7

# The Profit and Loss of Lament

## *Rethinking Aspects of the Relationship between Lament and Penitential Prayer*

Donald P. Moffat



Lament and penitential prayer are closely related. Both are responses to suffering and crisis yet the ways in which they address God and the assumptions they make about the relationship and the allocation of responsibility are quite different. In the light of recent research on penitential prayer I want to re-examine aspects of the relationship between such prayers and the laments. In the process I want to look again at the implications for theology and Christian practice that were highlighted in seminal work by Claus Westermann and Walter Brueggemann.[1]

### TRANSITION AND IMPLICATIONS

Westermann pointed out that prayers prompted by suffering and crisis transitioned from lament to penance.[2] He noted that lament—that is, complaint that God has wrongly allowed or unjustly caused suffering—played a significant role in Old Testament theology but was removed

1. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*; Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 52–71.

2. Westermann, *Praise and Lament,* 204–13.

from post-exilic prayers, which replaced it with penance. This transition has been traced by a number of scholars, most notably in recent work by Mark Boda, Rodney Werline, and Richard Bautch.[3] Bautch, who rejects the idea that penitential prayer is a separate category from lament, nevertheless identifies significant changes. His form critical study of Isa 63:7—64:11, Ezra 9:6–15, and Neh 9:6–37 traces the changes in form and content from the classical lament to the penitential prayer of Second Temple Judaism.[4] The change is mediated by prophetic texts like Isa 63:7—64:11, Jer 14:1—15:4, and Lam 3 which retain the major features of classical laments but introduce penitential features.[5] It is this transition that has resulted in a group of prayers (Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 1:5–11; 9:6–37; Dan 9:4–19) with its own distinctive features. While the debate about whether lament and penitential prayer are distinct genres continues, their differences are clearly significant. Boda concludes, "[w]hether we talk about this shift as a new form or a major transformation within an older form, one must admit that there is a difference between a prayer of request that is dominated by complaint (lament) and a prayer of request that has an absence of complaint and dominance of penitence."[6] Lament and penitential prayer are related responses to suffering and crisis with distinct emphases.

Boda warns that we should not think about a tidy transition from one form to the other but rather of a continuum of prayer styles where prayers with penitential features come to dominate. There are clearly mixed type prayers particularly in the exilic and early post-exilic era.[7] That mixing is also evident in the later Hellenistic and Roman era when lament elements return and the historical review changes from a catalogue of cumulative sin to a review of the faith of ancestors.[8] Nevertheless, penitential prayer styles dominate the Second Temple era. That domination is highlighted by those prayers that address the suffering of the righteous. These are cases where penitential prayer seems inappropriate and lament is surely

3. Boda, *Praying the Tradition*; Bautch, *Developments*; Werline, *Penitential Prayer*.

4. Cf. also Werline, *Penitential Prayer*; Boda, "Form Criticism in Transition," 181–92.

5. Bautch, *Developments*, 29–63, 165–66; Boda "From Complaint to Contrition," 179. See also the essay by Boase in this volume.

6. Boda, "Form Criticism in Transition," 188.

7. This is illustrated by the papers by Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer and Elizabeth Boase in this volume.

8. Bautch, *Developments*, 137–61.

the better option. Yet in cases like Tobit (3:2–6) and the Prayer of Azariah (an apocryphal addition to Daniel) we find penitential prayers used by righteous sufferers. These prayers certainly have more elements of lament but they are penitential prayers.[9] For Second Temple Judaism penitential prayer is the appropriate response to suffering, whether deserved or innocent.

Westermann claimed that the replacement of complaint by penitential features had some negative implications theologically and followed that by expressing concern about the absence of lament from Western Christianity. Brueggemann, following Westermann's lead, identified two problems caused by the loss of lament from the liturgical life of a faith community, namely the loss of genuine covenant interaction and the stifling of questions about theodicy.[10] On the first point he argues that a focus on praise renders the human partner of the covenant voiceless because there is no place to challenge God about divine faithfulness. Using psychological theory about the development of the ego he claims the dependent partner needs to have an independent voice to which God responds in order to develop a strong faith that is able to genuinely praise God.[11] Lament calls on God as a partner in covenant and refuses to be intimidated by the divine nature of the senior partner.

On the second point Brueggemann argues that the Hebrew Bible is "more committed to questions of justice than to questions of God."[12] The human covenant partner needs to be able to call the divine partner to account when suffering is intolerable,[13] even if the only court is in fact the court of the God who stands accused. Brueggemann presumes a social situation analogous with the monarchy where the religious institution is closely aligned with the political power. A key point in Brueggemann's analysis is that lament embodies the voice of the suffering masses against the political powers who gain their legitimation from the central religious

9. Werline, *Penitential Prayer*, 161–89.

10. Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament."

11. Boda questions Brueggemann's use of social and psychological theory as the basis for the analysis ("The Priceless Gain of Penitence," 51–75).

12. Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 62.

13. Ibid., lists four features of lament that respond to theodicy. The attitude of God's obligation to the complainant as covenant partner is explicitly stated in the last one and is presumed in the others. That is an area where penitential prayer displays a significantly different attitude. See below.

institution.[14] Ultimately God is responsible for the system and lament is a means to demand a change.

The features of lament that Brueggemann highlights as essential to a healthy relationship with God are the very features that appear to be lost in the transition to penitential prayer. Brueggemann offers some valuable insights here and pointers to social application that have increasingly been heeded in a world more open to acknowledging mourning and disaster. However, I have questions about both the claimed loss that founds the theological concern and the assumption that penitential prayer closes off questions of theodicy. On the first point, lament is not really lost from the worship of Second Temple Judaism. True, it is not present in the prayers uttered in times of crisis but it was still part of worship. Complaint prayer was relocated rather than lost. Second, the contexts of the two forms of prayer are quite different. The exile had an enormous impact on the life, beliefs, and practices of Second Temple Jews. That changed context, particularly the changed place of the cult in relation to crisis prayer had a profound effect.

## RELOCATED LAMENT

The foundation for Westermann's and Brueggemann's lament about Western Christianity was that its worship mirrored the loss of complaint prayer from Judaism and was therefore impoverished by that loss. While both scholars were undoubtedly right in their analysis of a problem in the Western church the link they make with Second Temple Judaism is based on a narrow selection of its worship practice. Their contention that prayers which protested suffering were lost only relates to official prayers uttered in response to crisis. Westermann acknowledges that lament continued to occur in the literature of the Second Temple but it was significant to him that it existed independently of prayer.[15] Yet this does not make lament absent from Jewish worship. More recent research

14. While Brueggemann makes this point in "The Costly Loss of Lament" it is more forcefully made in other examples of his writing. See for example, Brueggemann, "Theodicy," 3–25; or Brueggemann, "Embrace of Pain," 395–415.

15. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 206–13. He points to several examples of lament that are separate from any formal prayer: Bar 4–5; 1 Macc 2:6; *Pss. Sol.* 2, 8; 2 *Bar.* 10–12. On the other side Bautch argues that the element of confession waxes and wanes in Second Temple penitential prayers and so questions whether penitential prayer should be regarded as a separate category from lament. See Bautch, *Development*, 160.

reinforces the notion that complaint prayer was not lost to the thinking and practice of Second Temple Judaism. William Morrow notes that while lament prayer is absent from official worship, it continued to find expression in popular piety at times of crisis. He points to a "practice of informal protest prayer that continued to assert itself in expressions of popular piety."[16] It is also important to note that elements of lament returned in later penitential prayers.[17] In addition we need to account for the book of Psalms. Lament is the most common form of Psalm, comprising some 40 percent of the book. If the standard scholarly assumption that Psalms is the song book of the Second Temple is correct then laments continued to have a significant role in Second Temple worship. As Patrick Miller has observed, wherever there is suffering there is a need to cry out to God.[18] The Second Temple era provided plenty of examples of suffering. The cry of the innocent sufferer may have been displaced but it was not silenced in Jewish worship.

## CHANGE OF CONTEXT

Complaint continued to find a place in Jewish worship. Yet it is striking that penitential prayer predominates as the response to crisis in Second Temple prayer liturgy. What complaint exists in the literature was, for a period at least, separate from prayers uttered at times of community crisis. Lament was lost from penitential prayers because the context had changed. Changed circumstances forced a change in outlook on life (*Ausblick aufs Leben*), which in turn demanded a change in ideology.[19]

Brueggemann's concern is about theodicy and the need for worshipers to call God to account in the face of suffering. Penitential prayers do not question God's faithfulness. In fact, one of the recurring features of the prayers is a review of history that identifies Yhwh's covenant faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness. Neither do penitential prayers question

16. Morrow, "Affirmation of Divine Righteousness," 103. He lists 1 Macc 2:7–13; 3:50–53; 2 *Bar* 3:1–9; 1 *En.* 84:2–6; 2 Esd 3:28–36; 5:28; 6:55–59.

17. Werline, *Penitential Prayer,* 161–89.

18. Miller, "Heaven's Prisoners," 15–26.

19. Boda, "Form Criticism in Transition," 181–92. Boda's comment is that form criticism can only take analysis of lament and penitential prayer so far. He suggests that progress will come from those methodologies that pay closer attention to the context of the prayers. He therefore indicates a need to focus on the *Ausblick aufs Leben* rather than the *Sitz im Leben* of form criticism. Note also Boase's essay in this volume.

God's righteousness or faithfulness, quite the opposite. One of the most consistent features of penitential prayers is the declaration of God's righteousness (אתה צדיק), which particularly refers to covenant faithfulness.[20] These prayers represent suffering as the result of evil at work in the world not the actions of an angry or negligent God.[21] The penitent relies on God, characterized by righteousness and faithfulness to the covenant, to respond by rescuing the oppressed. In the demise of these two features lament was indeed lost from prayers offered in suffering and crisis.

Community lament is a mode of prayer designed for the people of Israel gathered in the temple in the face of national disaster. It presumes that the suffering is both an affront to God (Ps 79:12) and the result of divine anger (Ps 79, 80) or neglect (Ps 44). The covenant relationship is understood but the emphasis is on divine obligations to the nation rather than on the people and their obligations.[22] As Westermann notes, lament is founded in the exodus and the understanding that when the people call out in distress God hears and responds.[23] The psalmist relies on God's חסד, that divine faithfulness, goodness, and mercy that will compel divine response in the face of the people's distress. While the lament may acknowledge community sin, it is hardly a determinative factor in the encounter with God. Rather the lament prayer presumes that the community needs to survive, if only for the sake of God's reputation and the continuance of proper worship. The issue of sin was not addressed through lament, instead sin was addressed through specific cult practices. Lament presumes an active cult that dealt with the issue of impediments in the relationship between the supplicant and God. In essence, lament presumes national election, covenant relationship, functioning cult, and a God whose nature would not allow the nation to be destroyed.

This assumption of the role of the cult in dealing with impediments to the relationship with God is hardly surprising when we think about the historical context of lament. While, as I have noted, lament continued to be used in Second Temple worship, its primary context was the

20. Boda, *Praying the Tradition,* 6–64.

21. Penitential prayers that have a stronger element of lament often point to the excesses of a human agent as the reason for the suffering. In that sense they hold on to the idea that God is responsible for giving the powerful their role but absolve God of direct responsibility by invoking the free will actions of the agent.

22. Rom-Shiloni, "*Setting* or *Settings*?"

23. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 259–61. Cf. Miller's argument that lament is imbedded in the human divine relationship ("Heaven's Prisoners," 15–20).

monarchic era. The laments in the book of Psalms originated in the pre-exilic era and thus presume an active royal cult. Likewise the book of Lamentations stems from the early exilic period when the patterns of the monarchy were still assumed, although the cult had been interrupted if not halted by the second Neo-Babylonian conquest. Transitional passages like Isa 63–64 show the change in context and ideology where the cult was not so accessible. Penitential prayers fully reflect a situation where the cult is not operable or is inaccessible, a situation that remained even when the Second Temple was established. It was not accessible to the Diaspora and some residents in Judah may have found their access restricted.[24]

Penitential prayer shares some of lament's features but it also has distinct features born out of its different historical and ideological context. The *Sitz im Leben* of community lament is prayer offered in the face of national crisis in the context of the cult. Two examples will illustrate the point. When the Israelites were defeated at Ai, Joshua fell on his face "before the ark of the LORD" and prayed a lament (Josh 7:6–9). Similarly Hezekiah's response to Sennacherib's letter was to enter the temple in mourning (2 Kgs 19:1–4). Penitential prayer was also uttered in the face of crisis, yet the temple, even when functional and accessible, was not the place where the prayer was spoken.[25] The prayers in Ezra 9 and Neh 9, both set in Jerusalem after the temple was rebuilt, take place in public spaces. Nehemiah 1 and Dan 9 are uttered in exile in Susa and Babylon. In post-exilic practice penitential prayers were spoken outside the temple even when the pray-er was present in Jerusalem. Penitential prayer, unlike lament, is not dependent on a functioning cult. Indeed it

24. The threat of the ban against non-compliant families in the mixed marriage controversy in Ezra 9–10 indicates active policing of access to the temple and it is possible that dissident groups, which passages like Isa 63:16 hint may have existed, also faced restrictions.

25. Note also Tobit, Baruch, and the Prayer of Azariah. The one arguable exception is 3 Macc 2 where Simon the high priest prays in the temple before the sanctuary. The location is hardly surprising when the prayer is about a desecration of the temple by the Greeks. Probably written in the early first century BCE the prayer evidences other changes from the penitential prayers in the canonical texts. The historical review in this prayer is not a catalogue of past sin and the prayer pleads with God not to punish Israel for the Greek defilement of the temple. Thus, while it does confess sin like other penitential prayers, it also evidences characteristics which reflect still more change in context and ideology. Yet even in this case the prayer is uttered because the temple has been compromised and therefore was temporarily unfit for its function.

presumes that the temple is not accessible and that the prayer functions even if the cult is not.

Penitential prayer's altered relationship with the cult is highlighted by the two roles it had in relation to sin. It either *supplemented* the cult or it *substituted* for the cult. The supplementary role can be seen in Ezra 9 where the prayer paved the way for the guilt offering which confirmed the repentance of the guilty and their renewed obedience to the law. Part of the function of penitential prayer was to move sin from the realm of the unforgivable to the place where the cult could deal with it. This is based on the priestly view of repentance where remorse and confession transfer deliberate sin to a place where, according to Jacob Milgrom, it can be dealt with. Milgrom argues that the sins listed in Lev 5:20–26 (Eng 6:1–7), described as מעל, "unfaithfulness," are deliberate and therefore not forgivable through sacrifice.[26] However, they are made forgivable by the אשם "guilt" sacrifice after confession. It is this priestly idea of repentance by remorse and confession that is the basis for penitential prayer's role in supplementing sacrifice.[27] Penitential prayer by confession and expressing remorse therefore played an important role by changing the status of the sin from that with which the cult could not deal to that with which the cult could deal. One could argue that the sin of mixed marriage in Ezra 9–10 was inadvertent because it arose from a new application of the law. However, the sin is described as מעל (Ezra 9:2; 10:2) and is linked to the past sins of the people that led to the exile. It therefore required confession as preparation for the guilt offering. In contrast to lament, which makes no attempt to deal with sin but relies on the cult, penitential prayer aids the cult in dealing with sin.

More radically penitential prayer was part of a process that could substitute for the cult. It was not the prayer alone but associated factors such as contrition and suffering that made the penitentiary act a substitute for cultic actions. This role is evidenced in Dan 9 where the prayer and mourning are effective without any cultic action. This substitutionary role seems to be a response to the inaccessibility of the cult.[28] This is

26. Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience*, 17–21; Milgrom *Leviticus 1–16*, 375–78. Good summaries of Milgrom's arguments are given in Werline, *Penitential Prayer*, 48–50, and Falk, "Scriptural Inspiration," 133–39.

27. Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience*, 126–27. "Thus remorse (*`sm*) for inadvertencies and remorse plus confession for deliberate sins constitute the Priestly doctrine of repentance."

28. In his examination of regularized penitential prayer used by the Covenanters at

not necessarily because the cult was not operational but simply because it was inaccessible, whether through geography, such as Daniel's location in Babylon, or ideology, in the case of the Qumran Covenanters, for whom the Temple was compromised.[29] In a world where sufferers could not rely on access to the cult in order to rid the community of sin, the notions of repentance and confession rooted in both Deuteronomy and Priestly texts enabled penitential prayer along with suffering to substitute for cultic sacrifice. In this way the sufferer could clear the ground of any impediments in the relationship with God that might contribute to the suffering.

Lament arose in a context where the cult apparatus dealt with the effects of sin on the relationship between God and the people. Penitential prayer arose to deal with sin in a context where the cult could not be relied upon. It either paved the way so sin could then be dealt with through sacrifice, as exemplified in Ezra 9, or, in the absence of the temple and sacrifice, the prayer and suffering substituted as a means of restoration, as exemplified in Dan 9.[30] It is interesting to note that penitential prayer continually acknowledges the cumulative aspect of community sin.[31] This is a factor that, according to many texts in the Hebrew Bible, led to the exile and arguably was not dealt with effectively by the cult. In short lament and its evolutionary child penitential prayer respond to suffering with emphases dictated by different environments that produced different outlooks.

In further contrast to lament, penitential prayer does not rely on divine election and the honor of God's name, represented in the existence of the nation, being enough to prompt redemptive action. The exile was stark evidence that God was willing to risk his reputation and utilize another nation to discipline a people who flouted their obligations to the covenant. That meant that the political authority over the community

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Qumran, Falk urges caution in attributing this substitutionary role to lack of access to the cult. While he acknowledges that regularized prayer took place at times of sacrifice and came to have the same significance as sacrifice he argues that the use of penitential prayer at Qumran rests as much on the theology of repentance and atonement as it does on inaccessibility to the cult. See Falk, "Scriptural Inspiration," 127–57. However, one wonders how much the lack of access to the cult impacted on the theology.

29. An example of the Covenanter's ban on entering the temple is CD 6:11b–14a.

30. Hogewood, "The Speech Act of Confession," 69.

31. Note that penitential prayer presumes the cumulative nature of sin over generations, a priestly notion, not cross-generational accountability for sin noted in Deuteronomy. See Boda, "Confession as Theological Expression," 34–39.

was not its own king, also in covenant relationship to Yhwh, but a foreign ruler. This negates the social protest aspect that Brueggemann argues is such an important function of complaint prayer.[32] Complaint prayer was a means to protest suffering and call to account those who claimed legitimacy through divine election.[33] Penitential prayer operated in a different environment. The ruling figures were foreigners co-opted by God rather than kings in covenant relationship. The suffering was seen as the result of those authorities overstepping the boundaries rather than a king failing his responsibilities. As social protest lament was irrelevant in the post-exilic context, at least until the Maccabean era. At this level lament was not a loss to the post-exilic community because the social function was made redundant by the circumstances. Penitential prayer was a suitable replacement because it addressed the altered social situation.

One further difference that is worthy of note is the difference in the psychology of the people. Laments have a confidence that God will act in redemption based on the special relationship the nation of Israel had with their God and their role as witnesses of divine benevolence. The exile shattered that confidence and placed human faithfulness to the covenant at the top of the agenda. The extent of the trauma made it natural, when suffering reached crisis point, that the first question the community asked was about how their behavior may have influenced the situation.[34] The exile changed the community psychology and focused the question of responsibility for suffering in a different way.[35] In this

32. Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament."

33. There is a tendency methodologically to keep communal and individual laments separate. I note, for example, that Miller, "Heaven's Prisoners," 18, brackets out communal laments when he offers a theological application of lament to contemporary worship. He argues that lament is the voice of private pain. However, penitential prayer is also used in a context of individual suffering, though admittedly not in the canonical text, which suggests that the comparison between lament and penitential prayer should not be restricted to communal prayer. Even private pain was an issue for the immediate community of the sufferer in the biblical world and I will suggest below that both prayer forms have a role in community worship today.

34. I do not adhere to the notion that the Neo-Babylonian invasion had a relatively minor affect on the people of Judah. The archaeological evidence indicates significant devastation and a massive decline in population after the invasion. See Lipschitts, *Fall and Rise*. Further the dramatic changes in ideology and the indications of profound suffering expressed in the text argue that the trauma must be taken seriously. See Smith-Christopher, *Theology of Exile*.

35. Bautch, *Developments*, 171–72. William Morrow suggests this is the result of the transformation of thinking of the Axial Age ("The Affirmation of Divine Righteousness," 101–17).

sense penitential prayer met the psychological needs of the community by dealing with its greatest fear. It enabled a restoration of the relationship with God so that the community could have confidence in a divine response to relieve their suffering.

In the sense that penitential prayers are fit for their historical context, I do not think that the loss of complaint from prayers offered at times of community crisis was a loss of the opportunity to question God's role in the crisis as Westermann and Brueggemann claim. Rather the question about God's role in suffering had moved. Penitential prayers accepted that excessive suffering was not the direct result of divine action but the result of human sin, either in unfaithfulness or, in the case of the punishing powers, by overstepping boundaries. The prayers eschew the easy option of pushing the blame for evil on heaven and accept its earthly origins. Affirming God's righteousness did not close down the question of theodicy but refocused it around how God might respond to human suffering at the hands of other humans.[36] Confession removed any grounds for divine anger so that mercy could prevail. It put the penitent in the position to maintain genuine covenant interaction. Lament lingered in different forms in the post-exilic era and responded to a different set of motivators which perhaps focused more on the suffering of the faithful as "collateral damage" in the consequences of national failure. Not all those who suffered under the Babylonians, for example, were unfaithful yet all suffered.

## THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Dalit Rom-Shiloni has argued that the move from lament to penitential prayer is not so much a transition as a theological debate.[37] She notes that both forms are present in the Persian era and claims that laments articulate a "nonorthodox" theology while penitential prayers respond with an "orthodox," that is, Deuteronomic, theology. This is an interesting suggestion and, coupled with Katherine Hayes' argument that prophetic laments may have been a necessary step in leading people to recognize failure and to respond with repentance, it has some merit.[38]

36. It is interesting to note that the theodicy question in Job results from a series of predominantly natural disasters. This is a somewhat broader situation than the suffering addressed by penitential prayers.

37. Rom-Shiloni, "Socio-Ideological Setting or Settings?"

38. Hayes, "When None Repents," 119–43.

Nevertheless the idea of a theological debate has some deficiencies that caution against accepting it as the only or even primary factor in the differences between lament and penitential prayer. First, we need to note that differences in relating to God are not necessarily an indication of ideological conflict. The fact that laments dominate the book of Psalms while penitential prayer dominated Second Temple era response to crisis should warn us that both forms had their place and may not have been seen as contradictory.[39] Second, as noted above, the context of the two forms is different. Penitential prayer responds to an era when the cult could not be presumed to deal with sin in the way that lament presumed it did. Third, characterizing penitential prayer as championing Deuteronomic orthodoxy is rather too narrow a focus on its ideological basis. Boda's study has shown that penitential prayers arise out of a context of reflection on past traditions and that the prayers themselves evidence strong Priestly as well as Deuteronomic influence.[40] Penitential prayers are an amalgamation of Deuteronomic and Priestly ideas that reflect the merging of ideologies in the post-exilic era rather than the assertion of one pre-exilic perspective.

While theological debate may not be the primary reason for the relationship between lament and penitential prayer, the notion that they may interact or complement each other has its attractions.[41] Both forms of prayer appear to be operative in the Second Temple period. It is unlikely that laments would have been such a prominent part of Psalms if the issue of theodicy had been closed off by penitential prayer. Job indicates that the relationship between retributive theology and innocent suffering was a live issue. Thinking about lament and penitential prayer as complementary modes of response to crisis raises some interesting theological reflections.

The different contexts and perspective between lament and penitential prayer must have some bearing on how they are appropriated theologically and, as a result, on how they influence contemporary faith practice. Biblical scholars do not always make the transition well, nor does theology always grasp the biblical text well. As Mark Boda has observed in a recent reflection on commentaries with theological application, the task might be better tackled by collegial co-operation rather than left in

39. See also Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer's essay in this volume.

40. Boda, *Praying the Tradition.*

41. Balentine, "Afterword," 196–98.

the hands of the individual.[42] With that in mind I will offer some pointers which others may wish to follow up.

There are some implications for theological application from the supplementary and substitutionary role of penitential prayer in relation to the cult that are worthy of note. While penance is a normal part of many Christian liturgies it is often individualized and its relationship to suffering is rarely recognized. Penitential prayer should remind us of the damaging effect of personal and corporate failure and of the cumulative effect of unacknowledged sin. Churches, particularly in a Western individualized society, can be very slow to recognize, own, and confess corporate failure, particularly its historical elements. Recent scandals, particularly of historic abuse, have shown how slow churches are to address significant corporate wrong. A second implication here is the relationship between suffering and sinful failure. Too often any retributive theology is rejected as simplistic and crude. Reasons for suffering are complex and blaming the victim can do much harm, yet there is also a place for close self examination in the face of persistent difficulties. There is a healthy aspect, particularly where corporate suffering is involved, to ask searching questions about the conduct of the community and taking corrective action.

A third implication of the substitutionary role of penitential prayers relates to lament. Any theological application of lament relies on a prior penitential prayer that deals with impediments in the divine human relationship. For the Christian church that prayer relies on the efficacy of the cross and resurrection and is often standard in liturgies. However, theological application of lament to contemporary faith frequently overlooks the need for a prior confession. Hayes argues that prophetic lament led to penance, but in Christian practice penitential prayer can lead to lament.[43]

The case for a theological application of lament has been well made by Patrick Miller.[44] However, I have one point at which I question Miller's conclusions, that is his claim that lament is the expression of personal pain which does not belong in public worship. The majority of lament psalms may be individual laments but that does not remove them from community worship.[45] The fact that they feature in a book of prayers for

42. Boda, "Theological Commentary," 139–50

43. Hayes, "When None Repents."

44. Miller, "Heaven's Prisoners."

45. A point Miller acknowledges with reference to Gerstenberger, *Der Bitte Mensch*. Gestenberger argues that lament took place in a small group setting. Miller

temple use should warn against turning individual complaint into private worship. Further there are communal laments that Miller brackets out. I do not think this is necessary or defensible. Suffering, even at a largely individual level, has community implications as Job's friends illustrate. There are also times when a community needs to express its protest against excessive suffering.[46] These need not be restricted to the regular worshiping community. Contemporary Western society is becoming increasingly willing to recognize the impact of suffering on a community and that the church has a role in leading such events. Recent New Zealand examples are the community memorial services held for the Pike River mining disaster and the Christchurch earthquake in which the churches played a significant role.[47]

One further implication arises from the psychological perspective of the prayers noted earlier. Penitential prayers responded to the deep fears of the community following the trauma of the exile. They enabled the community to deal with their failures and confront their suffering by removing impediments to the covenantal relationship. Laments approach God with a sense that the suffering is not the result of sin, or that it is excessive if sin exists. Whether lament or penitential prayer is most appropriate may depend on the psychology of the community and its sense of relationship with God.

The exile was a watershed that brought huge changes to Israel's experience of God. One of the outcomes was that complaint prayers transitioned into penitential prayers. Yet that did not remove lament from human divine interaction nor remove questions of theodicy from that interaction. Both forms of prayer had a life in post-exilic faith practice and, I suggest, had complementary roles. That complementarity offers theological perspectives that can benefit contemporary faith practice.



argues that individual lament was primarily private and points to Hannah's prayer at Shiloh (1 Sam 1) as the paradigm while suggesting Jephthah's daughter bewailing her virginity with her companions is the exception (Judg 11). I wonder, in line with Gerstenberger, if the reverse is true and Jephthah's daughter reflects the more normal setting and Hannah's private and silent lament is the exception.

46. Broyles *Faith and Experience*. He notes that what prompts lament is not suffering but prolonged suffering that indicates Yhwh has not responded to the initial plea for help.

47. Sally Brown points to examples of American church leaders turning to lament to help their congregations make sense of the September 11 attacks ("When Lament Shapes a Sermon," 27–37).