
READING THE LAMENT PSALMS OF SICKNESS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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Abstract

As model prayers in the *Book of Psalms*, the individual Lament Psalms of Sickness (LPS) provide a resource for the church to bring the coronavirus pandemic situation to God in prayer. Four Lament Psalms of Sickness (Pss 6, 38, 88, 102) are examined according to the genre characteristics of prayer and the three constituting components of Complaint, Petition, and Assertions of Confidence. Through an analysis of the specifics of the LPS, the relevance of such poetic prayer language for use by the church in the context of COVID-19 is proposed.

Keywords

Lament psalms · coronavirus pandemic · sickness

The OT lament psalms¹ provided the Israelite community with a poetic literary form², through which to give expression, both

¹ The lament genre also occurs in *Job*, *Lamentations*, and *Jeremiah*. In the first two, lament is one of the key literary genres of the larger compositions. In *Job*, the lament genre occurs in the speeches of Job. *Lamentations* is a combination of the genres of lament and lamentation. In *Jeremiah* (11:18–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–14, 15–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13), the lament genre is found in the context of the prophet expressing difficulty over performing the prophetic ministry.

² Although frequently the terms „lament“ and „lamentation“ are sometimes used interchangeably, when applied as designations of literary genre, they should be distinguished as two distinctive types. „Lamentation“ is a mourning song that expresses grief at death. It takes the form of a monologue or soliloquy that is not addressed to anyone

individually and communally, to the emotional upheaval and experiences of distress and trauma.³ Incorporated into the worshipping community's hymnal and prayer book (the *Book of Psalms*), the lament psalms provided examples and templates for adapting and re-applying that literary form into various circumstances of distress and disorientation, regardless of the original incidents that the psalms were referencing. Not only its canonical inclusion but also the language of the psalms facilitated and invited such re-application, as the poetic descriptions of the distress in the lament psalms employed generalized, stereotypical, and metaphorical language rather than precise, detailed narrative-style accounts of the original trauma-evoking situation. For example, the lament psalms that speak of sickness elude a medical diagnosis precisely because such specificity of description was intentionally avoided. As a result, anyone with any physical malady can re-appropriate the lament psalms as their prayers, fittingly relating the descriptive language to their illness.

The lament psalms arose from, speak of, and find applicability in periods of trauma and distress. Clearly, the coronavirus pandemic, which began in the spring of 2020, and has continued through several waves and major mutated variants over the past two years, has resulted in varying levels of disorientation and stress on the personal, local community, national, and global levels.⁴ Global deaths (as of Dec 2021) stand at over five million. Even though that is a staggering number, it is not merely a

specifically. Its focus is past-present, and it eulogies the past. The past contrasts with the present loss in which all that previously was has become irretrievable. Its primary rhetorical function is to voice the emotions of grief and mourning to aid in the healing process of dealing with death. By contrast, „lament“ is specifically prayer addressed to God. It is primarily present-future oriented, and it bemoans the current dire situation. However, the future is seen as potentially reversible. Thus, its primary rhetorical purpose is to petition God for a drastically different future through God's intervention.

³ The amount of literature dealing with the various aspects of the lament psalms is massive. In the bibliography are listed only a few selected recent publications that deal with the lament psalms' issues of sickness, somatic language, emotions, body imagery, and the relevance of the lament psalms to the coronavirus pandemic.

⁴ An American Psychological Association (2021) survey done in Feb 2021 shows that „Nearly half of parents (48%) said the level of stress in their life has increased compared with before the pandemic. More than 3 in 5 parents with children still home for remote learning (62%) said the same. Essential workers were more than twice as likely as those who are not to have received treatment from a mental health professional (34% vs. 12%) and to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the coronavirus pandemic started (25% vs. 9%).“ See also Newman 2020.

statistic for those individuals and families who have suffered the grief and sorrow of the loss of a loved one. A recent poll taken in the U.S. shows that one in five has lost someone close in the pandemic (Neergaard, et al. 2021). Besides the physical toll of the COVID-19 deaths and hospitalizations, there is the emotional and psychological stress due, in part, to fear of contracting the virus and potentially dying. The physical distancing regulations, restrictions on the size of social gatherings, mask-wearing requirements, and the need for proof of vaccination to attend public events or travel can all be anxiety-producing. The length to which the pandemic has been going on is emotionally fatiguing. The stress is compounded by the economic impact of slowdowns of industries, temporary or permanent layoffs from jobs, closures of businesses, and disruptions to supply chains. There is disquietude over the long-term impact and changes regarding what the „new normal“ will look like. Furthermore, issues surrounding government requirements for vaccinations have produced ideological and political polarization, contributing to societal anxiety.

The lament psalms, in their facets of both giving voice to the physical, emotional, societal, and spiritual distress, along with the cries for God to intervene, provide one of the biblical prayer resources of how the church can express the stress, anxiety, and grief in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Although many of the lament psalms are relatable to the coronavirus situation, the Lament Psalms of Sickness (LPS), which explicitly speak of physical sickness as one of the underlying conditions, provide particular analogies of correspondence. There are four lament psalms in which physical illness is one of the critical components of distress: Pss 6, 38, 88, 102.⁵ These psalms are all classified as „individual

⁵ As a subcategory of lament psalms, those considered „Lament Psalms of Sickness“ vary. There are a few other lament psalms in which somatic terminology is used to describe the psalmists' suffering (e.g., Pss 22 [vv. 15–16]; 31 [vv. 8, 10–11]; 41 [vv. 4–5]; 69 [vv. 2–4, 21]; 109 [vv. 22–24]). Two interpretation issues are key in determining whether a psalm refers to physical sickness. The psalms speak more generally of „physical suffering“ rather than specifically „sickness“. Nevertheless, physical suffering does not always equate to sickness, as it can have other causes, for example, having been physically attacked. So the first issue is that there needs to be sufficient evidence of „sickness“ language. The other issue is that the poetic language of suffering and sickness may be metaphoric rather than literal. So although the language of „sickness“ and „healing“ is used, it may not refer specifically or exclusively to actual somatic conditions. The four psalms have been selected due to the prominence of the „sickness“ motif, and that most likely an actual illness is that which the psalms are describing. No claim is made that

laments“, as the speaking voice employs the grammatical first person singular. The focus will be on those psalms, to consider how the psalmists voiced their concerns about the sickness to God. In this manner, the psalms provide examples for adapting and applying those prayers to the context of COVID-19.

LAMENT PSALMS AS PRAYERS

From a literary genre standpoint, „lament psalms“ are defined primarily by two form critical characteristics: their form as prayers and three key genre components.

The lament psalms, as a genre, are prayers addressed directly to Yahweh. This is evidenced grammatically by second-person forms of address: vocatives,⁶ verbal forms (imperative, imperfect, perfect), pronouns („you“), and suffixes („your“). The second person address to God is very apparent at the beginning of the LPS (e.g., 6:2–5; 38:2; 88:2–3; 102:2).⁷ Also, the psalmists reference their lament psalms as „prayer“ (תפלה: 6:10; 88:3, 14; 102:2, 18), „resounding-cry“ (רנה: 88:3), „supplication-for-favour“ (תחנונה: 6:10), and „cry-for-help“ (שועה: 102:2). The psalmists also verbally speak of what they are doing of as: „calling-out“ (קרא) to Yahweh (88:10; 102:3); „crying-out“ (צעק: 88:2), and „crying-for-help“ (שוע: 88:14). Also mentioned is the gesture of prayer of „spreading-out the palms“ (88:10). In the superscription of Ps 102:1, it is spoken of as a „prayer (תפלה)“ and a „pouring out (שפך) a complaint (שיח)“.

The significance of the lament psalms as prayers to God is that the requests and laments are never merely voiced as a monologue of speaking to an unspecified audience, nor as a soliloquy of an internalized speaking

these four psalms are the only LPS; instead, they are used due to their representational character.

⁶ Sometimes, because the vocative occurs at the very beginning of the psalm, it is segmented out as a genre element of „Invocation“. However, the initial vocative is not a separate entity. Rather, it is part of an initial Petition, Complaint, or Assertion of Confidence. Also, the vocative is not confined to the beginning but occurs elsewhere in these psalms (in Petition: 38:22–23; in Complaint: 88:15, and in Assertions of Confidence: 38:10, 16; 88:10b, 14; 102:13).

⁷ The verse numbering follows the Hebrew. The translation throughout is that of the author.

to one's self.⁸ The lament psalms are part of the dialogic interaction between Yahweh and his people. The lament psalms arise out of the already existing covenant relationship between the individual and Yahweh, predicated upon a dialogic conversation of speaking and hearing between the two covenant partners.⁹ By voicing the lament psalm to Yahweh, the people are both acknowledging their relationship with God and expressing a sense of trust and faith in God through the very act of directing the prayer to God.

Even though in the Complaint the prayers experientially feel like Yahweh has rejected them and is thus inattentive or silent or inactive (e.g., 88:15), they nevertheless continue to tenaciously cling to God as the one to whom to vent their needs and frustrations. Thus, the incongruence of lament is that the psalmists continue to pray to God, who is being experienced as unresponsive. Moreover, those feelings of abandonment by God are paradoxically co-present with Assertions of Confidence that express trust in God. So the psalmists have an underlying supposition that God is still in some way aware of the situation, even though their analyses of the recent experiences indicate otherwise, and that their addressing God will provide the motivation for him to become active in responding to them.

In a contemporary re-application, the lament psalms illustrate that the direst of times are not the occasions to cease speaking to and with God. The coronavirus pandemic is not the time to cease the dialogue with God. Rather, the LPS can be used as templates, so as to continue the contemporary prayer dialogue of expressing feelings and requests related to the pandemic.

GENRE COMPONENTS OF LAMENT PSALMS

The second identifying characteristic of lament psalms is that they are comprised of three key genre components (1) Petition, (2) Complaint,

⁸ Even though on a rare occasion there is an internal dialogue with „self“ (e.g., Pss 42:6, 12; 43:5), such is done in the broader context of address to God.

⁹ The dialogic nature of the relationship in the context of cultic worship is expressed in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in 1 Kgs 8:27–53.

and (3) Assertion of Confidence.¹⁰ These three genre components are found in all lament psalms to some degree, but the proportional ratio between them varies from one lament psalm to another. Also, there is no set structural pattern or flow in which the three components occur, but most often alternate back and forth within an individual psalm.¹¹

(1) „Petitions“ are urgent pleas to God to help and intervene on the psalmists' behalf. The Petitions state what the psalmists desire Yahweh to do in response to the circumstances of disorientation, as they literarily and rhetorically arise out of and correspond directly to the circumstances expressed in the Complaints.

(2) „Complaints“ are the emotion-laden descriptions of the distressing circumstances in which the psalmist is suffering and the disorienting emotional and spiritual impact the situation is having on the psalmist. The poetic description in the Complaint gives words to the traumatic experience, and the voicing of the Complaint lays the specifics of the traumatic experience before God so that he will take notice and respond.

The Complaints describe the psalmist's perspective of what is happening in relation to the three participants in the scenario – the psalmist, Yahweh, and others. In the „I“-Complaint,¹² the individual psalmists speak of their physical anguish and emotional distress. In the „You“-Complaint, the psalmists describe their perception of the role that Yahweh plays in the situation, as well as directly questioning and challenging Yahweh about such. In the „They“-Complaint component, the psalmists recount the societal disruptions in their relationships with others and the anguish that such causes. In the LPS, the „They“-Complaint involves two separate groups. The ones are actively and aggressively acting as „enemies“ toward the psalmists. The other groups are family and

¹⁰ Some include other elements such as „Invocation“, „Assurance of God Hearing“, and „Affirmation or Vow to Praise“. As noted above, „Invocation“, merely notes the initial vocative, which is part of one of the three constituting components. An „Assurance of God Hearing“ is not always present and is here taken as a subcategory of „Assertions of Confidence“. The „Affirmation to Praise“ is frequently absent, found in the LPS only in Ps 102 (vv. 19, 22–23). Thus it cannot be categorized as a „defining“ or „necessary“ genre component.

¹¹ The characterization of lament psalms that they must move to confidence or praise at the end is inaccurate for most of them.

¹² Or „We“-Complaints, if it is a community lament psalm.

friends who have turned away from the psalmists due to the sickness.

(3) „Assertions of Confidence“ in God reaffirm in various ways the psalmists’ relationship with God. Often they declare who the psalmist affirms God to be while expressing a confidence that God will respond to the psalmist’s prayer in this particular case.

Excursus: Form Elements of LPS

Ps 6

Superscription (v. 1)

Petition (vv. 2–3aα)

Complaint („I“) (v. 3aβ)

Petition (v. 3bα)

Complaint („I“) (v. 3bβ–4a)

Complaint („You“) (v. 4b)

Petition (v. 5)

Complaint (v. 6)

Complaint („I“) (vv. 7–8)

Petition (v. 9a)

Assertion of Confidence (Assurance of Being Heard)

(vv. 9b–11)

Ps 38

Superscription (v. 1)

Petition (v. 2)

Complaint („You“) (v. 3)

Complaint („I“) (vv. 4–9)

Assertion of Confidence (v. 10)

Complaint („I“) (v. 11)

Complaint („They“) (vv. 12–13)

Attestation of Innocence (vv. 14–15)

Assertion of Confidence (Assurance of Being Heard) (v. 16)

Complaint („They“) (v. 17)

Complaint („I“) (vv. 18–19)

Complaint („They“) (vv. 20–21)

Petition (vv. 22–23)

Ps 88

Superscription (v. 1)

Assertion of Confidence (v. 2)

Petition (v. 3)

Complaint („I“) (vv. 4–6)

Complaint („You“) (vv. 7–9)

Complaint („I“) (v. 10a)

Assertion of Confidence (v. 10b)

Complaint („You“) (vv. 11–13)

Assertion of confidence (v. 14)

Complaint („You“) (v. 15)

Complaint („I“) (v. 16)

Complaint („You“) (vv. 17–19)

Ps 102

Superscription (v. 1)

Petition (vv. 2–3)

Complaint („I“) (vv. 4–8)

Complaint („They“) (v. 9)

Complaint („I“) (v. 10)

Complaint („You“) (v. 11)

Complaint („I“) (v. 12)

Assertion of Confidence (v. 13)

Assertion of Confidence (Assurance of Being Heard)
(vv. 14–18)

Affirmation of Praise (v. 19)

Assertion of Confidence (Assurance of Being Heard)
(vv. 20–21)

Affirmation of Praise (vv. 22–23)

Complaint („You“) (v. 24)

Petition (v. 25a)

Assertion of Confidence (vv. 25b–26)

Assertion of Confidence (Assurance of Being Heard)
(vv. 27–29)

THE FUNCTION OF LAMENT PSALMS

Most lament psalms' primary function is petitioning and pleading with Yahweh to act favorably on the psalmists' behalf. The Complaint and Confidence components provide the reason or motivation that Yahweh should respond to the Petitions for deliverance and healing. Such is evident at the beginning of the LPS through the structural flow in which Petition is followed by Complaint, with the latter syntactically linked to the former by „for (ׁ)“, which provides the reason or motivation for the Petition: Ps 6:2–6: Petition (vv. 2–3a α) + „for (ׁ)“ Complaint (v. 3a β) + Petition (v. 3b α) + „for (ׁ)“ Complaint (vv. 3b β –4) + Petition (v. 5) + „for (ׁ)“ Complaint (v. 6); Ps 38:2–9: Petition (v. 2) + „for (ׁ)“ Complaint (vv. 3–9); Ps 88:3–10a: Petition (v. 3) + „for (ׁ)“ Complaint (vv. 4–10a); Ps 102:2–12: Petition (vv. 2–3) + „for (ׁ)“ Complaint (vv. 4–12).

That the Petition is functionally the key component means that the purpose of the LPS is to solicit divine help, not merely to vent the psalmists' feelings found in the Complaint. Clearly, there is a cathartic value in venting one's feelings, but the resulting benefit of doing so is not the primary reason for the prayer. The prayer form itself highlights the primacy of petitioning. Whereas the therapeutic value of lamenting can be achieved through forms other than prayer, petitioning for divine help can only occur in prayer addressed to God.

The primary function of lament is petitioning for divine help. Voicing laments in the context of the coronavirus should not be done just for a therapeutical aim but out of a sincere desire for God to intervene and to deal with the circumstances and the impact of the virus.

Even though the primary function of the LPS is that of Petition for help, concerning the re-adaptation of the LPS in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the key point of relatability is that of the illness descriptions in the Complaints. Thus, we will begin the analysis of the LPS with the Complaints, followed by the Petitions.

COMPLAINTS IN THE LPS

In the LPS, the areas of Complaint can be broadly categorized into (1) physical suffering, which is coupled with (2) emotional and psychological distress, as well as (3) spiritual disorientation in relationship with God. All of these are compounded by the societal disruptions of (4) abandonment by friends and (5) adversity from „enemies“.

(1) The accounts of the physical suffering in the „I“-Complaint sections highlight the debilitating effect that the sickness is having on the psalmists' bodies. The descriptions are not designed to be objective reports of the medical symptoms but rather are emotion-evoking portrayals seeking to elicit a sympathetic hearing, that serve as motivational stimuli for Yahweh to respond to the Petitions for help.

Sometimes the descriptors are relatively specific, such as 38:5a: „My wounds stink (and) fester“. More often, they speak of general weakness and physical pain:

6:3aβ for feeble am I
 38:7a I am very bent (and) bowed down
 9a I am very numb and crushed
 18b and my pain is before me always
 88:16 Afflicted am I, and perishing from (my) youthful-vigour;
 I bear your dreadful terrors;
 I am exhausted.

Most often the suffering is tied to specific internal or external parts of the body, such as the „heart“, „bones“, „flesh“, or „eyes“:

6:3bβ for terrified are my bones
 8 Wasted away with grief is my eye;
 it has grown weak...
 38:4 There is no soundness in my flesh...
 There is no well-being in my bones...
 8 For my loins are filled with burning,
 and there is no soundness in my flesh.
 11a My heart flutters;
 my strength forsakes me,
 and the light of my eyes – also, that is no longer with me.

- 88:10a My eyes are dim on account of affliction
 102:4b and my bones, like (in) a burning-fire, are charred
 5 Smitten like grass, and withered is my heart,
 for I forget to eat my bread
 6b my bone(s) cleave to my flesh

In several of the LPS the psalmists make it clear that they are on the verge of death due to the sickness:

- 88:4b and my life draw near to Sheol.
 5 I am counted with the ones going down to the Pit.
 I have become like a strong man...
 6a-ba released among the dead;
 like the slain, who lie in the grave...
 102:4a for finished in smoke are my days
 12 My days lengthen like a shadow,
 and (as for) me, like grass I will wither.
 24 He [Yahweh] afflicted my strength in the way;
 he cut-short my days.

In thinking of themselves as on the verge of death, the psalmists are probably not being hyperbolic for persuasive effect. These descriptions must be taken in their original context in which advanced medical knowledge, technology, diagnostic tools, and treatment of diseases was not available. Thus, what are today considered as minor, easily treatable ailments, such as colds, flu, superficial cuts or wounds, or malaria, were both potentially life threatening, and their symptoms were not readily ameliorated.

The generalized and stereotypical poetic language in speaking of the sicknesses facilitates their re-application to the symptoms of COVID-19, without much of a shift from the LPS language. The Public Health website of Canada lists some of the more commonly reported symptoms as including: shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fever, chills, fatigue or weakness, muscle or body aches, loss of smell or taste, headache, abdominal pain, diarrhea and vomiting, and general feeling of being very unwell (Canada Public Health 2021).

(2) It is not always certain whether the graphic somatic references refer exclusively to physical suffering, or whether they are also metaphorically describing the psalmists' overall condition, including the emotional and spiritual upheaval brought on by and accompanying the physical malady. Nevertheless, the LPS do also often contain numerous references to the external manifestation of the emotional distress through paralinguistic „sighing (אנחה)“, „loud-groaning (גהש)“, „moaning (נהמה)“, and „weeping (בכי)“:

- 6:7 I am weary in my sighing (אנחה);
I make my bed swim every night;
with my tears, I make my couch dissolve.
- 38:7b all the day I walk about mourning (קדר).
- 9 I am numb and I am crushed, exceedingly;
I loudly-groan (גשג) out of the moaning (נהמה) of my heart.
- 88:4a For my soul is sated with troubles,
- 102:6 On-account-of the voice of my sighing (אנחה),
my bones cleave to my flesh.
- 10 For ashes, like bread, I have eaten,
and my drink, with my weeping (בכי), I have mingled.

Also, in 6:9b, in the Assertion of Confidence, the prayer is referred to as „the voice of my weeping (בכי)“.

Such expressions of emotional distress resonate with the sentiments and psychological distress of those suffering from the coronavirus.

(3) The physical and emotional distress is also conjoined with spiritual turmoil, the expressions of which occur in the „You“-Complaints. Within the LPS, Yahweh is viewed theologically as the one who has directly orchestrated and brought about the circumstances of suffering:

- 38:3 For your arrows have penetratingly-descended into me,
and your hand has descended upon me.
- 88:7 You have set me in the lowest pit,
in the dark places in the depths.
- 8b and with all your waves you have afflicted¹³

¹³ In the „You“-Complaints of Ps 88 (vv. 7–9, 15, 17–19) there are nine direct accusatory „you“ statements of what the psalmist perceives God's role is in the situation.

God's dealings with the psalmists are experienced both in the external oppressive circumstances attributed to God's actions, as well as by his absence and inactivity in rescuing:

88:15 Why, Yahweh, have you rejected my soul –
hidden your face from me?

God's lack of action through delaying is also implied in the question of 6:4b: „And (as for) you, Yahweh – how long?“ Thus Yahweh is paradoxically perceived as both acting and not acting at the same time.

Yahweh's deliberately acting in discipline or chastisement and, conversely, intentionally withholding favourable actions are both interpreted through the lens of divine anger and wrath:

38:4a There is no soundness in my flesh,
on account of your indignation (זעם);
88:8a Upon me, your anger (חמה) lies heavily
17 Over me your fierce-wrath (חרון) has gone;
your terrors (בעותים) have annihilated me.
18 They surround me like water all the day;
they engulf me all together.
102:11 Because of your indignation (זעם) and your wrath (קצר);
for you have lifted me up and you have cast me away.

That perspective is also evident in the Petitions for Yahweh to cease from that angry disposition and restrain from any further or fuller expression of such:

6:2 Yahweh, do not in your anger (אף), (continue to) rebuke me;
and do not, in your burning-anger (חמה), chastise me!
38:2 Yahweh do not in your wrath (קצר), (continue to) rebuke
me,
nor in your burning-anger (חמה) chastise me!

Even though the psalmists perceive what is happening as evidence of divine wrath, only in Ps 38 is the sickness directly attributed to the psalmist having sinned through an acknowledgement of such:

38:4b there is no wellbeing in my bones, on account of my sin
(חטאת).
5 For my iniquities (עוונות) have passed over my head;

- like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.
 6 My wounds stink and fester on account of my foolishness
 (אולת).

Since, within the theology of the covenant, which forms the key theological basis for the Psalms, a correlation was made between disobedience and the curse of sickness (Deut 28:22, 27, 35, 59–61; Lev 26:16, 21, 25), when one experienced sickness it could be perceived as divine punishment for specific sins committed (see Brown 1995: 119–157). In Psalm 38, the psalmist assumed that such a correlation was present.¹⁴ Yet what one interpreted and spoke of as an experience of divine wrath did not always mean that one's disobedience or sin had brought that outpouring of divine anger upon the person. Although in Pss 6, 88, and 102¹⁵ the psalmists use language and imagery of divine wrath, there are no acknowledgements or confessions of sin, nor penitential requests for forgiveness. Thus, in those psalms, the psalmists may have viewed themselves as being innocent of any offence which would have been the cause of their sicknesses, even though there are also no explicit assertions of innocence.

There are also other places in which the „experiencing“ of God's wrath is not equated by the sufferer as punishment for sin. Job clearly describes his suffering as the experiencing of God's anger, in terms very similar to the lament psalms (e.g., 9:13 „God will not turn-back his anger [רָא]“; 10:17 „And you increase your indignation [כַּעַשׁ] against me“; 16:7–16, specifically v. 9 „(In) his anger [רָא], he has torn“; 19:8–13, specifically v. 11 „He has kindled against me, his anger [רָא]“). Yet in the same breathe, Job vehemently maintains his innocence (16:17).

Like Job, in several individual lament psalms, the psalmists voice an „Assertion of Innocence“ (Pss 7:4–6, 9–11; 17:1–5; 26:1–8, 11–12; 35:7, 11–14; 69:5, 8, 10–13) in which they declare themselves innocent of any

¹⁴ A similar connection is drawn in Ps 31:11: For my life is spent in sorrow, / and my years in sighing. / My strength, because of my iniquity (עוֹן), has failed, / and my bones have wasted away. Also in Ps 41:4–5: Yahweh will sustain him upon (the) bed of illness; / he has altered all his lying down in his sickness. / (As for) me, I said: „Yahweh, be favourable to me. / Heal my soul, for I have sinned (חָטָא) against you.“

¹⁵ Although liturgically Pss 6 and 102 have been classified among the seven Penitential Psalms, within those psalms there is no expressed correlation between the psalmists' behavior and the experienced affliction.

wrongdoing that would justify the aggression from the enemies.¹⁶ Yet, they describe God's actions in terms that are typically understood as expressive of his wrath: for example, God „hiding his face“ (Ps 69:18), God being „silent“ and „far away“ (35:22), and God being „asleep“ (35:23a). In the communal lament of Ps 44, the community asserts its innocence (vv. 18–19, 21–22) in the midst of the accusatory „You“-Complaints (vv. 10–17, 20, 23). Although the term „wrath“ is not used, the circumstances are characteristic of such and correspond with the expected covenant curses associated with disobedience – military defeat and humiliation, becoming a reproach and a byword. Thus, in the LPS just because the psalmists are describing their sickness and distress through the lens of divine wrath, such does not necessarily mean that the psalmists assume that their illnesses have been brought on by any wrongdoing on their part.

It is the two theological suppositions of the LPS that (1) the sickness and suffering are directly attributable to God, and in some that (2) the sickness is the retributive consequence of sin, which may present the most significant difficulty in the use of the LPS as prayers during the coronavirus pandemic. Unlike in the OT where a direct line was often drawn between „natural“ events and God, in the contemporary perspective, there is often an uncomfortableness about attributing such events to God or to our sin. Rather the view is that either God has allowed the suffering to happen for some instructive or redemptive purpose, or that sicknesses and disasters are the results of the natural consequences in a world that functions according to natural laws (see Pew Research Center 2021; Wright 2020).

One of the ways of dealing with the issue of divine wrath in re-applying the LPS is to understand that the poetry of the lament psalms is „experiential“ language. It expresses how the psalmist is experiencing the reality that is occurring, rather than trying to make dogmatic theological declarations that this is definitively how God is working in the situation. What the psalmists were experiencing „felt“ to them like an expression of divine anger (just like Job interpreted what was happening to him as divine wrath). Thus, they used that kind of terminology to describe it. The same

¹⁶ Although the Assertions of Innocence only occur in lament psalms where the primary distress is created by enemy assaults, whether psychological or physical, in Job, the assertions are tied to his physical ailment and suffering.

is true of other language about God in the lament psalms; for example, the language of divine hiddenness or God being asleep. The psalmists were experiencing God as if he was hiding himself or sleeping; yet a systematic theology might affirm a different understanding. If understood as „experiential“ language, it seems that the wording of the LPS can be related to our circumstances. At times, what is being experienced in the coronavirus pandemic certainly „feels“ like divine anger. So regardless of what position one takes theologically as to the causal (or lack thereof) involvement of God in the pandemic, the poetic language of the „You“-Complaints can be adapted as our prayers.

Also, Ps 38, which does draw the correspondence between sickness and sin, may be useful as a text to evoke self-examination about whether there are sins explicitly arising out of the pandemic situation that need to be confessed. For example, is the church allowing pandemic-related issues to divide it, rather than drawing it together in authentic Christian unity? On a global scale, are those in the wealthy nations adequately providing medical treatment and vaccines to more impoverished nations, and does the church need to confess a part in that inequity of distribution? Just like many churches' weekly Sunday liturgy contains a Confession of Sin, prayers of lament during the coronavirus can provoke self-examination and, where needed, penitence.

During the pandemic, the community of faith needs the „You“-Complaints of the lament psalms to be encouraged to voice the hard questions to God about God's seeming absence in bringing about healing and relief from the pandemic: „Where are you, God, in this time of suffering? God, you seem silent. Is it not time to awaken and eradicate this disease? How long will you allow the pandemic to continue? God, how many deaths are enough?“ The LPS legitimately reflect on and bring those kinds of accusations and questions to God in prayer. When done in the context of a covenant relationship with God, such questioning does not reflect a lack of faith, but a profound reliance upon God.

(4) In the „They“-Complaints, the LPS also express the societal repercussions of how others relate to the psalmists in light of their sicknesses, and that amplifies the emotional and spiritual distress. The LPS speak about the sense of social isolation, abandonment, and ostracization by friends

and companions.¹⁷ Those who would usually be expected to give aid and succor in the time of suffering, have disassociated themselves from the psalmists, who then have to fend for themselves:

- 38:12 My loved-ones and my companions –
from before my stricken-disease they stand (aloof);
and my close-relatives stand far-off.
- 88:9 You have put my friends far from me.
You have made me abominations to them.
Confined, and I cannot go out.
- 19a You have put far from me loved-one and neighbour
- 102:7 I have become similar to a pelican of the wilderness.
I have become like an owl of the waste-places.
- 8b and I have become like a bird (who is) alone on the
housetop.

Those verses in the LPS resonate with the coronavirus experiences of aloneness. Over the past two years, the isolation has been graphically portrayed in pictures of elderly persons sitting inside a nursing home staring out the window with their loved ones on the outside, because visiting inside the elderly care facility was prohibited. Enduring the pandemic all alone is highlighted by the accounts of patients in the ICU dying without any family members gathered around them because no one was allowed to be present.

The coronavirus pandemic sense of isolation results from the physical distancing requirements, the stay-at-home mandates, the self-quarantine regulations, the restrictions on the size of gatherings, the closure of schools, public gatherings, sporting events, and even church gatherings. These have resulted in „social distancing“, whether voluntarily chosen out of fear of becoming infected or following government health directives. Social distancing produces feelings of disconnect with family and friends and of alienation from social contacts (see Lagoy 2021). An Oct 2020 study done by the Harvard Graduate School of Education concluded that „Alarming numbers of Americans are lonely... 36% of respondents reported feeling lonely ‘frequently’ or ‘almost all the time or all the time’

¹⁷ Job also speaks of the social isolation related to his suffering (19:13–19).

in the prior four weeks. A startling 61% of young people aged 18-25 and 51% of mothers with young children reported these miserable degrees of loneliness. Survey respondents also reported substantial increases in loneliness since the outbreak of the pandemic“ (Weissbourd, et al. 2021).

There is not only the sense of abandonment and loneliness in these psalms' verses but also the feeling of social stigmatization. The sick person is stigmatized by the shameful view attached to them due to their condition.¹⁸ Even though the reasons for the stigmatized view of an intentional separation from the psalmists are not explicit, it is logical to assume that part of the motivation was related to the health issue of fear of contracting the disease. The disassociation may have been motivated by the friends' concern that they would share in the societal shame attached to the sick person. Given that in Ps 88:9, the psalmist is considered as „abominations (תועבות)“ by others – a very strong term carrying the connotations of ritual defilement or ethical perverseness – it is possible that the stigmatization arose out of a theological perspective that the sickness was due to disobedience, and thus the need to disengage from someone who was categorized as a sinner (see Ps 1:1).

Studies show that social stigmatization is also a reality related to the coronavirus, with the stigmatization increasing suffering (see Ramaci, et al. 2020). The results of one study exemplify this:

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in India, there existed a negative perception toward those infected with the disease. The COVID-19 patients are accused of being ignorant and negligent, thereby being held responsible for having contracted the virus. The COVID-19 patients were being stereotyped as the active spreaders of coronavirus... Such a stereotype led the society to adopt several negative treatments (ranging from social media posts against them, stopping their entry into the residential areas, and spreading rumors against them on the basis of their religion, class, and caste)... [T]he devaluation associated with the mark of COVID-19 is indelible. Probably, that is why the consequences attached

¹⁸ Such is similarly expressed in Ps 31:12, which is preceded by a „You“-Complaint that Yahweh has given the psalmist into the hand of the enemy (v. 9), a Petition for Yahweh to be favorable toward him (v. 10a), because of the „I“-Complaint that he is suffering (vs. 10b–11) because of his iniquity (v. 11b): 31:12 Because of all my enemies, I have become a reproach, / and very much (so) to my neighbors, / and a dread to my acquaintances. / Those seeing me (when) outside flee from me.

to its stigmatization are so devastating that even... after defeating the virus, they have not been able to free themselves from being shunned by society. They are reported being treated as untouchables, receiving the humiliating taunts, and fingers pointed against them and their family (Bhanot, et al. 2021: 3).

Thus the LPS provide, in the midst of the coronavirus, the means for those experiencing such societal separation and stigma to express such in prayer.

(5) The other social ramification of the sickness in the „They“-Complaints, is the opposition of the „enemies“ against the psalmists:

6:8 Wasted away with grief is my eye;
 it has grown weak because of all my adversaries.

When compared with the other lament psalms, the „enemies“ play a much less significant role in the LPS. Even though the „enemies“ are not characterized sufficiently to identify specifically who they are, in the LPS they are most likely fellow community members. Since the enemies are not viewed as the cause of the sickness,¹⁹ their role is that of compounding the emotional and spiritual suffering and attempting to exploit the psalmists' condition. Thus, within the LPS, the primary accusation against the „enemies“ is that they are reproaching and mocking the psalmists. Such indicates verbal assaults which are aimed at undermining the psalmists' integrity and spirituality:²⁰

38:13 And they set traps, the ones who search for my soul;
 and the ones who seek my harm speak destructive ruin,
 and deceptions, all the day, they utter.
102:9 All the day, my enemies reproach me.
 Those who curse me, against/by me they have sworn.

¹⁹ Some suggest that the „enemies“ verbal and physical aggressions are the cause of the psalmists' illnesses. But such does not seem to be the case, based on: (1) the sickness itself is always directly attributed to Yahweh; (2) in Ps 38, the cause is identified as the psalmist's sin, and not attributed to the mentioned enemies; (3) the enemies play a minor role in the LPS. The „They“-Complaint occurs in only six verses (6:8b; 38:13, 17, 20–21; 102:9); only one Petition is directly related to them (6:9a), and only one Assertion of Confidence that they will be defeated (6:11).

²⁰ See similarly Ps 22:7–9, 13–14, 17, 18b–19.

Some of the verbal insults may be theologically based, similar to the accusations by Job's „friends“, such that the reproachers attribute the psalmist's sickness to sin. Therefore the psalmist justly deserves the divinely inflicted illness.

In Ps 38 it explicitly states that the enemies have no justifiable basis for their actions against the psalmists:

- 38:20 And my enemies are, without cause,²¹ numerous,
 and multiplied are those hating me falsely.
- 21 And those repaying evil instead of goodness
 act as adversaries (against me) because of my pursuing
 good.

Such is probably the underlying, unexpressed assumption in the other LPS as well.

Within the contemporary coronavirus context, there are „enemies“ to which the LPS descriptions would fit with modifications. One example would be those seeing to take advantage of the vulnerable in the midst of the pandemic. The issue is of such an importance that the U.S. Congress, in Jan 2021, passed the „Combating Pandemic Scams Act of 2020“. One of the sponsors of the law commented, „The last thing Americans need as we rebuild and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic is a dangerous scam that can destroy their lives. Unfortunately, as our nation continues to fight this virus, bad actors are targeting Americans – especially seniors and people with disabilities – with fake treatments, cures and more“ (Ripon Advance News Service 2021). Other contemporary „enemies“ might be those disseminating false information about the virus and about vaccines, which seems to mock scientific findings and research.

In other cases, the „enemies“ opposition can contribute to social stigmatization in more radicalized and violent ways during the pandemic. Although there are numerous, varying social, ideological, political, and racial prejudicial motivations that contribute to social stigmatization related to the coronavirus, one example is that of religious factors. The World Watch List that reports anti-Christian persecution, done by the international watchdog group Open Doors, concluded that the

²¹ Following the reading of ׀ַׁׁׁ in 4QPsa, instead of MT's ׀ַׁׁׁ, which could be translated „And my enemies are full of life“.

coronavirus pandemic „has been a catalyst for the repression of Christian minorities, who, in countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, as well as Yemen and Sudan, were sometimes denied aid... The coronavirus pandemic was often used as a pretext for discrimination.“ Ninety percent of the 4,781 cases of Christians killed for their faith between Oct 2019 and Sept 2020 „were in Africa, where a terrorist group [the Islamist group Al Shabaab in Somalia] blamed Christians for the coronavirus pandemic“ (San Martín 2021).

Human „enemies“ can certainly be lamented about in adapting the LPS to the coronavirus situation. However, another way to use the LPS is to metaphorize the „enemies“ as the coronavirus. Concerning the coronavirus, „war“ imagery has been used to speak of it as an „enemy“ that needs to be combatted. For healthcare workers who are on the front line against the virus, it must seem like a battle to deal on a daily basis with the debilitating effects and the magnitude of the disease. Like the „enemies“ in the LPS, the personified virus mocks and reproaches, and watches for its victims to succumb to death.

PETITIONS IN THE LPS

The Petitions convey a sense of urgency through directly expressing such in 38:23 „Hasten (חַוֶּשֶׁה) to help me“, and 102:3b „quickly (מַהֲרָה) answer me“. That sense of urgency is motivated by the psalmists' perception that they are on the cusp of dying, as voiced in the Complaints (88:4–6; 102:4, 12, 24). If God's answer does not come quickly, there will no longer be a need for his intervention.

Petitions in the LPS have a single trajectory that is focused on the psalmists, in that they express what the psalmists desire Yahweh to do for them.²² Thus, they beseech Yahweh to:

(1) Pay attention to, give heed to, and take notice of the psalmists' pleas:

²² None of the LPS under consideration have petitions of imprecation against the enemies. This is understandable since the primary issue of the Complaint is that of physical sickness and its consequences. The only Petition related to the enemies is 6:9a „Turn-away from me, all (you) workers-of-iniquity“, in which they are also directly spoken to, rather than the Petition being directed to God to act against the enemies.

- 88:3 Let my prayer come into your presence.
Incline your ear to my resounding-cry!
- 102:2 Yahweh, hear my prayer,
and let my cry-for-help, to you, come!
- 3b Incline to me your ear;
On the day (on which) I cry out, quickly answer me!
- (2) Cease the current postures of inaction of being hidden and far away:
- 38:22 Do not forsake me, Yahweh;
my God, do not be far from me!
- 102:3a Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress...!

These Petitions directly counter the „You“-Complaint that Yahweh is hidden or inactive (88:15).

(3) Not deal with the psalmist in anger or wrath, but conversely to deal with them in favour:

- 6:2–3a Yahweh, do not, in your anger, rebuke me;
and do not, in your burning-anger, chastise me!
Deal-favourably with me, Yahweh!
- 38:2 Yahweh, do not in your wrath rebuke me,
nor in your burning-anger chastise me!

Such counter the „You“-Complain that Yahweh is displaying an angry disposition toward the psalmists (88:8, 16b–17; 102:11).

(4) Directly intervene by healing or delivering from the suffering:

- 6:3b Heal me, Yahweh!
- 5 Turn, Yahweh, rescue my soul;
Save me...!
- 38:23 Hasten to help me, Lord, my salvation!
- 102:24 I say: „My God, do not take me up in the half of my days²³“.

These Petitions for help correspond to the „I“- and „They“-Complaints, which express the conditions from which the psalmists need healing and rescuing.

²³ „Half of my days“ probably means either pre-maturely or in the prime of life.

The LPS Petitions use generalized language imploring God to intervene, and can be readily adapted as entreaties for God to deal with COVID-19. God can be implored to curtail the spread of the virus and to bring healing and restoration to those who have been afflicted. Those contemporary laments can also become more specifically related to the details of the coronavirus situation. For example, God can be beseeched to bring comfort to those who have lost a loved one, to restore emotional health that the pandemic has sapped, to be a source of physical and mental wellbeing for front-line health workers, to economically sustain those who have lost jobs or businesses, to help expedite vaccinations getting to the most vulnerable, to break down political and ideological barriers that hinder medical treatment getting to those who most need it, to remove the stigma of those who have been socially disenfranchised due to the virus, and to forestall misinformation about the virus or the vaccines.

ASSERTIONS OF CONFIDENCE

The paradox of the lament psalms is that even though the psalmists view Yahweh as being negatively disposed toward them, they nevertheless continue to pray to Yahweh with a sense of confidence that he is the only one who can adequately deal with the circumstances. Sometimes their trust is evidenced through the psalmists' affirmation of their relationship with Yahweh through the first person singular possessive suffix: „my God“ (38:16, 22; 102:25); „Lord, my salvation“ (38:23), and „God of my salvation“ (88:2).

At times, the very act of praying is viewed as an act of reliance upon God:

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 38:10 | Lord, before you is all my desire,
and my sighing, from you is not hid. |
| 16a | For upon you, Yahweh, I have hopefully-awaited |
| 88:2 | Yahweh, God of my salvation,
(by) day I have cried-out;
in the night before you. |
| 10b | I have called-out to you, Yahweh, every day,
I have spread out to you my palms. |

- 14 But as for me, to you, Yahweh, I have cried,
and in the morning, my prayer comes to meet you.

Sometimes the confidence is spoken of through descriptors of who Yahweh is, of his characteristics, and his workings:

- 102:13 And (as for) you, Yahweh, forever you will sit (enthroned),
and your remembrance is from generation to generation.

The psalmists allude to Yahweh's loving-loyalty (דסח: 6:5; 88:12), faithfulness (אמונה: 88:12), wonders (פלא: 88:13), and righteousness (צדקה: 88:13).

Part of the rhetorical function of these Assertions of Confidence is that voicing a perspective of who God is and what he can do, shifts the psalmists' perspective off of the external circumstances and the internal distress. It moves the psalmists' focus onto God. At times, the feelings of confidence may not precede the verbalizing of such, but putting it into words and externally affirming it, may be the catalyst to rekindle a dormant internal belief. Thus, voicing such a trust in God bolsters and re-enforces the dynamics of the relationship with God, out of which the prayers arise, even though the psalmist may not be initially experiencing God in that way. Verbalizing the trust in God moves it from an intellectually held creedal affirmation to a felt conviction.

In the midst of the anxieties of the coronavirus pandemic, faith, trust, and confidence in God needs to be reaffirmed, renewed and reinvigorated, and such can occur through the use of the Confidence aspects of the LPS.

In addition to reaffirming the trust relationship in and dependence upon God, the psalmists often shift the focus off of the present distress to the future intervention of Yahweh. Thus the LPS (with the exception of Ps 88) includes an assurance of having been heard and that God will answer and favourably respond. These statements of assurance countermand the Complaints that God is hidden and not acting, and they anticipate a resolution to the Petitions that God alter his inattentive disposition and his unfavorable actions:

- 6:9b For Yahweh has heard the voice of my weeping.
10 Yahweh has heard my supplication-for-favour;
Yahweh will receive my prayer.

- 38:16b (As for) you, you will answer, Lord my God
 102:14a (As for) you, you will rise-up;
 you will have compassion...
 18 He has turned-toward the prayer of the naked,
 and he has not despised their prayer.

As part of that future expectation within the Confidence component, the psalmists re-imagine a „new social normal“ on the other side of the disorientation:

- 6:11 Ashamed and greatly terrified will be all my enemies;
 they shall turn and be ashamed in a moment.

The envisioned future is expressed with a certainty, and is perceived as real as the current suffering.

In Ps 102, the envisioned restorative work of Yahweh is not merely confined to the individual psalmist's life but much more broadly for all of God's people:

- 102:14 (As for) you, you will rise-up;
 you will have compassion (on) Zion.
 For (it is) a time to be favorable to it;
 for the appointed time has come.
 16 And nations will fear the name of Yahweh,
 and all the kings of the earth (will fear) your glory.
 17 For Yahweh has built Zion;
 he has appeared in his glory.
 20 For he has looked down from his holy height;
 Yahweh, from the heavens to the earth, gazed
 21 (so as) to hear the groaning of a prisoner;
 to set free those (appointed) to die.
 25b From generation to generation are your years.
 26 Long-time-previously, the earth you founded,
 and the works of your hands are the heavens.
 27 (As for) them, they will perish,
 and (as for) you, you will stand.
 All of them, like a garment will wear out;
 like the clothing, you will change them,
 and they will be changed.

- 28 And you are he,
 and your years will not be completed.
- 29 The children of your servants will (securely) dwell,
 and their offspring, before you, will be established.

The psalmist's present suffering is the total antithesis of that envisioned future. Nevertheless, such re-imagining of a future generates a sense of hope, which is vital in helping to endure the current suffering until God brings about that new future. Hope in distress is one of the keys to successfully navigating through disorientation (see Lasio-Roth, et al. 2021). „Hope is related to better psychological adjustment in response to a health crisis... and lower levels of psychological distress... Amid the unpredictable reach of the COVID-19 pandemic, hope represents a psychological resource that could enable people to overcome setbacks or maintain progress towards goal attainment“ (Counted, et al. 2020: 2). During the pandemic, appropriating the sentiments of the LPS that God both hears and will intervene to bring about healing and restoration, can help renew hope within the church of a future, both personally and globally, beyond the pandemic. In the context of the church's liturgy and worship, the LPS are also prayed through the lens of New Testament eschatology (Ps 102:26-28 is quoted in Hebrews 1:10–12), which gives an added perspective that there is a radical „new normal“ awaited.

CHURCH'S CONTEMPORARY USE OF LPS

There are numerous points of contact between the coronavirus experiences and the prayers of the LPS. The LPS thus become a resource for the church to use as a means of voicing to God COVID-19 related Complaints, Petitions, and Assertions of Confidence. There are many creative ways in which this re-adaption of the LPS can occur. For example, the LPS could be inserted into the Sunday scripture reading, even though they may not be part of the lectionary readings. As additional readings, they can be highlighted as special prayers for this season of pandemic and even introduced with a brief word that shows the applicability to the current pandemic. Liturgically, these psalms can be adapted into responsive readings. Additionally they can be used as prayers with contemporary

complaints and petitions related to the pandemic (see, for example, Fowler 2020a; 2020b) being inserted and alternating with the words of the psalm. They can be presented to the congregation through sermons and Bible studies. Congregants can be encouraged to use the LPS as templates to write their own lament prayers.

Even though the LPS speak of the personal agony that the psalmists were suffering, such does not exclude their use by those who are not sick or experiencing the same depth of suffering. Instead, they can also be prayed on behalf of others who are suffering, thus joining together in solidarity with them. The re-adapted LPS can take on the form of intercessory prayer and liturgically give a voice to those who may not have the strength to utter such words to God.

When using the LPS in the church's liturgy and worship, they can also be read through the lens of the NT's use of lament psalms in referencing Jesus' suffering,²⁴ not merely our own. Even though Jesus' suffering was not brought about by sickness, through the lament psalms, we are nevertheless theologically reminded that Jesus, in his humanity, has also experienced suffering just like us. In the time of the coronavirus, that can be a point of consolation that the physical suffering that we are enduring is both shared by and redeemed through Jesus.²⁵

²⁴ For example, the NT's use of Pss 22 and 69 in Matt 27, Mark 15, and John 19; Ps 31:5 in Luke 23:46.

²⁵ On the use of the psalms as intercessory prayer and through the lens of Jesus' suffering, see Mays 1991.

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Eestikeelne kokkuvõte

Lugedes kaebepsalme koroonapandeemia ajal

Vana Testamendi Lauluraamatu kaebepsalmid haiguste puhul pakuvad kirikule tuge ka koroonapandeemia palves Jumala ette toomiseks. Nelja kaebelaulu (Ps 6, 38, 88, 102) uuritakse vastavalt palve žanriliistele tunnustele ja kolmele koostoimivale komponendile: kaebus, palve ja usalduse kinnitused. Kaebepsalmide eripära analüüsisid leitakse, et sellise poeetiline palvekeel on endiselt asjakohane kirikus ka COVID-19 kontekstis.

Märksõnad

Koroonaviirus · kaebelaulud · kasutamine kirikus