



Community Laments & Thanksgiving

Every culture has poems and songs of both lament and thanksgiving. When they move from individual to communal, a different message is being delivered. As individual laments, the person singing or speaking the words has a measure of ownership for both the issue and the outcome. They are often more narrow in focus, such as healing or forgiveness for something very specific. However, with communal offerings of lament and thanksgiving, there is a more global effect in the desired outcome or the singing of thanks. There is a message everyone essential 'signs onto' as it is offered in prayer.

This is an incredible act of bravery, often overlooked but more modern congregations as old familiar words are said. To challenge the deity, to suggest injustice that the deity had to fix, could potentially end in death. There was a degree of trust that YHWH would receive these prayers and work in connection to restore the senses of justice, but it was not a guarantee.

Hebrew people had a covenantal relationship with God, that was likely very different from the surrounding faith traditions. This difference cannot be stressed too much, as relatively little is known about the worship in other cultures. However, the fact that the ancient Hebrews understood God as a partner rather than beings that used humans for entertainment, likely encouraged that sense of bravery in the face of the divine.

In modern contexts, one need only look at Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Throughout the musical Tevye is performing a typical song of lament: did you have to do that? how am I going to finish my work now? why did you curse me with five daughters? why do we have to leave our homes?,

including along the way the statements of praise and awe that are typically found throughout laments. In this way Teyve is in constant communication with God, telling God everything he wants fixed.

Community Laments - 12, 14, 44, 53, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 106, 108, 123, 126, 137,

Psalm 12 begins showing a typical complaint 'against this generation'. That is a common theme amongst elders of every age and culture, and one that appears frequently in the Bible. On the other hand, God speaking an answer to the lament is something that is less common. Of note also in like 6 is the number seven, which in Jewish Numerology means completeness. Numbers are never just numbers in Hebrew literature.

Psalm 44 is a great example of challenging God for not supporting the people. The psalmist recounts their history, but acknowledges that their current situation doesn't have any of God's interventions that their ancestors knew. Then they call for God to 'wake up' and get active. They have always been faithful, which God knows, and now it's time to return the favour.

Psalm 58 has a list of violent acts the psalmist wants to see happen to their enemies, as well as those who are led astray by the gods of other nations. Revenge fantasies are a large factor in community laments, and make it uncomfortable for the modern reader. We have to remember that there was never a time when the Hebrew people were politically independent. Fantasies of the revenge and destruction God would unleash on the 'evil doers' was all they had.

Psalm 85 has a slightly different tone. While it acknowledges the separation from God due to God's anger, most of the psalm is about what restoration of God's favour and peace will look like.

Psalm 106 is most likely Second Temple with the restoration thanks to the Persians, given the heavy retelling of the Moses narrative. A measure of 'Hebrew purity' developed during that time where any marriages with those outside the faith were considered unacceptable, and there was contempt for any Hebrew person who became too comfortable with Babylonian culture. To



By the rivers of
Babylon

see some of this judgement, read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Many scholars believe the novel of Ruth was written during this time as a countermeasure showing King David's own ancestry was not purely Hebrew.

Thanks to Boney M, entire generations of those outside the Jewish tradition know the opening words of Psalm 137. This was composed after the restoration of the Second Temple. The revenge fantasies included towards the end fit with the anger of people who are getting their political power back.

Community Psalms of Thanksgiving - 67, 75, 107, 124, 129, 136,

Community psalms of thanksgiving were not the acts of bravery that laments were, and in many ways are some of the easiest to pray. What differentiates them from Psalms of Praise is the acknowledgement of the problems that led everyone to these songs of thanksgiving.

Psalm 107 is the fullest example of community thanksgiving. Using several images of distraught and dangerous situations, the psalmist shows that God saw what was happening and intervened to save the people. The revenge fantasy included towards the end of the psalm is considerably muted, and offers the chance for those who they wish to condemn to become 'wise' and share in the blessings.

Psalm 124 and 129 have a response requested of the people. These psalms were perhaps performed by a priest at the temple, and expected an affirmative sound, much like is found in modern Black Baptist congregations.

Psalm 136 is the clearest example of a litany found in psalms (a prayer lead by one or more priests and the same congregational response after every line). This is a historical recitation of the history of the Hebrew people, composed during the Second Temple period, showing how in every situation God has been present and working on behalf of the Hebrew people.

Revenge Fantasies in the Book of Psalms

One of the most challenging parts of reading Psalms is the occurrence of descriptions of violence. As mentioned when we began this series, they were never realized, but they were part of the cultural and individual reaction to being a repeatedly conquered people. The fantasies often include reference to a time with King David when all was well, and how much they have lost. To underscore how uncomfortable the modern audience is with these parts of the Psalms, many books of worship intentionally don't include the more destructive references.

Academic studies into revenge fantasies show they exist across all cultures and throughout history. They are a natural response to feelings and the very physical acts of being dominated. Most

fantasies continue until some form of justice has been realized. The psalms of thanksgiving are perhaps that outlet for the Hebrew people during worship, as they see the nations that once had so much power being defeated by other nations. Graciousness to one’s enemies was not a consideration.

Scholars also have found a gendered line when it comes to revenge fantasies, where men are the ones who tend to write and promote these fantasies while women tend to prefer moving on and forgetting. Psychologists theorize that patriarchal culture encourages aggressiveness in men, so revenge fantasies are sanctioned. Meanwhile aggression in women is seen as abnormal, and women internalize aggression, often taking it out on themselves either through suicide or low self-esteem.

Since the psalter was most likely written exclusively by men, this tracks with modern psychological studies, and readers should not read anything more into the words, such as YHWH being a God of violence.

A conclusion that might be drawn, however, is that the violence in Psalms might have been a ritual response, a way to have a healthy outpouring and make it God’s responsibility so the people could carry on with their lives. This would match the first point that a person or community would hold onto revenge fantasies until they were satisfied that they had received justice.

Summary of our Lenten Study

As we noted with John Calvin and Martin Luther when we began this study, the entire scope of human emotions and the Hebrew story are found within Psalms. As such they become our prayers too.

None of the Psalms are closed. We can add ourselves to any of the laments or praises or recitations of history with more historical periods of our own remembering. They are the words

of the people, and they are a place we can all connect with God and with each other.



Illuminated pages from the St. Alban Psalter, a 12 century monastery in England