



Lament and Hope in Psalm 130

Professor Lee Roy Martin
Research Fellow University of South Africa
Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies
900 Walker ST NE, Cleveland TN 37312, USA
lmartin@ptseminary.edu

Abstract

Psalm 130 is a penitential lament, located within the Psalms of Ascent. This article shows that, unlike other Psalms of Lament that move from lament to praise, Psalm 130 moves from lament to exhortation. Utilizing rhetorical analysis, the author also demonstrates how Psalm 130 expresses the necessary connection between lament and hope. Founded on a covenant relationship to Yahweh, the psalmist can lament, confess, and repent, all the while hoping in Yahweh's compassion and covenant commitment. The article concludes by arguing that lament, which has been largely abandoned in the Church, holds great value in the contemporary context.

Keywords: lament, rhetorical analysis, hermeneutics, repentance, penitence

Introduction

This article examines Psalm 130 and explores its nature as a penitential lament. The approach used here is a rhetorical critical method that takes into account the nature of the psalm as lyric poetry. As poetry, the Psalm expresses its theme and message not only through the straightforward use of words but also through the artistic devices of **form** (genre and structures), **feeling** (mood/affective dimension), and **figures** of speech. These rhetorical devices overlap and intertwine to create theological meaning.¹ Furthermore, this approach appreciates the various contexts of ancient and contemporary hearers of the psalms.

Beginning with an overview of Psalm 130, the article will argue for a four-part chiasmic structure of the psalm. The main body of the study will consist of a rhetorical analysis of the psalm, and the article will conclude with suggestions regarding the contemporary practice of lament in the Church.

Psalm 130

¹A Song of Ascents

From the depths, I cry to you, LORD.

Lord, hear my voice!

²Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleadings for grace.

³If you should observe iniquities, LORD,

Lord, who would stand?

¹ These compositional and semantic devices are found in all types of biblical literature, but they are more pronounced in the poetic sections of Scripture. See, for example, L.R. Martin, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Essential Keys for Interpreting the Bible* (Miami, FL: Gospel Press, 2011), and W.L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).



- ⁴But forgiveness is with you,
so that you may be feared.
⁵I wait for the LORD; my whole being waits,
and for his word I hope.
⁶My soul [waits] for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning;
watchmen for the morning.
⁷Hope, O Israel, in the LORD;
because with the LORD is commitment,
and abundant with him is redemption.
⁸And he, himself, will redeem Israel
from all their iniquities. (Author's translation)

A reading of Psalm 130 immediately reveals three of its characteristics. First, the heading/superscription of the psalm points to its canonical context among the fifteen Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134), which were sung by the Jewish pilgrims as they journeyed to Jerusalem and as they ascended Mt. Zion to worship at the ancient temple. Second, the fact that the psalm begins with a cry for God's attention suggests that it should be classified as a lament, a request for God's help.² Third, the references throughout to sin and forgiveness indicate that this is a particular kind of lament – it is what has been called a penitential psalm.³ The seven penitential laments, Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143⁴ (and I would include also Psalm 106),⁵ are contrite confessions of sin coupled with passionate pleas for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Used in the liturgies of the Synagogue and the Church to voice the contrition and repentance of both the individual and the congregation,⁶ Psalm 130 is known in the Latin tradition as 'De Profundis', a title based on the first words of the psalm ('from the depths') as translated in the Latin Vulgate. Because of differences in the numbering of the Psalms, Psalm 130 is number 129 in the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew traditions.

I. The Structure of Psalm 130

The psalm may be divided into four sections. Verses 1 and 2 express the psalmist's plea for grace, and verses 3 and 4 describe the Lord's compassionate nature. Verses 5 and 6 declare the psalmist's intent to wait and hope in the Lord, and verses 7 and 8 challenge the people of Israel

² Psalm 130 is classified as an Individual Lament by C. Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1980), p. 53.

³ According to O. di Lasso, *The Seven Penitential Psalms and Laudate Dominum De Caelis* (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1990), p. vii, the first person to group together the seven penitential psalms was Cassiodorus in his sixth-century commentary on the Psalms. The earliest edition that I could find is F.M.A. Cassiodorus, *Cassiodori Clarissimi Senatoris Romani in Psalterium Expositio* (Venice: Impensa heredum Octaviani Scoti ac sociorum, 1517); see p. 10b. Cassiodorus' reference to the seven penitential psalms is also found in J.P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Graeca* (Patrologiae Cursus Completus; Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1969) LXX, p. 60: '*Memento autem quod hic penitentium primus est psalmus, sequitur tricesimus primus, tricesimus septimus, quinquagesimus, centesimus primus, centesimus vicesimus nonus, centesimus quadragessimus secundus*'.

⁴ These numbers follow the English Bible; the numbering of the Psalms varies in different versions of the canon.

⁵ Psalm 106 defies any straightforward form-critical classification. It begins as a song of praise but soon turns into a confession of national sin (v. 6: 'we have sinned'), including requests for forgiveness (vv. 4, 5, 47). Because the structure follows Israel's historical narrative, the psalm could also be grouped with the psalms of historical recital.

⁶ In the Roman Catholic tradition, Psalm 130 (129) is read on several occasions throughout the liturgical year. It is also read at funerals as a prayer that the faithful departed may be forgiven of their sins.



to do the same, because the Lord is committed to his covenant with Israel and will redeem them. In addition to these structural characteristics, it should be noted that verses 1-4 are addressed to God, and verses 5-6 form a soliloquy that expresses the psalmist's trust in God and assurance of being heard. The last two verses are addressed to the congregation as an encouragement to seek for redemption.

A. Four-part structure of Psalm 130

- A. Address to God and plea for pardon (vv. 1-2)
- B. Confession and declaration of God's mercy (vv. 3-4)
- C. Testimony of the psalmist's trust in God (vv. 5-6)
- D. Exhortation for Israel to trust God as redeemer (vv. 7-8)

Another structural feature of note is the chiasm imbedded in verses 3-8.

- A Iniquity** - If you kept a record of iniquities, Yahweh (v. 3)
- B Grace** - But there is forgiveness with you, (v. 4)
- C Expectation** - I wait for Yahweh, and ... I hope (vv. 5 and 6)
- C' Expectation** - Hope, O Israel, in Yahweh; (v. 7)
- B' Grace** -with him is abundant redemption (v. 7)
- A' Iniquity** - he himself shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities (v. 8)

The outer elements of the chiasm point to the work of Yahweh in forgiving iniquity, and the center of the chiasm highlights the role of the supplicant to 'wait' for Yahweh and 'hope' for an answer.

B. Structure of Lament Psalms

Another way to look at the structure is to compare it to the pattern that is found in many of the Psalms of Lament. With the exception of the vow of praise, the common elements of the lament can be correlated with Psalm 130.

Elements of Lament	Psalm 130
1. Address to God	v. 1
2. Petition	v. 2
3. Complaint	v. 3
4. Assurance of answer	v. 4-5
5. Statement of trust	vv. 5-7
6. Vow of praise	absent
7. Descriptive praise	vv. 7-8

II. Rhetorical Analysis of Psalm 130

A. The superscription

As mentioned above, Psalm 130 is located among the Psalms of Ascents. Inasmuch as an approach to the temple is an occasion for rejoicing and celebration, the heading creates a mood of joy and anticipation. While anticipation may continue throughout the psalm, the joy is quickly replaced by sorrow, when the hearer realizes that this is a Psalm of Lament. At first thought, the Psalms of Ascents appear to be an inappropriate location for a lament. Nevertheless, Psalms 120,



123, 126, and 130 are all among the Psalms of Ascents and all of them seem to fit into the category of lament. In an earlier psalm, worshipers are warned about the moral requirements for entering the House of God:

Who may ascend into the hill of Yahweh,
and who may stand in His holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood,
and has not sworn deceitfully.
He shall receive a blessing from the Yahweh
and righteousness from the God of his salvation (Ps. 24.3-5).

Perhaps the repentance that is voiced in these laments prepares the worshipers to enter God's presence with 'clean hands and a pure heart'.

A. Address to God and plea for pardon (vv. 1-2)

Like other Psalms of Lament, Psalm 130 begins with a direct address to God: 'From the depths I cry⁷ to you, Yahweh' (v. 1). Unlike some psalms that speak only *about* God, the laments speak *to* God. All of the agony, all of the pain, all of the guilt, and all of the shame is spoken directly to Yahweh from within the depths of suffering. A powerful figure of speech, 'the depths' brings to mind the feeling of despair and urgency that might overtake a person who is drowning in deep waters with no way of escape (Cf. Ps. 69.15). Here, the psalmist is drowning in the guilt and alienation brought on by sin (v. 3); therefore, a desperate cry goes out to Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God who heard the cries of slaves, brought them out of Egypt, and joined himself to them in covenant.

The beginning of verse 2 creates an unusual rhetorical pattern when juxtaposed with the ending of verse 1. The last word of verse 1 is Yahweh, and the first word of verse 2 is Adonai ('Lord'). Therefore, the psalmist states, '...I cry to you Yahweh; Adonai hear my voice ...'. The fact that this pattern is repeated in verse 3 makes it even more remarkable, and the fact that the translations ignore the pattern is disappointing.

Verse two begins as a prayer that God will 'hear' and be 'attentive', essentially highlighting the perceived absence of Yahweh, a feature that is common to the Psalms of Lament. The psalmist implores God to listen and to hear his prayer. The desire to be heard is emphasized by the repetition of the word 'voice' (קוֹל). At the beginning, the prayer has no specific content; it is a request only that Yahweh hear the psalmist; but at the end of the verse, the content of the prayer

⁷ This present tense usage of the qatal (perfect) is sometimes called 'performative'. See P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Subsidia Biblica, 14; 2 vols.; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991), §112.f. Cf. B.K. Waltke and M.P. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), who write, 'An instantaneous perfective represents a situation occurring at the very instant the expression is being uttered. This use appears chiefly with *verba dicendi* ('verbs of speaking,' swearing, declaring, advising, etc.) or gestures associated with speaking' (§30.5.1.d); and W. Gesenius, E. Kautzsch, and A.E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2d English edn, 1910), §106.i(b). Present tense is adopted by the CEB, RSV, and by C. Westermann, *The Psalms: A New Translation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 225. For further argument in favor of the present tense, see Erich Zenger, 'Psalm 130', in F.-L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger (eds.), *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011) p. 421-42, footnote a.



is revealed to be an appeal for grace. The word תַּחֲנוּן means ‘a plea for grace or favor’⁸ and is related to the noun חַן which means ‘grace, favor’. The verb form חָנַן (‘show favor, be gracious’)⁹ is used in Psalm 51, another Penitential Psalm, when the psalmist prays, ‘Be gracious to me, O God’ (51.1).¹⁰ The act of pleading for grace is fraught with emotion and reveals the psalmist’s deep desire for restoration of the covenant relationship with God.

C. Confession of sin and declaration of God’s mercy (vv. 3-4)

The psalmist, claiming no merit whatever, confesses the universal failure of humanity, and in so doing, confesses his own sinfulness. If God’s acceptance of humanity were based upon his observation of iniquities, no one could stand acquitted, including the psalmist.¹¹ A multitude of iniquities prohibits anyone from standing innocent before God, ‘but forgiveness is with’ the Lord. The Hebrew כִּי (‘but’) is used here as a strong adversative,¹² pointing to Yahweh as the only source of hope. The word סְלוּחַ (‘forgiveness’) signifies ‘pardon’¹³ and is used in the Hebrew Bible only in reference to the actions of God.¹⁴ Perhaps the psalmist remembers the Lord’s forgiveness of Israel when they built and worshiped the golden calf (Exod. 34.9) or when they grumbled at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 14.19-20). The preposition ‘with’ (עִם) answers the question, ‘Where is forgiveness; where is it located?’ It is ‘with’ the Lord. Similar language is used later in verse 7, where we learn that ‘commitment’ is ‘with’ Yahweh, and ‘redemption’ is also ‘with’ him. Because Yahweh is the only source of forgiveness, he is to be ‘feared’, which means to be revered and held in awe.¹⁵

D. Testimony of the psalmist’s trust in God (vv. 5-6)

The first four verses of Psalm 130 are addressed to God, but verses 5-6 are a soliloquy, with no explicit addressee: ‘I wait for Yahweh; my whole being waits; and I hope for his word’. Having pleaded for God’s grace and forgiveness, the psalmist now waits expectantly for the Lord to answer. The theme of verses 5-6 is communicated through two related terms ‘to wait’ and ‘to hope’, and each of these terms is found twice in verses 5-7. Here it is affirmed that although lament is a statement of suffering and a plea for help, it is also ‘an act of hope’.¹⁶

In modern usage, ‘waiting’ can be a passive state that is disconnected from the object of waiting. For example, while in the doctor’s waiting room, patients may read, watch TV, talk to each other,

⁸ Cf. F. Brown *et al.*, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (trans. Edward Robinson; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), p. 337 (Hereafter, *BDB*).

⁹ *BDB*, p. 335.

¹⁰ The verb is used in the following Penitential Psalms: 6, 51, 102, and 130. The noun form (חַנּוּן) is found also in Psalm 143, another Penitential Psalm.

¹¹ For a parallel usage of the verb חָנַן, see Job 14.16, ‘you do not keep a record of my sin’ (CEB).

¹² D.J.A. Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (8 vols.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) IV: 387. Cf. the same usage in Pss. 44.3 [4]; 115.1; and 118.17 (Hereafter, *DCH*).

¹³ L. Köhler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Leiden: Brill, 2001, p. 757 (Hereafter *HALOT*); cf. W. Van Gemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (5 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997) III: 259-60 (Hereafter *NIDOTTE*); and E. Jenni and C. Westermann, eds., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (3 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) II: 797-98 (Hereafter *TLOT*).

¹⁴ W.C. Kaiser, ‘חָנַן’, in R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, and B.K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) II: 626 (Hereafter *TWOT*).

¹⁵ *DCH*, IV, p. 278. Cf. CEB: ‘honored’.

¹⁶ S.A. Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008), p. 4.



make phone calls, or even take a nap. However, regarding the biblical word ‘wait’ (קוה), John Hartley writes, ‘This root means to wait or to look for with eager expectation ... It means enduring patiently in confident hope that God will decisively act for the salvation of his people (Gen 49:18). Waiting involves the very essence of a person’s being, his soul (*nepeš*; Ps 130:5).’¹⁷ Indeed, the psalmist emphasizes the involvement of his ‘whole being’ in this intense waiting process.

Waiting for the Lord, the psalmist also ‘hopes’ for a ‘word’, an answer from God.¹⁸ The word ‘hope’ (hif. of יחל overlaps semantically with ‘wait’ and is used here in parallel to it.¹⁹ The LXX, however, recognizes the difference between the terms and translates קוה with the Greek ὑπομένω, and it renders יחל with ἐλπίζω. Paul Gilchrist argues that the kind of hope signified by יחל ‘is not a pacifying wish of the imagination which drowns out troubles, nor is it uncertain ... but rather [it] is the solid ground of expectation for the righteous. As such it is directed towards God.’²⁰ The psalmist hopes for God’s ‘word’, that is, for God’s answer to the prayer that is being offered. The psalmist will tarry and persist in prayer until a word of assurance comes forth from God.

The anticipation and longing of the psalmist is symbolized in verse 6 by a comparison with the guards who keep watch upon the city walls each night. Their hope is that they might pass the night successfully without threat or incident. Therefore, they long for the coming of the morning, when they can finally breathe a sigh of relief.²¹ The psalmist, however, longs for the Lord even more than the watchmen long for the day. Feeling the burden of iniquity and the guilt that it incurs, the psalmist waits and hopes sorrowfully and apprehensively, unable to claim the joy of forgiveness until the Lord responds with the gift of his word of redemption.²² The comparison presented in verse 6 does not add new information; rather, its import is to deepen the affective impact of the psalm. The impact is further strengthened by the striking repetition, ‘watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning’.²³ Consistent with other laments, verses 5-6 suggest that the Psalm of Lament is ultimately a psalm of hope.

E. Exhortation that Israel should trust in God’s redemption (vv. 7-8)

The Psalms of Lament often make a transition from prayer to praise, but in Psalm 130 the transition is from lament to exhortation. The last two verses of the psalm are addressed to ‘Israel’, the community of faith, which is encouraged to follow the example of the psalmist and ‘hope’ in the Lord.²⁴ Although the last two verses do not constitute praise, they produce a change of tone

¹⁷ J.E. Hartley, ‘קוה’, in *TWOT*, II, p. 791. Cf. *NIDOTTE*, III, pp. 892-93.

¹⁸ See R.J. Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem* (JSOTSup, 118; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), who provides a list of the Psalms in which ‘God is asked to reply and does so’ (pp. 162-63).

¹⁹ *HALOT*, p. 407.

²⁰ P.R. Gilchrist, ‘יחל’, in *TWOT*, p. 373. I, p. 373. Cf. Pss. 42.5 [6]; 43.5; 131.3; Job 13.15.

²¹ The Hebrew text has no verb in v. 6. Translators assume that the verb ‘wait’ is carried over from v. 5; however, Westermann chooses to insert ‘longs for’, which is a bit more intense than ‘waits for’. See Westermann, *The Psalms: A New Translation*, p. 225. Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms*, p. 155, remarks that morning is the ‘time when יהוה saves the chosen or punishes the guilty’.

²² The comparison between the lament of Ps. 130.6 and the lament of Habakkuk is striking: ‘I will stand on my watchtower and station myself upon the rampart; I will look to see what he will say to me’ (Hab. 2.1). R.D. Moore, *The Spirit of the Old Testament* (JPTSUP, 35; Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2011), writes, ‘Habakkuk stages his wait for God on the watchtower, the place from which one would watch for an approaching enemy! The lamenter, who has been moved to see others and himself differently, is now opened to see God in a new way too’ (p. 116).

²³ ‘Watchmen’ is a substantive participle of the verb שמר, ‘to keep, guard, watch, observe’. See *BDB* p. 1036.

²⁴ Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms*, p. 209, understands v. 7 as an expression of Jewish messianic hope during the Persian period.



that is similar to that which would occur with a transition to praise. The first part of the psalm is plaintive and sorrowful, but the psalm concludes on the hopeful and positive note that Yahweh is faithful and will redeem Israel.

In light of the earlier thrice-repeated alternation from 'Yahweh' to 'Adonai' (vv. 1-2, 3, and 5-6), we might expect the same alternation here in verse 7. Instead, 'Yahweh' is repeated, as a kind of poetic climax that emphasizes the importance of the name 'Yahweh'.

Israel's hope in Yahweh is not without sound justification. The psalmist supplies two important reasons for that hope. First, Israel has grounds to hope in Yahweh, because 'with Yahweh is commitment', a theological conviction that is rooted in Yahweh's self-revelation to Moses in Exod. 34.6 and which is a crucial concept in the Psalter.²⁵ The word 'commitment' (Hebrew τon) refers to Yahweh's covenant faithfulness. The Hebrew term has no exact equivalent in English, which has led to a variety of translations: 'faithful love' (CEB), 'mercy' (JPS, NKJV), 'lovingkindness' (NASB), 'steadfast love' (RSV), 'ἔλεος' (LXX), '*miser cordia*' (VUL and RV), '*Gnade*' (Luther). The difficulty in translation results from the fact that in contexts like Psalm 130, τon expresses a combination of love, mercy, and covenant loyalty.²⁶ I have chosen to follow Goldingay, who translates τon with the English 'commitment', a word that seems to capture both the loyalty and covenant love that are essential to τon .²⁷ On its deep significance, Zenger writes that τon

underscores that there is a fundamental relationship between YHWH and Israel on which Israel can rely: It is a loving relationship that determines YHWH's actions toward Israel and drives him to act out of love, which not only yields more than one would 'normally expect but cares lovingly for Israel – unconditionally and 'for nothing,' the very love that is not only supportive but in fact constitutive of Israel's life.²⁸

Israel's second reason for hope is that God's redemption is 'abundant' (v. 7b). The adjective 'abundant' is stressed by the unusual word order of v. 7b. It is a verbless clause in which 'abundant' is often translated as an attributive adjective: 'With him is abundant redemption' (NASB, NKJV).²⁹ The placement of the adjective in first position, however, dictates that it be understood as a predicate adjective rather than an attributive adjective. Attributive adjectives follow the nouns they modify, which is not the case in v. 7. Translating 'abundant' as a predicate adjective yields the following meaning in English: 'with him, redemption is abundant'. As is often the case, using normal English word order would obscure the rhetorical impact of the Hebrew text; therefore, a better translation results by retaining the Hebrew word order – 'abundant with him is redemption'.³⁰ After all, this is poetry; and even in English poetry, word order is fluid.

The word order in verse 8 is equally emphatic, inasmuch as the verse begins with the unnecessary pronoun 'he', which suggests the translation 'he, himself, will redeem' (he, and no one else!) or

²⁵ In its various forms, τon is found 130 times in the book of Psalms. See especially, Psalm 136.

²⁶ DCH, III, pp. 277-78. Cf. HALOT, I, p. 336.

²⁷ J. Goldingay, *Psalms* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), III, p. 530.

²⁸ Zenger, 'Psalm 130', p. 438.

²⁹ JPS and RSV have the same word order but use the word 'plenteous' instead of 'abundant'.

³⁰ Cf. C.A. Briggs and E.G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (International Critical Commentary; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), II, p. 465. The Hebrew הרבה was originally a hifil infinitive construct, with the meaning 'to increase, to make numerous, to make great', but its grammatical function was expanded to include adjectival and adverbial uses. See HALOT, p. 1177.



more loosely as 'he is the one who will redeem' (CEB).³¹ Once again, repetition adds to the impact of the psalm. The noun 'redemption', found in v. 7, takes a verbal form in v. 8: 'will redeem'. The root of both the noun and the verb (פדה) means 'to buy out',³² to 'ransom for a price',³³ to 'liberate'.³⁴ It is used in reference to Israel's redemption from Egyptian bondage (Deut. 15.15) and the redemption from Babylonian exile (Isa. 35.10), but Ps. 13.7-8 is the only Old Testament text where the word פדה is used with reference to redemption from sin.³⁵ The words 'commitment' and 'redemption' appeal to Israel's communal memory as the covenant people of God, and those memories generate deep affective responses of love, gratitude, and hope.

The ending of Psalm 130 points back to verse 3, where the psalmist asked the sobering rhetorical question: 'If you should observe iniquities, LORD, Lord, who would stand?' This final verse answers verse 3 with the buoyant declaration that the Lord 'himself will redeem Israel from all their iniquities!' Psalm 130 confirms the assertion of Brueggemann that 'when YHWH is rightly understood, sin from the outset is penultimate at best. What is ultimate is the mercy of YHWH that outflanks human failure.'³⁶

III. Psalm 130 and the Practice of Lament

The Psalm of Lament is the worshiper's cry to God for deliverance from distress. The seven penitential psalms, including Psalm 130, link pain to guilt; but this linkage is rare elsewhere within the Psalter.³⁷ Most of the Psalms of Lament are expressions of suffering by those who are innocent; that is, their immediate pain is not caused directly by their own guilt (e.g. Psalms 5, 7, 17, 26).³⁸ In the more common types of lament, the sufferer's trouble may take the form of sickness (Psalms 6, 31, 38), oppression (Psalm 3, 9, 13), or an accusation (Psalm 7, 17, 26).³⁹ Underlying the lament is the feeling that God is absent (Psalms 13, 22, 44).⁴⁰ Scott Ellington explains a number of important components of the biblical lament:

Biblical lament, while it does include tears, complaints and protests, is something more. It is the experience of loss suffered within the context of *relatedness*. A relationship of trust, intimacy, and love is a necessary precondition for genuine lament. When the biblical writers lament, they do so from within the context of a foundational relationship that binds together the individual with members of the community of faith and that community with their God. That biblical lament is offered to God is clear, but perhaps less obvious is the essential role that the community plays. The prayer of lament is not a private thing, but is offered 'out

³¹ The LXX follows the Hebrew: καὶ αὐτὸς λυτρώσεται τὸν Ἰσραὴλ ἐκ πασῶν τῶν ἀνομιῶν αὐτοῦ.

³² HALOT, II, p. 912.

³³ DCH, VI, p. 651.

³⁴ J.J. Stamm, 'פדה', in TLOT, II, 964.

³⁵ W.B. Coker, 'פדה', in TWOT, II, 716.

³⁶ W. Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid: Introducing the Psalms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p. 108.

³⁷ W. Brueggemann, 'The Friday Voice of Faith', *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001), p. 19.

³⁸ Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message*, p. 68. Cf. Brueggemann, 'The Friday Voice of Faith', p. 13.

³⁹ J.H. Hayes, *Understanding the Psalms* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1876), pp. 64-84. Cf. Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message*, pp. 60-70.

⁴⁰ L.P. Maré, 'A Pentecostal Perspective on the Use of Psalms of Lament in Worship', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29.1 (2008), p. 102.



loud,' 'standing up,' and 'in church.' Lament is not the property of the individual but belongs to the community that presents itself before God.⁴¹

Walter Brueggemann has been instrumental in calling attention to the value of lament in general and to the Psalms of Lament in particular. In his 1986 article, 'The Costly Loss of Lament',⁴² he argues that despite the great value of the Psalms of Lament, they are now virtually ignored by Church; and he observes further that lament itself is absent from both 'life and liturgy'.⁴³ Brueggemann argues that 'most contemporary prayer is denial, as though our secrets can be hid from God'.⁴⁴ He insists that by not using the Psalms of Lament in the Church, 'we have communicated two messages to people: either you must not feel *that* way (angry with God, for example) or, if you feel *that* way, you must do something about it somewhere else – but not here'.⁴⁵ Therefore, lament is consigned to the therapist's office and effusive praise to the sports arena.

Claus Westermann proposes that the absence of lament in Christian theology and practice is due in part to a one-sided reading of the New Testament, particularly by the Reformed tradition, that emphasizes the work of Jesus Christ as redemption from sin but not as redemption from suffering. He writes, 'Here we see the real reason why the lament has been dropped from Christian prayer. The believing Christian should bear suffering patiently and not complain about it to God. The "sufferings of this world" are unimportant and insignificant. What is important is the guilt of sin.'⁴⁶ The laments, however, reflect a 'spirituality of vigorous protest'.⁴⁷ Westermann observes further that by quoting Psalm 22 on the cross, Jesus demonstrated that he 'had taken up the lament of those people who suffer, that he too had entered into suffering... With his suffering and dying, therefore, Jesus could not have had only the sinner in mind; he must also have been thinking of those who suffer.'⁴⁸ The one-sided view of Christ's death that relates his work to sin alone and excludes human suffering does not represent 'the New Testament as a whole'. Therefore, Westermann asserts that Christian theology must be 'corrected by the Old Testament. A correction of this sort would have far-reaching consequences. One of these would be that the lament, as the language of suffering, would receive a legitimate place in Christian worship, as it had in the

⁴¹ Ellington, *Risking Truth*, p. 7 (emphasis original). Ellington's stance is in direct opposition to that of P.D. Miller, 'Prayer and Worship', *Calvin Theological Journal* 36.1 (2001), who argues that lament is a private prayer that has 'its primary focus outside of worship ... not *in* the community' (pp. 53-54, emphasis original). Miller uses the prayer of Hannah as support for his model, but he fails to incorporate the communal laments, the book of Lamentations, the laments found in the prophets, and the Psalms of Lament that include direct address to the community, as Ps. 130.7-8 does.

⁴² W. Brueggemann, 'The Costly Loss of Lament', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986), pp. 57-71. The article is reprinted in W. Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 98-111. Brueggemann builds upon the groundbreaking doctoral thesis of C. Westermann, published in English as *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965) and reprinted as *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), which includes an additional section devoted entirely to the Psalms of Lament. Westermann argues convincingly for the value of the Psalms of Lament for the contemporary Church. The Christian significance of lament is later expanded and clarified in C. Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁴³ Brueggemann, 'The Costly Loss of Lament', p. 60.

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid*, p. 92.

⁴⁵ Brueggemann, 'The Friday Voice of Faith', p. 15 (emphasis original).

⁴⁶ Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, p. 274.

⁴⁷ Brueggemann, 'The Friday Voice of Faith', p. 16.

⁴⁸ Westermann, *Living Psalms*, p. 274. The place of lament in the New Testament is explored in more detail by L.R. McQueen, *Joel and the Spirit: The Cry of a Prophetic Hermeneutic* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009), pp. 37-62, and by Ellington, *Risking Truth*, pp. 163-83.



worship of the Old Testament.⁴⁹ The Psalms of Lament encourage faithful and legitimate protest to God during times of trouble.

Conclusion

Psalms 130 begins with a cry: 'From the depths, I cry to you, LORD'; and, by beginning in this way, the psalm teaches us to give voice to our suffering and our pain. The laments teach us to come openly and honestly to God with our needs, to tell him our doubts and our fears. Jesus declared that God's house should be a house of prayer, but many liturgies do not include prayer for the sick or times of seeking the face of God in sustained prayer. In some contemporary churches, worship is turned into entertainment, and the preaching of the Gospel becomes self-help sessions that promote positive thinking. There is little time given to minister to those who are suffering. The church should be a place where God's people can weep with those who weep and bind up the brokenhearted. Many Christians arrive at church bearing heavy burdens. During times of prayer, the body of Christ can respond to their pain, so that grieving ones are not alone in that moment. In the words of the psalmist, the Church must 'cry out' to the Lord for each other and for the suffering of the world.

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⁴⁹ Westermann, *Living Psalms*, p. 275. Cf. Brueggemann, 'The Friday Voice of Faith', p. 13, who writes that lament, 'taken theologically and christologically, correlates with the Friday and Sunday of Christian faith. Therefore, it is precisely this psalm-lament genre that gives Christian faith its liturgical pattern of crucifixion and resurrection. One obvious implication is that the loss of the lament psalm in the worship life of the church is essentially the loss of a theology of the cross.'



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