

Psalms of Lament

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FOREWORD

Ann Weems offers poetry and reflection more poignant than anything she has yet published. She brings to this task her finely contoured, well-seasoned faith, which is mature and knowing. She brings, as well, her peculiar finesse with words. She understands how speech operates and submits herself to the working of the words, which do things even beyond her will. When, however, Weems brings her faith and her speech to the task of utterance, she finds now that the task is saturated with pain and ache. The pivot point of her pain, perhaps the immediate trigger for her poetry, is quite concrete . . . an unfinished, unanswered, unresolved grief for her beloved Todd. Weems knows well that it takes all the faith she has and all the speech she has to honor the pain written deep in her life. And even then, it is scarcely enough for what is required.

The poems given here, however, are not preoccupied with the narrow range of self. Weems's gift as a poet is to move the listener in and through what is personal to her, so that the poem touches each of us in our concreteness and all of us in our commonness. For like the life of this poet, the life of the world is saturated with pain and ache not yet finished, not yet answered, not yet

resolved. And we are left with the demanding question, What shall we do with so much of hurt that is left unfinished? Weems's powerful purpose is to speak it well.

In taking up the work of lament, Weems does not begin *de novo*. She is not the first in her craft to move pain unutterable to words uttered. Harold Bloom has taught us that every good poet rewrites the poems that are already there, using them in fresh ways, but never free from them. Weems knows quite self-consciously that her words have taken up residence in a large mansion of old griefs. And therefore to get said her concreteness, she must enter into that large mansion and respeak all the old griefs that are yet palpable in the world.

Weems's particular room in the world's mansion of uttered grief is the Bible, and more specifically, the Psalter. That book of poems-prayers-songs has funded the faith and imagination of synagogue and church since the birth of faith. What strikes one about the book of Psalms, if one notices anything at all, is that nearly one half of the Psalms are songs of lament and poems of complaint. Something is known to be deeply amiss in Israel's life with God. And Israel is not at all reluctant to voice what is troubling about its life.

It has been noticed by many readers of the Psalms before Weems that there is a recurring, disciplined form to the complaints and laments. Israel knew how to order its grief, not only to get that grief fully uttered and delivered but also to be sure that, said in its fullness untameable, it is not turned loose with destructiveness.

What we have in these poems is not raw rage, anger, and sadness; rather what we have has already been ordered, mediated, and stylized to make the rage and hurt more effective, available, and usable. It is this ordering of raw grief that is the work of the poem and the gift of the poet.

The classic model of Israel's speech of grief, pain, and rage has six regular elements, which may occur in all sorts of configurations. Indeed, not all the elements need be employed in every such utterance.

1. The poem characteristically begins with the naming of God in an intimate address, for example, "My God, God of my fathers." The complaint is not uttered to a stranger. It is a trusting utterance set down in the middle of an ongoing friendship of trust and confidence. Neither is the lament spoken to "an empty sky." It is addressed to someone, aimed at a sovereign friend who is believed to be listening intently.

2. The poem moves immediately to complaint. It tells God, with some specificity, how troubled life is and what the trouble is. The complaint no doubt engages in hyperbole, much as a child does with a modest hurt. A child must overstate in order to secure the attention of a busy adult. The overstatement is perhaps intrinsic to pain. But it may also be a stratagem to get God's attention and to persuade God to act, for often the psalmist knows God to be absent, silent, indifferent, or uncaring. God must be "recruited" into the trouble.

3. The poem then comes to its focus in petition. This is the point of it all. The lament addresses God with

a large, demanding, unapologetic imperative: "Turn, heed, save!" God can save, it is confessed, if only God can be mobilized. Everything to the speaker depends upon being able to mobilize God, for God's power is not in doubt. It is only God's attentiveness that seems in short supply, to which Israel's imperative makes strong appeal.

4. The complaint and petition under normal circumstances might be sufficient. But this is no normal circumstance. The urgent petitioner does not leave it at asking, but says more. The complaint is regressive speech. That is, the speaker in extremis does not credit God with noble, theological features. And therefore motivations are added to the petition, motivations that seek to give God some good reasons for acting. The motivations variously appeal to virtue, to repentance, to precedent, to God's honor, and even to God's vanity. The speaker often assumes that human needfulness is no adequate reason for which God may act. God must be shown that something is at stake for God in the trouble as well. Thus the motivations voice a dimension of faith that is not very respectable. But hurting people may on occasion risk the unrespectable, even the unorthodox.

5. Very often the needful speaker, who asks God for rescue from an enemy or an evildoer, does not stop at a petition for rescue. Very often the speaker would also like some vengeance against the enemy who has caused hurt. In addition to the good asked for self or for community, the lament also asks bad for the enemy. Thus there is frequently in these poems a wish for doing

something hurtful and punishing and destructive to the human adversary. The pain risks what is most ignoble in human intention and daringly brings to speak what is darkest, and what is most unacceptable, in conventional theology and conventional social relations. These poems are, indeed, uttered in extremis.

6. Oddly enough, when the need, the hurt, the demand, and the venom are fully voiced, something unexpected happens in the psalm. The mood and tone of the psalm change. Israel's anger and protest appear to be spent, and pain characteristically moves to a positive resolution. The speaker is, at the end, confident of being heard and "dealt with bountifully," and so ends in rejoicing and praise. It is not at all clear what happens that permits such a turn. But it is clear that such a turn belongs regularly to the pattern and genre of lament. It may be that the long protest is cathartic, and enough said finally suffices. Or it may be, as many scholarly readers think, that there was in the middle of the utterance a communal, liturgical intervention of assurance that permitted a new posture of confidence, well-being, and gratitude. On such a reading, the poem is genuinely dialogical. It receives an answer that resolves the need of the speaker. Thus the poem accomplishes something, and the speaker is, at the end of the poem, in a very different place.

It is true that the book of Psalms itself offers ample warrant for such a style of faith and speech. It is equally clear, however, that elsewhere in the Old Testament,

named, known persons of faith engage in this sort of prayer, which transforms their life with God, their life in the world. Among these is Moses, Israel's great petitioner (Exod. 32:11–14, Num. 11:11–15), and Jeremiah (Jer. 12:1–6, 20:7–13), about whose life with God we seem to know the most. And beyond Moses and Jeremiah, the entire poem of Job is cast as a series of vigorous complaints in the mouth of Job, to which his friends make inadequate responses and to which God in the whirlwind makes an enigmatic and preemptive response. In all these examples that pervade Israel's text, we are able to see how Israel conducts itself when crowding into God's presence.

We may be fascinated by the artistic particularities of this genre of faithful utterance. But we should not miss the courageous and daring act of faith that is constituted and enacted in such utterance. The lament-complaint, perhaps Israel's most characteristic and vigorous mode of faith, introduces us to a "spirituality of protest." That is, Israel boldly recognizes that all is not right in the world. This is against our easy gentile way of *denial*, pretending in each other's presence and in the presence of God that "all is well," when it is not. But Israel also defiantly refuses to confess its guilt or to take responsibility for what is wrong in the world. Israel is able to identify "enemies" whose fault matters are, or Israel is able to hold God accountable for what is failed, dysfunctional, and unjust. Such speech is against our *docility* before God. Our Western propensity is to imagine God well beyond such strictures and such implicated-

ness. Israel, however, thinks its way through trouble with realism, and it speaks its truth without stammering.

In this strong act of faith, Israel rejects all the easy clichés conventionally ascribed to God—omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, all-loving, all-powerful—and seizes the initiative over against the Divine Presence. Israel is not slowed down by our preference for “Prevenience” or “Divine Sovereignty.” Israel, in this speech, is more like a sweaty, ominous General Haig, who is able to assert, “I am in charge here”—and God must get accustomed to the new situation of conversation. Israel holds the initiative and for the moment operates as God’s senior partner in faith, daring to dictate the terms of conversation for God. The idea to which God must get accustomed is that Israel is not a docile kitty, not easy putty in God’s providential hands. Israel has will and voice and starch. Israel knows its hurt to be unwarranted and unfair. And God must make the best of Israel’s new insistence.

To what end is such utterance? Well, perhaps in our psychological propensity, the utterance is cathartic. One feels better afterward. Or with more sophistication, there is need for an elegiac texture to a life not as smoothly satiating as the TV ads have promised us. There is a wistful artistry that heals through such utterance of self-disclosure. But no “strong poet” will settle for the psychological or any thin artistry. This utterance is a freighted theological act upon the Holy Powers of Heaven, anticipating that such speech works new reality. This speech is indeed “performative.” And what it

performs—requires—is a change in God’s life and God’s dealings with the world. One cannot join this procession of poets without imagining that grief said without apology demands that God reenter the world in a different way, at a different place, in order to do a different work. In place of “hands off,” intervention. In place of indifference, transformation. In place of sustenance, miracle. Such poets may not invoke intervention or require transformation or produce miracle. But what these poets confess—without a dissenting vote—is that intervention, transformation, and miracle will not happen without such utterance. In terms of bereftness, such utterances “from below” become a *sine qua non* for notice from above. Newness starts “from below,” where the poets live.

For that reason, the poet must utter on. Weems joins, one more time, that relentless, indispensable company. She does not need to imitate or to replicate old poets. But she is their child and their heir and their most recent echo. Her words will not fully resolve the hurt, as she well knows. Her utterance will not restore Todd, as she well knows. Her voice will not fully heal, as she well knows. Nonetheless, Weems in her verbal majesty becomes a *sine qua non* for our future. She joins the “strong poets,” strong in faith, strong in utterance, strong in insistence, strong in risk. In having her and her words, we are represented, as Israel was represented, by such utterances. We are represented away from denial to strong, truth-telling protest. We are represented away from docility to daring intention. And in our being

represented, God yet too must do differently. Our prayer to this newly positioned God is not louder than our thanks to beloved Ann. For by her wounded words, we may yet be healed.

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Psalms of Lament

Lament Psalm One

O God, have you forgotten my name?

How long will you leave me
in this pit?

I sang hosannas
all the days of my life
and waved palm branches
greened in the new spring world.

Rich only in promises
from you,
I followed
believing,
and then they killed him
whom I loved
more than my own life
(even that you taught me).

They killed him
whom you gave to me.

They killed him
without a thought
for justice or mercy,
and I sit now in darkness
hosannas stuck in my throat . . .

Why should I wave palm branches
or look for Easter mornings?

O God, why did you name me Rachel?

A cry goes up out of Ramah,
and it is *my* cry!
Rachel will not be comforted!
Don't you hear me,
you whose name is Emmanuel?
Won't you come to me?
How long must I wait
on this bed of pain
without a candle
to ward off the night?

Come, Holy One,
feed to me a taste of your shalom.
Come, lift to my lips
a cup of cold water
that I might find my voice
to praise you
here in the pit.
Pull forth the hosannas
from my parched lips,
and I will sing to all
of your everlasting goodness,
for then the world will know that
my God is a God of promise
who comes to me
in my darkness.

Lament Psalm Two

God, find me here
where the sun
is afraid to shine!
Don't you recognize
your faithful one?
Haven't I known you
since the days of my youth?
Haven't I sung your songs
in the ears of your enemies?
Why then are you silent?
Why have you forsaken me
and left me to wail
in the empty night?
Why do you give me silence
when I ask for
the nightingale's song?

O God, have pity on me
and enter into
the city of my pain.
Hear my cry
and come to me
that all might know
your faithfulness.
From the icy coldness
of the pit,

I will praise your name,
for like a shepherd
searching for a lost sheep,
you will not give up
until you find me.
Here in the gloom
I wait for the light
of your coming.
Then I will shout
that my God is the God
who does not rest
until all are
gathered in
from the threat of night.