

THE LIMITATION ON MEANING MAKING
IN THE LAMENT PSALMS

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Abstract:

There is a strong temptation to embark on a quest for meaning in the challenges of life. This quest often takes the shape of seeking liability, either in one's self or in some one else. Perhaps it was my sin, or perhaps some one else sinned. The Psalmist's laments stand in stark contrast to such thinking. The Psalmists laments can only be understood in terms of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, and through the lens of unwavering trust in God alone. Paradoxically, suffering is not about us.

1. INTRODUCTION

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me,
from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest (Psalm
22:1-2).¹

The words of the Psalmist's lament resonate with our contemporary experience of grief and affliction. The shared human experience has what Walter Brueggemann calls "seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death...[evoking] rage, resentment, self pity, and hatred."² While it would be unfair to equate the common human experience with the particularity of the Psalmist, the fundamental question we ask is the same, "Why?" In Psalm 10:1, the Psalmist cries, "Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" In Psalm 44:24 the Psalmists asks, "Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?"

"Why?" does not necessarily ask, "what is the meaning" of this experience, however "Why?" can be satisfied if we understand the "meaning." The question goes far beyond understanding the physical, physiological or social dynamics that resulted in a particular outcome.³ Morris Inch posits, "There are many facets to man's experience, but at the heart is his

¹ All Scripture quotations from the ESV unless otherwise noted. The Christological implications of this Psalm are not considered here, however Jesus' appropriation of the Psalm and its prophetic nature should not go unnoticed.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 19.

³ Here we must carefully differentiate between rational explanation of events and presumptive meaning of the events. It is one thing to understand that corrosion caused a cascading failure of a ship's steering gear resulting in the ship running aground. It is quite another to understand "why" God "allowed" a parishioner's husband to die in the accident. The temptation to find "meaning" or "purpose" in the death can be over whelming. Often we appeal to Joseph's words to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). This inevitably fails, sooner or later when there is no logical or exegetical connection between the disaster and

search for meaning, his abiding sense of liability.”⁴ The question “who is to blame” lurks behind our question. The disciples questioned Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). The very question betrays an anthropocentric, perhaps narcissistic “sense of liability.” Brueggemann refers to these laments as “psalms of disorientation.”⁵ Certainly, we face confusing paradoxes and dissonance in the Psalms. The question “Why?” in the Psalms is left unanswered, at least in terms that satisfy the insatiable human search for meaning. The Psalms in effect tacitly limit, if not prohibit finding meaning in the events of life.

2. THE QUEST FOR MEANING IN TIMES OF TROUBLE

A Psychological Perspective

There are those who suggest that religion is of it self merely a form of meaning making as reflected by Jacobson, Luckhaupt, Delaney and Tsevat who suggest that meaning making takes the following forms.

(1) the Deferring Believer (“God allows things to happen for a reason.”); (2) the Collaborating Believer (“This is where I’m supposed to be.”); (3) the Religious/Spiritual Seeker (“I’m trying to get my life together.”); and (4) the Self-Directing Believer (“What else is new?”). The findings support a previously described theoretical model of

Joseph’s experience. People tend to want some one to blame. Perhaps the engineer who specified the metallurgical composition of the bolt was to blame. Perhaps if the Coast Guard had arrived earlier more lives would have been saved. While this hypothetical narrative may be atypical, it would be easy enough to substitute a teenager killed in a motor vehicle accident or news of a debilitating illness. Pastorally, the problem is the same, how to approach the question “why”.

⁴ Morris A. Inch, *Psychology In The Psalms: A Portrait of Man in God's World* (Waco, TX: WordWord, 1970), 26.

⁵ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 19.

meaning-making in response to adversity, and they suggest the value of life course and narrative approaches to understanding religious coping.⁶

Empirically, there is little reason to question the premise that we engage in “meaning-making in response to adversity” as they suggest. The temptation to find a “spiritual” explanation to adversity and crisis is strong.⁷ Freedman and Combs rightly posit, “Whatever culture we belong to, its narratives have influenced us to ascribe certain meanings to particular life events.”⁸ These “meanings” inform and are informed by our worldview.⁹ Empirically we can affirm this predisposition to making meaning out of adversity. Our question is, however, do the Psalms facilitate or permit this “meaning making” and what are the pastoral implications?

Pastoral Perspective

Logan Jones in his article, “The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow,” comments on Brueggemann’s thesis “human life consists in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death.”¹⁰ Jones critiques how some pastors respond. “For some pastors and seminary students, pastoral care means giving someone an answer. It means offering a scripture verse or two, maybe a prayer, designed to speak words of comfort and hope, which,

⁶ Taken from the abstract of the article, C. Jeff Jacobson Jr, Sara E. Luckhaupt, Sheli Delaney and Joel Tsevat., "Religio-Biography, Coping, and Meaning-Making Among Persons with HIV/AIDS," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 1 (2006): 39.

⁷ It takes little imagination to consider Job in this picture. The pastoral implications of Job’s experience is remarkable in its own right.

⁸ Jill Freedman, Gene Combs., *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 32.

⁹ Donald R. Bardill, *The Relational Systems Model for Family Therapy: Living the Four Realities* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 1997), 30.

¹⁰ Logan C. Jones, "The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 61, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2007): 51.

regretfully, only seem to deny and avoid the situation of disorientation.”¹¹ Morris Inch poignantly points out, “The believer is not free from the fact or immune from the stress of suffering. He brings to the situation faith both in God and in His purpose being realized, a faith which can question the seeming disparity between the ideal and the present incident.”¹² So is our “meaning” seeking and our predisposition to giving “answers” as Jones suggests, appropriate?

3. THE PSALMIST’S RESPONSE TO TROUBLE

Covenant Implications

Logan C. Jones offers a helpful starting place for consideration of our question.

By praying the laments, Israel had a way of directly facing the hurtful dimensions of human life. Israel did not try to explain them away, deny them, or avoid them. Instead, Israel held to the premise that all of life—even the hurtful dimensions—was embraced by its covenantal relationship with God.¹³

The importance of the covenantal relationship between YHWH and His people cannot be overstressed in the lament Psalms. The human predilection for meaning making can mask the significance of this. The opening of Psalm 6, “O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger,” could well be understood as the Psalmist engaging in meaning-making—surely the reason why I am suffering is because God is angry. Here we must establish the limits of debate clearly. If we agree with Freedman and Combs that, “Whatever culture we belong to, its narratives have influenced us to ascribe certain meanings to particular life,” then certainly it is reasonable to argue that the history of Israel and its covenant relationship with God provide meaning to the

¹¹ Ibid., 54.

¹² Inch, *Psychology in the Psalms*, 26.

¹³ Jones, “The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow”, 48.

Psalmist experience.¹⁴ Nevertheless, with the Psalmist, we must sharply part company with such secular determinations of “meaning.”

The factual truth of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel—and by extension, the relationship between Christ and the church—defines the limits of meaning making. What is in question is any attempt to make meaning outside of this covenantal relationship. Matters of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel are permissible subjects for the Psalmist’s lament, but attempts to understand suffering and trials outside of the covenant, in other words, in secular or non-Scriptural terms, are not.

Howard Neil Wallace, discussing what he perceives as differences between treating some psalms as lament versus complaint, provides a helpful grounding for our covenantal limits.

If the extremes [in the Psalms] are praise and lament in general, then there is a presumption that the relationship between the psalmist and God remains essentially the same in all circumstances. The psalmist’s circumstances may change but he/she can always turn to God, who is in relationship with them, either to give praise or to ask for help. The situation is much more complex if the extremes are praise and complaint. Not only do the psalms portray address to a God who is in relationship with the psalmist and who can help or who deserves praise, but he/she also suggests that a pray-er can address God directly about the very state of their relationship. The psalmist can even complain that God has not been faithful to the relationship and has let them down in some respect.¹⁵

What About Sin?

If Inch is correct that meaning is connected to an “abiding sense of liability” is correct, what about sin.¹⁶ So far we have side stepped the Psalmist’s view of himself and sin. The Psalmist considers the potential of sin as the cause of his plight, but it is dismissed as in Ps. 7.

³ O LORD my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands,

¹⁴ Freedman, *Narrative Therapy*, 32.

¹⁵ Howard Neil Wallace, *Words to God, Words From God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (England: Ashgate, 2005), 41.

¹⁶ Inch, *Psychology in the Psalms*, 26.

⁴ if I have repaid my friend with evil or plundered my enemy without cause,
⁵ let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it, and let him trample my life to the ground
and lay my glory in the dust (Ps. 7:3-5).

Craigie suggests the Psalmist declares his innocence as an oath.¹⁷ Yet, as John Goldingay posits, it is not a “claim to sinlessness but a denial of being the gross wrongdoer that the accusation implies.”¹⁸ Commenting on Psalm 69, Marvin Tate aptly comments, “The folly and guilt of the speaker is not hidden from God...Both the supplicant and the enemies are before God and known by him.”¹⁹ We need to consider this within a broader Scriptural framework.

In this age, under the New Covenant in Jesus Christ we can turn to 1 John 1:9-10, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” Beginning with verse 10, we must affirm that no one is without sin, thus, for the Psalmist to “have sin,” acknowledges a fact the Psalmist cannot deny. In verse 9, under the terms of the New Covenant, if we confess our sins we are righteous. Under the Mosaic Law, there was a sacrificial means of dealing with sin where one could be declared clean. Obedience to the Torah was not so much a means to live sin free, as it was a means of grace to identify sin and provide a means of attaining righteousness. Paul affirms, “the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Seeking of a “sin meaning” disintegrates further in the book of Job. Claus Westermann comments on Job.

Job admits that he has sinned as others have, but he cannot admit that he has committed a crime as gross as his friends assume because of the terrible blows that have befallen him. Behind their assumption stands the doctrine that a bitter and cruel fate must unquestionably be the result of great sin, for God is just. For Job such a doctrine has

¹⁷ Peter. C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalm 1-50*, 2nd. ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 100.

¹⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 145.

¹⁹ Marvin E. Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalm 51-100* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 196.

disintegrated. *He knows that his suffering is not punishment and that he can now no longer understand God* [italics mine].²⁰

Westermann's understanding of Job's experience is consistent with the Psalmist's lament. He also poignantly brings us full circle to the question the Psalmist's disorientation. "Why?" This is not to say that sin is not a possible structural reason behind the circumstances of the Psalmist's lament. Consider Psalm 85:1-5.²¹

¹ LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

² You forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin. Selah.

³ You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger.

⁴ Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us!

⁵ Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? (Ps. 85:1-5).

Yet, in the Psalm's acknowledgment of Israel's failing, the covenant connection is clear. Psalm 85:9 declares, "Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land." As Craig C. Broyles posits,

Among the ten corporate complaints, the issue of sin surfaces in five or perhaps six psalms. Ps. 44 staunchly affirms that the people have upheld their allegiance to Yahweh and his covenant (vv. 18-19, 21-22). Pss. 79, 85, 89, and 90 all mention (at least the possibility of) the people's sin, but for these psalmists the people's failure to obey completely does not account for the extreme disaster that has befallen them. The distresses cannot be considered just judgments commensurate with their transgressions.²²

²⁰ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Alanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 273.

Although not the primary subject of this paper, the reader should be struck by the consistency of John's words with Job's. Yes Job has sin issues, but sin is not itself at the heart of the events.

²¹ Great care must be taken here that we do not arrive at the conclusion that sin does not matter. God judges sin. Israel's exiles were not capricious, but redemptive to deal with sin and covenantal failures. Arguably, the real cause of the exile is failure to address sin under the provisions of the covenant. Had Israel obeyed the provisions of the covenant, the exiles would not have been necessary. So while disobedience to the covenant is in a sense sin, failure to bring sin under the atonement provided by the covenant results in judgment.

²² Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms: A Form-Critical and Theological Study*. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 219.

What Broyles identifies in essence, is that whatever is happening to the Psalmist, while sin maybe a factor, it does not explain “why”. God’s covenant provides a means to atone for sin thus sin is not the “meaning.” The covenant also specifies the rightful expectations His people can have. The close of Psalm 7 and 13 (and many others) exemplifies the Psalmist’s confidence in the covenant relationship with God.

I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness, and I will sing praise to the name of the LORD, the Most High (Psalm 7:17).

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me (Psalm 13:5-6).

Unresolved Dissonance

So where do the Psalms leave us? If sin is not the “meaning” of the Psalmist’s troubles and from the Psalmist’s perspective, the conditions of the covenant have been met, what is the meaning of the Psalmist’s troubles? From the Psalmist’s perspective, it seems God has not upheld His end of the covenant. Broyles articulates the depth of the problem this creates. “The distress itself may cause the psalmist physical pain and social ostracism, but the faith dissonance results in intensified psychological turmoil and religious questioning.”²³ Is God faithful?

The Psalms leave us with this awkward dissonance. Under the terms of the covenant, God should be intervening in ways contrary to the immediate experience of the Psalmist, and God is Lord of the universe, faithful and just. This disjunctive dissonance echoes throughout Psalm 22. Consider the striking dissonance in Psalm 22. One the one hand the Psalmist declares his feeling of abandonment (vs.1-2), while declaring God’s faithfulness and deliverance of “our fathers” (vs. 4-5). The Psalmist describes himself as a “worm and not a man” (vs.6), then paradoxically

²³ Ibid., 223.

describes himself as belonging to God as an infant (vs.9-10).²⁴ The emotive dissonance continues with the hopelessness of the Psalmist's plight (vs. 12-14) and the declaration that "you who fear the Lord, Praise him!" (vs. 23). Broyles rightly suggests the following.

In these psalms the conflicting elements are plainly open to view...the conflict is...brought into focus for the sake of appeal to God. These psalms, by their very nature as prayer, abandon all attempts at resolution from the human side: the disappointment is in God and so the resolution must be from him as well...It is striking that the community of worshippers in Israel should have preserved the psalms of such unresolved dissonance. On the divine side, such mystery was not 'explained away' by notions of transcendence; and on the human side, the mystery of sin and its consequent judgment did not offer sufficient grounds for resolution.²⁵

The Psalms leave us with a degree of discomfort in unresolved dissonance.

4. CONCLUSION

We must avoid anthropocentric reasons—particularly sin—as meaning behind suffering and affliction in the Psalms. This is not to deny sin or its consequences, rather to place it under

²⁴ Goldingay interprets this passage such that the Psalmist's humanness is not in question. More to the point, he is clearly God's creation. Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 330.

²⁵ Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms*, 224. Broyles explanation is much more complete and is provided here.

"According to the cognitive dissonance theory as outlined by R.P. Carroll, there are three possibilities for the resolution of dissonance. The first is avoidance of discomforting evidence. This means, by definition, could not be employed in a complaint psalm, which by its very nature addresses God with an apparent anomaly. The second category of dissonance resolution is that of social support. In the case of individual laments, however, the absence of social support and the harassment from adversaries would naturally aggravate dissonance. This is frequently the case in these psalms because the distress from which the psalmist is suffering is often interpreted as a judgment by God.

The Third means of resolution is offered by the theory is that of reinterpretation. Thus, there may be a reinterpretation of the beliefs received, which would thereby lead to altered expectations. ... The composers of the complaint Psalms, however, clearly rejected this form of dissonance resolution. In these psalms the conflicting elements are plainly open to view...The conflict is thereby brought into focus for the sake of appeal to God. These psalms, by their very nature as prayer, abandon all attempts at resolution from the human side: the disappointment is in God and so the resolution must be from him as well." Ibid., 223-24.

the atonement provisions within the covenant. The Psalms acknowledge sin, but sin is not the “meaning” behind the laments. Paradoxically, our suffering is not about us. The Psalmist’s lament is grounded in the covenant between God and His people. Broyles rightly states, “If a psalmist were to blame his affliction on God without sufficient grounds, his appeal would be misdirected from the start.”²⁶ Contemporarily, we must correctly teach what is and is not promised under the New Covenant. It is failure to act within the provisions of the New Covenant that result in judgment. Any complaint to God that stands apart from, or contrary to His covenant is necessarily anthropocentric, in effect idolatry for we presume to shape a god after our own desires. The “meaning” is in God in His sovereignty, not us.

What is the appropriate response to the unresolved dissonance of the lament Psalms? Our response is to do what the Psalmist does in response to his lament, to acknowledge and praise God. “I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness, and I will sing praise to the name of the LORD, the Most High (Ps. 7:17). As Paul exhorts us, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

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