustively for a seminary textbook. It certainly reflects upon the human condition, but it also reflects upon the character of God. It is a vital aspect, then, of theological anthropology, itself an increasingly central concern for Christianity in the twenty-first century. Our study of lament psalms will hopefully provide a basis for a theology of lament.

Our motive is not that of previous scholarship that identified one genre or category of the Psalter as “lament psalms,” in contrast to other genres, such as praise.¹ Our selection of psalms would then be debatable, for other psalms could have been chosen as more expressive of the genre identified as “lament.” We have, in fact, in our collaborative effort to combine the history of the interpretation with contemporary exegesis of selected psalms, simply taken the traditional “seven penitential psalms,” of which Psalm 51 was already selected in our previous work,² together with Psalms 5 to 7 as a cluster, together with special pleas for Psalms 44 and 49.

As we shall see, the early Church Fathers did not take their “penitential” character with the same literal emphasis as the medieval culture was to do later. Our sample, then, is in no sense comprehensive, but more contextual of a basic human posture of our finitude, of our sinful nature, of our need of redemption, of our trust and communion with God, all in the light of God’s purpose for humanity to be created and destined in the imago dei.

As for finitude, the problem of being persecuted for righteousness’ sake was more vexing for the psalmist in the old dispensation than for Christians in the new dispensation. The old dispensation promised blessings to those who

2. The Psalms as Christian Worship, pp. 446-83.
were faithful and obedient to God’s law and threatened his punishment against the unfaithful and disobedient (cf. Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28). Though the first prophecy in the Bible — “he [the offspring of the woman] will crush your [the Serpent’s] head and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15) — hints at the persecution of the righteous, the Book of the Law by Moses, the human founder of Israel, did not express that inevitability. In the old dispensation, many saints (e.g., Abel, Job, Moses, Jeremiah) suffered, like the psalmists, for being faithful. Several Old Testament stories recognize the spiritually formative value of suffering. In the wilderness, Israel learned what living with the Lord meant. Through causing Israel to hunger and then feeding them, the Lord taught them to be teachable (Exod. 16:4; Deut. 8:2-4). By allowing the Canaanites to remain in the land he taught holy warfare to the descendants of Joshua’s generation (Judg. 3:1-2). But mostly the old dispensation kept saints in the dark about the necessity of the righteous to suffer the buffeting of the wicked. By contrast, the Lord Jesus Christ, confiding in his followers as friends, teaches them clearly that they will be persecuted. “Servants,” he said, “are not greater than their master. If they [the world] persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). Because of their finitude, Christians are still perplexed about undeserved sufferings (2 Cor. 4:8-9), but, because they have been forewarned, they do not protest them but expect them (cf. 2 Tim. 2:3, 12), unlike the innocent psalmists, who protest their sufferings. In short, as a result of Christ’s forewarning, one cannot speak of “the psalms as Christian complaint.”

To be sure, Christians, like the psalmists, mourn their sufferings, and they hunger and thirst for righteousness (cf. Matt. 5:3-11). The Lord Jesus with the psalmist said “my soul is troubled” (John 12:27; Ps. 6:2-3[3-4]), and “into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46; Ps. 31:5[6]). Like the lamenting psalmist, he was “hated without reason” (John 15:25; Ps. 35:19) and a “close friend lifted his heel against [him]” (John 13:18; Ps. 41:9[10]). Paul also identified with the psalmist when he wrote: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered” (Rom. 8:36; Ps. 44:22[23]). But, unlike the psalmist, Christians rejoice in their suffering, and this for two reasons. First, Christians, more so than the psalmists, know that undeserved sufferings produce virtues (Rom. 5:3-5; Jas. 1:2-3; 1 Pet. 1:7). And second, because Jesus Christ “has brought life and immortality to light” through his death for sin, burial, and authenticated resurrection (2 Tim. 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:3-8), they know better than the psalmist that great is the reward in heaven of those who are persecuted because of righteousness and faith in Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:10-12; 1 Pet. 4:13). Francis Bacon said well: “Prosperity is the blessing of the

Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New, which carries the greater benediction, and the clearer revelation of God's favor." Moberly comments on this opposition and persecution: “The Christian vision can contextualize such things within the life of discipleship.” In short, one cannot speak of “the psalms as Christian joy in suffering.”

Being “poor” and being in “lament” are linked in the Psalter: in seeking righteousness in the law court as a plaintiff; in crying out for help in danger, oppression, and the threat of death; in need of health and cure in the presence of sickness and disease; and, in the truly penitential psalms, in seeking forgiveness, redemption, and restoration of communion with God. Lament is then both individual and national; and this is especially true in the psalms, for they are often the lament of Israel’s king, who is in corporate solidarity with his people.

Mysteriously, Jesus Christ himself, as the God-Man, fed his inner life in communion with his Father, at the significant stages of his life and death, on the Hebrew Psalms. He probably first learned them at his mother’s knee as a small child (cf. Ps. 22:9-10[10-11]; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15). When he was baptized in solidarity with all humanity, the recitation of a psalm gave clarity to his earthly mission. In his nakedness and cruel suffering on the cross, it was with a psalm that he died. As the epistle to the Hebrews comments, “in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb. 5:7). Likewise in the persecution and suffering of his followers, Paul and Silas, who chanted psalms at midnight while they were imprisoned (Acts 16:25).

As the Fathers of the fourth century struggled to sustain both the humanity and the deity of Christ, within the Greek culture of the immutability of the divine, the Nicene Christianity that was shaped through these struggles inserted a critical article: “for us . . . he was made man.” This we may paraphrase as “who for the sake of human persons was made a human person.” The incarnation is for a specifiable objective. Biblical lament is subsumed within this divine

7. The Psalms as Christian Worship, pp. 91, 106.
purpose. For to have a genuine human existence as God intended us to enjoy is to exercise lament before him. This is expressive of his sovereign grace, of our trust in his good purposes, and of our final destiny, to be transformed to the image of his Son.

Our historical commentaries are not comprehensive; rather, they are selected vignettes showing how lament was exercised for particular concerns and personal issues at differing periods of church history. Each of the early Fathers has his own style of pastoral theology that expresses his own personhood. Only from the time of Bede and Alcuin do the numerical “seven Penitential psalms” begin to have social force, as the penitential culture from the thirteenth century until the Reformation dominated the use of the Psalter.\(^10\) As Michael P. Kuczynski observes so well: “The psalms came to shape late medieval moral discourse so dramatically because writers who knew the Psalms intimately . . . argued that the ethical principles latent in the Psalms could and must be applied to the daily everyday behavior of late medieval people.”\(^11\)

In the England of Henry VIII, the penitential psalms might subtly have been used as a political protest against his marital affairs.\(^12\) Lament psalms were also appropriated in the ways rivalry operated even among the reformers.

Such historical insights should caution our use and perhaps misuse of the lament psalms for our own cultural contexts and individual agendas. For as we face the aging of a large segment of the population, we are beginning to reinterpret the Baby Boomers’ culture of professional “success” into “a disability culture” of caring for an excessive population of the aged.\(^13\) Lament, then, will take on new significance.

Such shifting perspectives make it all the more important that “lament” be based on its biblical expressions. Crucial in this century is the need of a deepening understanding of theological anthropology. Just as the mystery of creatio ex nihilo is linked with the call of Abraham, so too human personhood cannot be

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10. Clare Costley King'oo, *Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). While comprehensive as a literary study, it reveals the Catholic bias toward a “penitential culture” that is still interpreted as “Augustinian” in origin. It ignores the Carolingian reform as being the strong precursor of medieval penitential culture.


understood without the doctrine of the *imago dei*.\textsuperscript{14} Both are metaphysical categories that do not contradict human sciences, but add a dimension unavailable to human understanding. “Lament-before-God” is a similar category, transcending human complaint when only viewed in terms of secular psychology.\textsuperscript{15} No one scholarly discipline can be independent of the other, as we are trying to express in this work. For we are standing at a new door of perception, a new specialty that may become for the next generation of scholars “a theology of lament.”

Our biblical exegete, Dr. Bruce Waltke, professor emeritus of biblical studies, Regent College, has devoted much of his academic life to the textual study of the Psalms, to give us, like Calvin before him, “the plain meaning of the text.”\textsuperscript{16} His exegetical studies comprise the central substance of our book. Dr. James Houston, founding principal of Regent College and professor emeritus of spiritual theology, has provided the history of commentary and the personal profiles of its selected contributors. Dr. Erika Moore, professor of Old Testament at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, wrote the exegetical portion for Psalm 39, did valuable editing, and prepared the glossary and indices.


\textsuperscript{15} We can be sympathetic to attempts to relate the Psalms to human dependency and suffering, such as proposed by Dennis Sylva, *Psalms and the Transformation of Stress: Poetic-Communal Interpretation and the Family* (Louvain: Peeters, 1996), but such attempts do not interpret biblical lament.

CHAPTER 1

The Psalms as the Christian’s Lament

I. The Importance of Lament in the Psalter

If, as John Calvin asserted, “the Psalms are the mirror of the soul,” then lament is a major element. For more than a third of the Psalter consists of “lament psalms.” Some forty-two are individual laments, and another sixteen are corporate laments. Ten of these lament psalms echo the wisdom psalms in their focus on the Torah. R. W. L. Moberly notes that “the predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel’s prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual but rather are central to the life of faith. . . . Moreover they show that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith.”1

In iconography the helplessness of outstretched arms, the postures of kneeling in supplication, or of abandonment in lying upon the dust of the ground, how both body and spirit are poured out in grief, express the most intimate feelings of grief in a very public way.2 Such lament follows the theme that once everything was good, but now all is lost. In a dirge like 2 Samuel 1:17-27 or 3:33, the “lostness” is expressed “in a long series of very specific gestures and postures: one crouched on the ground, threw dust on the head, rent the clothes, donned coarse apparel, abstained from nourishment” (Pss. 35:13-14; 69:10-11[11-12]). Thus the inwardly chaotic emotions are expressed outwardly in these differing bodily actions.3

Yet this intense — almost violent — embodied form of prayer, while still in the Christian liturgy, is not practiced today with the intensity that the Psalms

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It is obvious that “lament” and “confession” are not central features of our Western Christian life today. Rather a “programmatic” and pragmatic view of Christian action prevails, reflecting the secular attitude around us. The pursuit of knowledge, rather than the desire to be “known of God,” does not encourage a confessional posture. The autonomous agent, who in self-sufficiency excels in all the gadgetry of the “Electronic Revolution,” is reluctant to see him or herself as “despairing in absolute need.” Lament and confession as expressed in the psalms both require that one stand in the presence of God as Sovereign and Holy Lord, implying accountability, openness to the Other, awareness of sin, of personal shortcoming, and of attribution of the whole cosmos to the Creator. Public lament is no longer practiced in our culture when we no longer review the past as “open to a God-directed history,” as expressed in the Old Testament. On occasion, we may confess “sins,” but “sin” as the universal human condition of humanity before God is not an inducement for confession as expressive of Christian identity today.

The strong Roman Catholic tradition of priestly confession was reexamined by the Synod of Bishops in 1983 in order to study the contemporary “crisis of confession.” Since, traditionally, Catholics profess to having a confessional

6. This is the argument of Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006).
self-identity, this “crisis” is critical indeed. For many today the human agenda for social justice/injustice over confession has eclipsed any deep sense of personal “sin-before-God.” Confession is interpreted radically as being appropriate for simpler societies in bygone times, but now human limitations are being identified as “sins” with each other, as defined by human sciences, rather than by biblical theology.

Against this, we may admit that “ritualized confession” can become meaningless, while the replacement of theological “sin” with social “sins” is indeed anti-Christian. Is not the mark of truly social action in recognizing “sin” as self-isolation that separates us from both God and our fellow humans? Likewise, should we not interpret a confessional way of life as expressive of the dynamic of conversion, not only in the past tense, but as ongoing in daily renewal, healing, and reconciliation? The recovery of the Psalter as the Christian’s lament and repentance may thus help us to become more “open” with God, within ourselves, as well as with each other in progressive relational growth.

III. Lament in a Post-Critical Culture

Ironically, lament has been neglected by the church only to be revived in distorting ways. Since 9/11, together with the ease with which the electronic revolution is conveying global news — much of it violent and tragic — lament is taking center-stage in our culture. In a famous remark, Clemenceau once stated that “war is too dangerous to leave to the generals.” Now we have to add, “and the interpretation of lament is too subversive to leave to liberal theologians.” It reduces “I AM” to a god whose sense of social justice is being questioned like an accused criminal in the dock! It pushes the limits of what it is to be human to being as gods. It legitimizes the voice of blasphemy, all in the name of “scholarship.” Walter Brueggemann calls lament “a wake-up call,” “a reconfiguration of power in a dialogic mode.” This reconfiguration of power is “the antithesis of praise,” which, in Brueggemann’s opinion, only legitimizes the status quo of orthodox Christianity. Several scholarly essays by his students are being published, following his anti-trust argument that “conventional formulations are of little help for the primal reality and primal speech of Jews and Christians, pain is open to more than one ‘explanation.’”

Postmodernist thinking has the historical defect of creating a rhetoric of collage effects. Brueggemann's fixation with the lament form, summarized in his theme of “orientation-disorientation-reorientation,” is a revolt against biblical orthodoxy in that it provides a psychological alternative, and then suggests a new approach to biblical interpretation. This psychological lament becomes a new tool for subversion, to destroy covenantal faith between God and humankind. On the contrary, Westermann has pointed out how lament is a central theme of the Old Testament, acting between sin and mercy, in a relational series of events where humanity cries out to God, and yet also where God himself bemoans his judgment against his covenant people (Hos. 6:4; Jer. 12:7-13).

The element of contingency (i.e., the dependence of the human upon God) in lament is now deeply ambivalent in contemporary scholarship. It can refer to the mystery of God, “whose ways are not our ways.” It can refer to the false absolutism of rationalism, to which postmodernists now react legitimately. It can reflect on distrust of an ordered universe, and on disbelief in the sovereignty of the Creator. It can reflect the amount of pain and suffering humans can endure, collapse under, or transcend, resulting in post-traumatic nervous stress or in post-traumatic spiritual growth. Ultimately, lament can express the deepest trust in God, or it can wholly reject God; lament then becomes the spiritual experience of trustful humility, or the defiance of God in pride. Biblical lament is prayer; secular complaint collapses into the meaningless.

Biblically, lament is a transition, like the Exodus, a tempted environment of murmurings and distrust, or a joyful anticipation of the Promised Land. As Oswald Bayer has observed: “Systematic theology in general tends to refer to a happy ending all too hastily and fails to take seriously the fruitless disorientations

9. In the 1960s, avant-garde architecture first experimented with differing designs in the same building that expressed a collage effect of perhaps “classical,” “gothic” and other periods all mixed together. Similarly, post-critical scholars freely quote Locke, Kant, Kierkegaard, Freud, Ricoeur, etc., as Brueggemann does, with no sense of context, presuppositions, and history; it is “the quote” that in itself is quotable. In place of biblical evidence or theological context, the modern disciplines of psychology and sociology become the guiding authorities for what is culturally and historically intrusive of another world.


of the journey in all its uncertainties.” Joy is the last word, but lament may fill much of a Christian’s earthly sufferings. Søren Kierkegaard, who reflected much upon Job, left his mark in a corner of Copenhagen’s cathedral — Vor Frue Kirke — dedicated to Job and to all lamenters, in a creedal statement: “We believe that God is great enough to harbour our little lives with all their grievances, and that he can lead us from darkness through to the other side.” Then through the semi-darkness, the eye can begin to see dimly pinned to a picture of a cross, the words of the apostle Peter: “Cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

IV. Biblical Causes for Lament

Real as cultural causes for renewed lament may be today, they do not explain the fundamental causes of biblical lament. In our first volume we argued for the pivotal importance of Psalm 1, as the prelude to all the psalms, with its key significance of “the way of the righteous.” Lament is a corollary of right-relatedness, since “to lament” is to express impaired or disrupted relationships. Its intensity is greatest when it is “before” and “about” God. In this sense a secular culture cannot “lament,” for when truth is relative, contingent, meaningless, and “anything goes,” then there is no basis for “biblical lament.” Rather righteousness/order and lament are set antithetically, as are light and darkness.

Lament may be accusatory of God, often in a passionate reaching out to God, when everything seems to speak against God. Psalms such as Psalm 44 exacerbate lament into protest. Protest is understandable in the old dispensation, for undeserved suffering for the sake of righteousness does not fit the paradigm of covenant blessings for keeping covenant and covenant curses for violating covenant (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28). In the new dispensation, however, Christians are Christ’s friends and he makes it clear to them that suffering is constitutive of the Christian faith. As he suffered innocently, so must they, for they are not greater than their master (John 15:14-21; Rom. 5:1-5; 8:34-39). Consequently, a voiced protest is not heard in Christ’s or the apostles’ teaching.

Nevertheless, the problem of theodicy has been reawakened in the nightmare of the Holocaust, which continues to haunt us. Is that why it is German pastors who are urging the church to recover the role of lament in our liturgy, not Americans? Yet there is a converse to lament in confession in the Psalter. Here it is a focus, not on the wrath of God but on the holiness of God, before whom the

suppliant acknowledges the reality of being a sinner. Here the bodily expression is one of prostration, proskynesis, of feigning to be dead before the holy presence of “I AM.” The Psalms prohibit any such posture except to God alone, for true confession and repentance is only valid in the presence of the God above all gods (Pss. 81:9[10]; 106:9).

Shame is a diminution of honor, or failed relationships (Ps. 22:2, 8-9[3, 9-10], 12[13], 14[15]), especially before God (Ps. 22:7[8]). It may express the sense of wrongdoing in which the whole self is involved (Ps. 51:6[8]); or most frequently as the shame felt from ridicule by others (Psalms 6, 44). These causes for shame leave the identity of the psalmist diminished, primarily before God, but also from the hostility of others (Ps. 35:16), to become vulnerable (Ps. 31:12[13]), ostracized (Ps. 102:6[7]), and socially powerless (Ps. 38:12[13]); he is left alone like a bird on the roof (Ps. 102:7[8]). It is the enemy’s boast, “by our tongues we will be strong; with our lips who can be our master?” (Ps. 12:4[5]). Yet Psalm 12 speaks of “another speech,” when God speaks in verses 6-7(7-8), to provide security. Where a corporate identity is strongly developed as it was in biblical times, social diminishment is a strong motive for lament.\textsuperscript{15}

The prominence given to lament in the Psalms thus arises from Israelite identity as a covenanted community before God, surrounded by pagan nations and set in a hostile world. Evil threats abound from innumerable “enemies,” “the wicked,” national “foes,” even one’s own negative emotions. All of these present threats to the psalmist’s identity and well-being, even from within one’s own family or community. Patrick Miller has argued that the vagueness of identity of “the hostile other” affords flexibility to the complainant for a multitude of threats.\textsuperscript{16} Gerald Sheppard goes further, identifying “the enemy” not historically, but from a socio-rhetorical context in which the prayer was expressed in the presence of one’s enemies, as an accusatory public function of prayer.\textsuperscript{17}

Ever since Gunkel broadly classified the Psalter as expressing petition/ lament, thanksgiving, and praise, these genres have been generally acceptable to scholars. Indeed, this is the Chronicler’s own verdict in 1 Chronicles 16:4, where he states: “[David] appointed some of the Levites . . . to make petition, to give thanks, and to praise the Lord.” Having reflected upon the Psalms as the church’s worship in our first volume, we now focus upon a further selection of Psalms of lament,


which reflect upon the limitations, sufferings, fears, protestations, aspirations, as well as confession and penitence of the worshiper before God. Lament begins so soon in the Psalter, as we have already reflected upon Psalms 3, 4; to these we added the great penitential psalm, Psalm 51. But it is misleading when so many scholars assume “lament” is only an Old Testament category, not found in the New Testament, or that lament was discontinued with the shift from Judaism to Christianity. Instead, we shall argue that lament still remained formative for the deepening of Christian devotion in early Christianity, and it needs today to be strongly recovered.

Apart from Psalm 51, included in our first volume, the other six Penitential Psalms are our basis for this book (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, 143), together with Psalms 5, 7, 39, 44. In our historical surveys, we shall also distinguish differing pastoral theologies of “lament,” both among the early Christian commentators, as well as in later leaders of the church. The individual lament psalms illustrate the dictum, “tell me how you lament, and I will tell you who you are.” For in “lament” the figured world and the identity of the one in distress are both more deeply revealed. While we are emphasizing “lament” and “confession” in these psalms, we recognize that “prayer” and “petition” are broader traits of the Psalter, as expressing the covenantal life of Israel with “I AM.”

V. The Old Testament Context for Lament

Biblical “lament” is not then an isolated emotion, but it is set within its own religious context. Just as an ecological environment has its own context, so Old Testament “lament” can only be appreciated distinctively within its biblical mindset. Complaints and dirges may be expressive of literary genres, but in their distinctive usage in the Psalms the sufferer seeks to share his suffering with God and with hope of deliverance. It is anticipatory of what the Resurrection would later reveal.

This context we may summarize under seven characteristics.

A. The Humanity of the Psalms

A broad introduction to the Psalter has already been given by one of the authors. However, a further introduction to the theological context for biblical

20. Waltke and Yu, OT Theology, pp. 870-90.
lament and confession is appropriate. Hebrew faith and culture have always been richly human, in the sense that cultural practices including rites of passage, festivities, feasting, fasting, and mourning allowed for the expression of all their emotions and passions before God, on the national, familial, and individual level. It is as if the robust Hebraic expression of being “human” was itself a preparation for when God himself would become fully human in the incarnation. The Old Testament characters are human beings like ourselves, who expressed themselves in poetry and narrative, as we do. All their emotions were communicated with the flow of their lives, as they danced, sang, laughed, shouted, complained, cried, became angry, confessed, lamented, and mourned.  
Perhaps few have equaled Martin Luther in his personal appreciation of the Psalms in this regard, when he asks:

What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid the storm winds of every kind? Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? There you look into the hearts of all the saints. . . . On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. . . . When they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for your fear or hope, and no Cicero or other orator has so portrayed them. And that they speak these words to God and with God, this I repeat, is the best thing of all. This gives the words double earnestness and life.  

B. Responsibility before God

If “humanness” is one trait of the Psalter, another is individual consciousness of responsibility. Among the ancient civilizations surrounding Israel, corporate responsibility was legalized early, so that their kings or pharaohs were considered guardians of their constitutions. In contrast to these pagan laws that incriminated a whole family, city, or clan, the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22-23; 33) and the Book of the Law (Deut. 29:18-21) emphasized the claim of the Law upon an individual as well.  

23. For example, the sons of Saul to the Canaanite city of Gibeon, 2 Samuel 21.
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drags the wrongdoer with it, irrespective of his inner relation to his deed, becomes a matter of personal and conscious responsibility.”

While the legal presupposition “Thou shalt not” still frames the Ten Commandments, the ḫesed love of the Lord remains the underlying and strongest appeal for being a moral agent. Motivation based on relationships is more effective than brute legal power. All of Israel’s history was to be interpreted as undeserved “gift”: from the gift of life first breathed upon Adam, to the “call” of Abram, to entry into the Promised Land, and to the kingly anointing of David. The Psalms thus express that the ḫesed love of “I AM” endures forever (Psalm 136).

C. Faith in the Creator

A third distinctive of the psalmist is that Israelite faith reflects faith in the Creator. It is conceivable that a Babylonian or an Egyptian could escape from the suzerainty of their country, but none can ever escape the sovereignty of the Creator. Nor is he a world-principle contributing to some cosmogony that may be conceived abstractly, nor an explanation of some theodicy, as Job’s friends argued. Mysterious as God’s ways in creation may appear to humans, or conversely, however humans are placed within his created realm (Psalms 8, 19, 29, 104, 135, and 147), humans can yet live realistically. Eichrodt observes: “It is only when a lively sense of the living rule of the godhead in the mighty course of natural forces is obscured by later rational reflection, which attempts in its own strength to illuminate the relation between the life of man and of nature, that the autonomy of nature’s laws is raised to alien and uncanny power.” For the Israelite, “I AM,” who created all things, is also the Lord of history, who has chosen his people. The will of “I AM” as Creator is at one with the will of the Redeemer to save his people, individually as well as collectively.

D. God as Author of Suffering

A fourth element is that while God is the infinite Giver, he is also the Author of suffering, both of deserved and undeserved pain. He understandably inflicts condign punishment, but he also incomprehensibly rejects in his wrath. Other religions can

25. Bruce Waltke, in his Old Testament Theology, interprets all its essential premises as “gift” from “I AM,” whether it is creation, humankind, or his covenant relationship.
26. Waltke and Yu, OT Theology, pp. 31-32.
explain human calamity and destruction as the work of demons and evil powers, but in Israel the sufferings of human life lie ultimately under the sovereignty of God. This is why the laments of the psalmist are always God-directed, never in complaint to other sources, even when the psalmist can complain like a crime detective, “Who-did-it?” Even when the character of God seems to be in contradiction to the evil inflicted upon the complainant, the end result is a deeper trust and more perceptive knowledge gained of God. This is why, also, the voices of lament and even of protest are at one and the same time the voice of praise. The first three stanzas of Psalm 44 end with “all day long” (vv. 8[9], 15[16], 22[23]), yielding the amazing paradox that Israel praises God all day long, while they are reviled all day long and are being put to death all day long. This is so because they place themselves in the overarching story of the Lord’s calling and preserving through his mighty acts of salvation a people for himself, and through whom he will bring blessing to the nations. Israel also mixes lament with praise, because they know beyond doubting that in God’s unchanging, unfailing love they will be saved in the end.

Often we learn as Christians only through suffering what we could not otherwise have gained without the pain endured (Rom. 5:1-5). Repeatedly, the Old Testament prophets affirm the educative value of suffering, without which God’s true love, patience, and forgiveness could not have been experienced. With the prophets, it seems as if failure was their calling, suffering it bitterly when their message was unheard, disobeyed, and rejected. As Maria Boulding has observed: “Many a prophet was not merely a failure but a programmed failure. Only by failing could he do the Lord’s work, yet his failure was no less painful for that,” as evidenced in Hosea’s experience with his wife, spoken by Isaiah of the Suffering Servant, or in the lamentations of Jeremiah. Again, this is anticipatory of Jesus, “the failed Messiah,” “a little Lamb looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne . . . who reigns forever and ever” (Rev. 5:6, 13).

E. The Reality of Sin before God

A fifth element of lament and confession in the Old Testament is the reality of sin, as sin against God. Prominent in the priestly role of offering sacrifices is the expiation for sin that God himself provides. Yet as readily as sacrifices could degenerate into cultic practices with no true repentance, the divine prerogative of


forgiveness, not bounded by any sacrificial system, is celebrated in such psalms as 40, 51, and 69, to ensure pardon as the immediate gift of God. “Sin” and “grace” are never separated, as the apostle later states with such assurance: “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20).

A model of penitential prayer for divine forgiveness is portrayed in Nehemiah 9:1-37. It marks the renewal of the covenant on the people’s return from captivity in Babylon. As mourners, they fasted, put on sackcloth, and threw dust on their heads — all expressive of the presence of death among them. For separation from God is “death.” They then confessed their own sins, as well as the wickedness of their fathers. Spending part of the day reading the Law, they then confessed and worshiped, accompanied by the Levites and their choral leaders. The penitential prayer/psalm that follows is a recitation of God’s history with Israel, since he chose Abram, and made a covenant with Israel. There follow the redemptive Exodus from Egypt, his preservation of the people in the wilderness, the Law given in Sinai, and their relapses later, from keeping the covenant. Thus two stories are interwoven: the faithlessness of Israel, but the faithfulness of God. Such confession is both petition and worship, personal confession of sin with the contrasted ḥesed love and mercy of the Lord. God’s intervention in human history is thus the ground for God’s continuing relationship with Israel, personally and collectively.

This model prayer on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, however, is part of Israel’s renewal during that month. On the first day of that month Ezra read the Law and the people mourned their sin. But Ezra and Nehemiah commanded the people not to weep but to rejoice, for God’s holy day is a time for joy, and “the joy of the Lord is their strength” (Neh. 8:1-12). On the second day they celebrated the feast of booths and for seven days “there was very great rejoicing” (vv. 8:13-18). In short, the penitential prayer on the twenty-fourth day is in the context of great joy. Neither they nor the psalmists are disoriented; they know and trust their God and their relationship to him.

**F. Facing Death**

A critical distinctive of how an Israelite might “lament” lies in the shadowy presence of Sheol, as the realm of the dead. The term is used sixty-six times in the Old Testament, mostly in poetry with rich images of the grave.29 As poetic expres-

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sions, no further speculations are implied; it is a terminus of clinical life. As the psalmist faces Sheol, he depicts it as “depth,” “darkness,” “decay,” and “dust.” But the worst aspect of Sheol as the place of nonlife was the absence of “I AM”: “For in death there is no remembrance of you, in Sheol who can give you praise?” (Ps. 6:5[6]; cf. 88:3-6[4-7]). It is “the land of silence” (Ps. 94:17), and thus the antithesis of praise. Even for the living Sheol is never far away, since sickness, persecution, and sin remain threats to life before God.

But for the psalmist Sheol is not beyond God’s reach (Ps. 139:8) and does not have the final word. In the first stanza of Psalm 49, by the sons of Korah, the psalmist states what all can see: “No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them — the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough — so that they should live on forever and not see decay. For all can see that the wise die, that the foolish and the senseless also perish, leaving their wealth to others” (vv. 7-10[8-11]). But in the second stanza of that psalm he confesses what eyes of flesh cannot see: death and decay are not the final end of the upright: “But the upright will prevail over them [those who trust and boast of their wealth] in the morning . . . God will redeem me from the realm of the dead [Heb. Sheol]; he will surely take me to himself” (vv. 14-15[15-16]). Likewise Asaph, after his complaint about the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous, confesses: “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:21-26). Amazingly, David, giving voice to his greater son, prophesied: “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Ps. 16:9-11).30

Nevertheless, in spite of this hope for the eternal presence of God and for realizing justice beyond its miscarriage in this life, Israel never created its culture in the attempt to penetrate through death into the afterlife, as Egypt so conspicuously tried. Rather everything living is expressive of the continual dependent presence of God; in life man is but dust which is “God-breathed,” as in the creation of Adam.

Israel had no specific understanding of immortality, for, as Paul says: “This grace [to be saved and called to a holy life] was given us in Christ Jesus before the

30. See Waltke and Houston, PACW, pp. 33-38.
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beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Tim. 1:9-10; Titus 1:1-3). Since Israel did not have this specific understanding of immortality, the unity of the Israelite family is such that life and death are united, so that we are told Samuel was buried in his own house in Ramah (1 Sam. 25:1). Significantly then, burial grounds were family properties over many generations. In Sheol the body has gone to be with the ancestors, but the memory of the deceased is still a blessing to their successors. The genealogies reflect upon this continuity between life and death. As long as the deceased’s memory is preserved, they live on among their heirs. For it is the transcendence of God that still rules over life or death. Again this Hebraic historical continuity prepared the birth of Christianity to receive the resurrection of Christ from the dead, as a present reality of living “in Christ” whether dead or alive. Christian lament for those “asleep in Jesus” is profoundly different from those “who have no hope,” for now “death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54).

G. Living by God’s Word

A uniqueness of Israel is that unlike the hydraulic civilizations, which lived by their massive exercise of irrigation, by state authority, and by human despotism, Israel’s identity — past, present, and future — is wholly dependent upon God, “I AM,” as source and sustainer:

The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land . . . the Lord your God takes care of; the eyes of the Lord are continually on it from the beginning of the year to the end of it. (Deut. 11:11-12)

To live in “the Promised Land” is not just a military victory but an ethical injunction. As baptism is now for the Christian, Israel had a rebirth to live entirely dependent upon God, “in whom we live, and move, and have our being; and without whom we can do nothing.” Living by God’s word expresses this way of being. This sums up how wholly countercultural was “the way of Israel” in contrast to the pagan nations around it. God and his Word ruled their lives and destiny. “Entering the Promised Land” is then undertaking to serve God ethically, to become docile to the Torah, the catechetical teaching of the Covenant to love the Lord and to serve him “with all your soul” (Deut. 11:13). Psalm 1 stands then as the entry into
God’s territory, so that all the psalms that follow are to be treated as expressed by God’s covenant keepers. They are not to be treated just as relics of previous literary legacies, of pagan peoples before the existence of Israel. Petition, lament, confession, penitence, as indeed praise and thanksgiving in the Psalter, bear the distinctive of coming from “God’s people.” The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that “during the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son he learned obedience from what he suffered, and once made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him . . .” (Heb. 5:7-10). Was it in his use of the Psalms that Jesus as a human being gained insight into his mission and identity? Do then the same psalms have continued relevance for our own identity as Christ’s followers?

VI. The Penitential Psalms

As far as we can trace, Augustine (354-430) followed by Cassiodorus (c. 485-585) are the first commentators to group the penitential psalms together as psalms of confession (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). Alcuin (735-804) also adopted this grouping, and by the eleventh century onwards commentaries on these seven psalms (both lay and clerical) began to appear. From our perspective today, at least four of these psalms scarcely reflect confession and repentance (Psalms 6, 38, 102, 143). But as we shall see, the Fathers read much more of God’s judgment and our need of repentance into these psalms than we may now appreciate. Augustine translated the Hebrew term in the title “according to the sheminith” (Psalms 6, 12) as “the eighth,” which he with previous commentators interpreted as reference to the final day of judgment, thus suggesting this psalm warns the unrepentant of the ensuing wrath of God. For this reason it had become church practice to baptize on Sunday, both the day of new creation, the symbol of eternity, and also the day of God’s judgment. Baptisteries were often designed in octagonal form to symbolize “the eighth day,” since it celebrated too the resurrection of Christ. We do not know the process by which Augustine chose these “Seven Psalms.” Earlier than Augustine, Athanasius in advising Marcellinus about appropriate psalms for various circumstances states: “In confession of sins, Psalm 51 . . . ; if you wish to remember the mercy and judgment of God, Psalm 102.” He makes no reference to the other “Seven.”

31. This is the perspective of Susan Gillingham, Psalms through the Centuries (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 114.
Cassiodorus follows the Psalm homilies of Augustine quite closely, Cassiodorus is distinctive in identifying each of the penitential psalms. He follows Origen in suggesting that there are “seven ways of being forgiven: by baptism, suffering martyrdom, almsgiving, forgiving the sins of the brethren, diverting a sinner from the error of his ways, abundance of charity and by repentance.” Fortunately, Cassiodorus does not allow this unorthodox suggestion of “the seven ways of penance” to control his commentaries on the penitential psalms; rather, with Augustine’s guidance, he comments on each psalm’s own context. But it anticipates the whole doctrinal confusion on penance that was to develop later.

Bede and then Alcuin summarized each psalm to elicit memorization of the Psalter and to make distinctive each psalm. By the fourteenth century, in selecting a single verse from each of the “Seven Psalms,” a tradition arose in personal devotion to link each psalm appropriately against a cardinal sin. Psalm 6 was used against Anger; Psalm 32, against Pride; Psalm 38, against Gluttony; Psalm 51, against Lechery; Psalm 102, against Greed; Psalm 130, against Envy; and Psalm 143, against Sloth. The conciliar Reformer, Jean Gerson, used this tradition in his writings. Martin Luther’s early treatise on “The Seven Penitential Psalms” (composed in 1517) protests against the abuse of indulgences, and suggests that four of them are “Pauline Psalms” (Psalms 32, 51, 130, and 143). Psalm 130 is his favorite.

The seven cardinal sins (first adopted by the Desert Fathers in Egypt) trace their origins to Hellenistic astrology. Many Hellenistic sects believed that the soul, after death, had to journey through the seven zones of heaven, while the evil spirits, sometimes seven, hindered their passage. This may have originated in Persia, been passed on by Babylon, and adopted by Gnostic sects in Egypt. The Testament of Reuben (part of the pseudepigraphic work, Testament of the Patriarchs, c. 109-106 BCE) lists seven evil spirits: deceit; lust or fornication; gluttony; vainglory; pride; lying; and injustice. In the Corpus Hermeticum, possibly in the first century CE, Poimandres states: “. . . thereupon the man mounts upwards through the structure of the heavens. And to the first zone of heaven (Moon) he gives up the force which works increase . . . [i.e. acedia]; to the second zone (Mercury), the machinations of evil cunning; to the third zone (Venus) the lust

whereby men are deceived; to the fourth zone (Sun), domineering arrogance; to the fifth zone (Mars), unholy daring and rash audacity; to the sixth zone (Jupiter), evil striving after wealth; and to the seventh zone (Saturn), the falsehood which lies in wait to work harm.”

The apostle Paul’s allusions “to the powers in heavenly places” may reflect this mindset without conceding to astrology.

Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345-399), mentored by Makarios, used simple short sentences of prayer for his mode of teaching. “There is no need to speak at great length; it is enough to stretch out one’s hands and say, ‘Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy on me’ (Ps. 41:4[5]). And if the warfare grows pressing, say, ‘Lord, help me!’ (Ps. 94:17). He knows very well what we need and he acts mercifully towards us.” These Desert Fathers were simply reciting the short petitions, like “arrow prayers” shot into the heavens. Evagrius also cites Makarios as recognizing anger as the great obstacle to prayer. Indeed it is likely that all the eight vices were catalogued by Evagrius as generic evil thoughts (logismoi) that hinder the monk’s prayer life. These he ordered as gluttony, fornication, avarice, sadness, anger (sometimes reversed as anger-sadness), acedia, vainglory, and pride. Evagrius’ manual and guide for the daily life of the monks (Praktikos), which was influenced by the book of Proverbs, begins by describing these vices, which he categorizes in groups. Gluttony, lust, and avarice are bodily temptations, while sadness stands alone as a frustration of desire, what we might now call depression. Anger is directed to others socially, acedia is the discouragement to be tempted to give up the life of a monk, while the spiritual temptation of vainglory in one’s spiritual progress leads to pride, by which Satan fell. Later all these vices became interwoven into the Christian practices of psalmody and prayer.

Later, at the end of the sixth century, Gregory the Great reduced the cardinal vices to seven, in a revised sequence: pride, anger, envy, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. J. M. Neale describes the Seven Penitential Psalms as “the seven weapons wherewith to oppose the seven deadly sins: the seven prayers inspired by the sevenfold Spirit to the repenting sinner: the seven guardians for the seven days of the week: the seven companions for the seven Canonical Hours of the day.” There developed the medieval tradition of interpreting “the Seven”

38. 2 Corinthians 12:2ff. and Ephesians 6:11-17; 4:8 have no allusions to astrology, while speaking within this culture.
40. A full history of how the seven deadly sins evolved in the history of the church is discussed thoroughly by Morton W. Bloomfield in The Seven Deadly Sins (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967).
as seven steps on the ladder of repentance. The first step is fear of punishment (Ps. 6:1[2]). The second step is sorrow for sin (Ps. 32:5). The third step is hope of pardon (Ps. 38:15[16]). The fourth step is the love of a cleansed soul (Ps. 51:7[9]). The fifth step is longing for heaven (Ps. 102:16). The sixth step is having distrust of self (Ps. 130:6) by looking only to the Lord. The seventh step is prayer against the final judgment (Ps. 143:2): “enter not into judgment with thy servant.”