

Spiritual formation for today's Indonesian churches through the psalms of lament

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Abstract

Christians have discouraged the use of lament for various reasons. In Indonesia I never heard any single sermon preached on lament even though we have experienced many sufferings, persecutions and calamities. Current scholarly works on these psalms focus on their genre, life settings, and other academic considerations. However, in its life and practice the contemporary church is largely ignorant of the lament Psalms. The question is, how can we use them practically in our modern church setting? This article will answer this question through the usage of lament psalms as spiritual formation model for persecuted Indonesian churches.

Keywords Lament, Indonesia, persecution, spiritual formation.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is often referred to as the world's largest archipelago, a name which aptly represents its 17,000 or so islands which span more than 5,000 km (around 3,200 miles) eastward from Sabang in northern Sumatra to Merauke in Irian Jaya. For years, Indonesian Christians have suffered many persecutions and discriminations. Militant Islamic groups have flexed their muscles over the past few years. Some have been accused of having links with Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda, including the group blamed for the 2002 Bali bombings, which killed 202 people.

Lying near the intersection of shifting tectonic plates, Indonesia is prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. A powerful undersea quake in late 2004 sent massive waves crashing into coastal areas of Sumatra, and into coastal communities across south and east Asia. The disaster left more than 220,000 Indonesians dead or missing.

Although Indonesia is a country with much disaster and suffering, I do not recall even one sermon based on a psalm of lament. It seems pastors and preachers do not know how to preach from lament psalms even in our worst situations.

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Cultural influences, relational styles, theological perspectives and misunderstandings have discouraged the use of lament in the contemporary church.² Various arguments have been proposed throughout history as to why we should not use these psalms.

But the laments have an essential, marvelous and important function. They are an expression of genuine faith. By offering them up to God, we have the capacity to see our odious meditations and desperate thoughts transformed into something acceptable (Ps. 19:14). Despite all the debates concerning the use of lament in church services, it remains an important component of spiritual formation. Moreover, it is a way to step forward in faith, for we trust God with our most filthy ugliness in the knowledge that he will love us nonetheless.

In his article *The costly loss of lament*, Brueggemann explains the importance of lament psalms in the Christian life. Based on the important contribution of Westermann, Brueggemann builds his arguments that the absence of lament results first in the loss of *genuine covenant interaction*, because the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise. Secondly the *question of theodicy*³ (the defence of God's goodness in the presence of evil) is stifled.

In this paper I will explore the function of lament psalms in spiritual formation, especially in the context of persecuted churches in Indonesia today.

2. Methodological assumptions

To gain some perspective of the Indonesian church's spirituality and the context of lament psalms, these methodological assumptions will guide us throughout this study.⁴

2.1 Similar political and social settings

Oppression and persecution are the common experiences of today's Indonesian churches and the world of the lament psalms. With this similarity we can draw a close connection between the psalms and the churches. Since 1996 church persecution in Indonesia has increased, many churches have been burned and closed.⁵ The most recent case is the closing down of GKI Yasmin church that called Indonesian Christians to have a communal lament in the location.⁶ Not only physical

² Brian L. Webster and David R. Beach 2007. The place of lament in the Christian life. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164 (October-December); 387.

³ Walter Brueggemann 1986. The costly loss of lament. *JSOT*, vol. 39, 57-71.

⁴ I borrow this approach from K. Jesurathnam, 2002, Towards a Dalit Liberative Hermeneutics: Re-reading the Psalms of Lament, *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol 34, 1-34.

⁵ Read Thomas Santoso 2003. *Peristiwa sepuluh-sepuluh situbondo*. Surabaya: Lutfansah Mediatama.

⁶ A Sunday mass being held at the house of a congregation member at the Taman Yasmin complex, and which was being attended by around 50 members of the GKI Yasmin church was forced to stop when

persecution, but also intimidations and threats caused some of the members of the church to leave their faith. In many laments we hear the psalmist crying out for justice. Politically the churches are helpless, their voices not heard by the ruling party, and so they ask God for mercy and justice. Christians are considered a minority in Indonesia. We are often marginalized and have no equal rights with the majority. So the struggling, persecuted Indonesian churches can easily identify with the struggles of the oppressed communities in the lament psalms.

2.2 Common theological issues

A major theme of lament is theodicy, and it is so with persecuted churches in Indonesia. The question, "Why is there evil when God exists?" has been discussed throughout the ages in Indonesia and remains a favorite theme today.⁷ One of the biggest challenges of persecuted churches is to prove that God is on their side. The tension created by the absence of God – very prominent in lament Psalms – is seen in the psalmist's cry to God to show himself both to the people of God and their enemies.

2.3 Similar hope for liberation

The main concern of the persecuted churches in Indonesia is their liberation from socio-cultural and political oppression. This hope is expressed in many lament psalms, where oppressed and marginalized people seek justice and freedom by crying out to God.

3. The function of lament psalms in spiritual formation

Recent study of the lament psalms indicates the increased awareness of scholars concerning the neglect of lament psalms in the life of the contemporary church. Sally Ann Brown and Patrick D. Miller explained that the rediscovery of lament as a pattern for Christian prayer, public worship, and the care of souls had already been under way for some time prior to 2001. By the late 1990s, studies such as Daniel Migliore and Kathleen Billman's *Rachel's cry: Prayer of lament and the rebirth of*

a group of Muslim protesters arrived and demanded that the congregation halt the service. Hendrik, one of the congregation members whose house is located only one kilometer from the location of the church, said that they had performed the mass at his house since the church premises had been sealed by the Bogor municipal administration. "We use the house as we have no other place to pray." According to Hendrik, a group of protesters arrived shouting and insisted that the congregation, mostly women and children, stop their mass. (*The Jakarta Post*, Jakarta, Sunday, 22 January 2012.)

⁷ One of the best reference books on Muslim theodicy used in Islamic symposium in Indonesia at 2009 is written by Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi 2010. *Theodicy and justice in modern Islamic thought: The case of Said Nursi*. Burlington, USA: Ashgate.

hope,⁸ were reintroducing the church to the much neglected lament prayers of the Bible as resources for worship and Christian ministries of care. These efforts relied, in turn, on the fruits of nearly a decade of fresh work on lament in biblical studies. Years earlier, Donald Capps had discussed the role of lament psalms in grief counseling in *Biblical approaches to pastoral counseling*.⁹ A number of articles published in the mid 1990s called for the recovery of lament psalms in the liturgy.¹⁰ In 2010 Federico Villanueva also published his work on preaching lament.¹¹

In order to find the connection between lament psalms and the Indonesian Christian community we will try to draw a connection between the two worlds.

3.1 Sitz im Leben (the life setting) of the psalms of lament

Herman Gunkel is the pioneer on this issue. He said that the communal laments (*Klagelieder des Volkes*) were used by the people to respond to public calamity or disaster. The lament festival was held at the public sanctuary. Gunkel explained that when they lamented, they also used some religious rituals such as withholding from food and drink, restraining from marital relations and civil business, weeping, tearing their clothes and blowing the trumpet to call upon God to listen to their cry. These lamentations include their confession of sin and plea for forgiveness.¹²

Regarding the setting of personal or individual laments, Gunkel believed the life setting was difficult to determine because of the formulaic character of the language. The laments were derived originally from services of worship and later used as spiritual songs by the individual. These psalms were occasioned by apparently life-threatening situations, such as illness, misfortune and persecution from enemies – though one needs to be careful about taking the images too literally. Gunkel further noted that a peculiar feature of personal or individual laments within the psalms was a decisive transition from an early plea to a confident trust that Yahweh would act to redress the situation.¹³

Mowinckel found the cult to be a fertile ground for understanding the setting of these psalms. For him the life setting is the festival of Enthronement which is modelled after the Babylonian New Year festival.¹⁴

⁸ Daniel Migliore and Kathleen Billman 1999. *Rachel's cry: Prayer of lament and the rebirth of hope*. Cleveland: United.

⁹ Donald Capps 1981. *Biblical approaches to pastoral counseling*. Philadelphia: Westminster.

¹⁰ Edited by Sally Ann Brown, Patrick D. Miller 2005. *Lament: Reclaiming practices in pulpit, pew, and public square*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox: xiv.

¹¹ Edited by Grenville J.R. Ken., Paul J. Kissling & Laurence A. Tuner 2010. *He began with Moses: Preaching the Old Testament today*. Downer Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity: 64-84.

¹² Hermann Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*. Macon, GA: Mercer, 1998, 83.

¹³ *Ibid*, 19-21.

¹⁴ Sigmund Mowinckel 1962. *The psalms in Israel's worship vol.1*, Trans. by D.R. Ap. Thomas. Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 106-129.

In contrast with Mowinckel who suggested the cult as the life setting of lament, for Westermann the life setting was difficult to determine. For Westermann, lament as a genre had a long and independent history in the religious-social history of Israel. As deliverance in the Old Testament was God's response to a cry of distress, lament was therefore an integral part of God's saving deeds or events.¹⁵

Walter Brueggemann calls the laments the psalms of *disorientation*. He writes:

The use of these "psalms of darkness" (laments) may be judged by the world to be acts of unfaith and failure. But for the trusting community, their use is an act of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith. It is an act of bold faith on the one hand, because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. . . . But the transformation concerns not only God. Life also is transformed (the lamenter's life).¹⁶

So we make three observations: First, lament was centered in the cult festival and used as part of the Israelite liturgy in their temple setting, or in personal worship in the situation of disaster, persecution, distress or enemy attack. Secondly, lament was a prayer addressed to Yahweh, a cry to God to redeem or liberate a helpless people from their difficult situations. Thirdly it was an act of faith, showing that the worshippers trusted God as their ultimate helper. Even though their situation seemed hopeless by the world's standards, the worshippers believed God could save them.

These three observations are relevant to our ongoing discussion about the relevance of the psalms of laments for spiritual formation in Indonesia's persecuted churches.

3.2 The structure of the psalms of lament

Claus Westermann, in his scholarly work, made a major contribution to the study of lament. He divided the psalms of praise into two categories – declarative and descriptive – and then related praise to lament, showing how the psalms moved from plea to praise.¹⁷ Federico Villanueva advanced the contribution by discussing the return of lament from praise to lament again, with his study on Psalm 12.¹⁸ The common structure of community lament as stated by Westermann is:¹⁹

¹⁵ Claus Westermann 1981. *Praise and lament in the psalm*. Atlanta: John Knox: 20-39.

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann 1984. *The message of the psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg: 52.

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, 52.

¹⁸ Federico Villanueva 2008. *The uncertainty of a hearing*. Leiden: Brill: 133-153.

¹⁹ Claus Westermann, 52.

- Address
- Introductory petition
- Lament
- Confession of trust
- Petition (double wish)
- Vow of praise

This basic structure appears in most lament psalms. Other aspects may include, in varying situations, an intercession with God, a confession of sin, a recollection of God's earlier deeds of deliverance, and an assurance of being heard.²⁰

Federico Villanueva completed the work of Westermann. He showed in his research that lament psalms also move from praise to lament. Using the canonical approach Villanueva investigated the context of Psalm 12 and concluded the structure of this psalm was not unique but was found throughout the Psalter.²¹ In his summary, Villanueva stated that this anti-climactic ending created a tension between what God said and the reality of the psalmist.²²

The fact that lament psalms do not always end in praise is important to note. We need to remember that the journey of faith is a continuous struggle from lament to praise or from praise to lament, until the world faces its final lament or praise at the judgement.

Persecuted churches in Indonesia are now lamenting their bad situation. We all hope this lament will soon turn into praise. But life can in no way be predicted. Not every lament will end in praise, but faith is strongly present in every lament psalm.

4. The psalms of lament and spiritual formation

4.1 Pursuit of truth

When churches get burnt down in Indonesia, the victims are eager to find a reason. But the situation creates theological conflicts which are not easy to answer. Similarly in the lament psalms, we see many questions and conflicts in the life of the psalmist. Questions like, "How long oh God?" "Why God?" "God, do you know what is happening down here?" "Will you help us?"

These honest questions passionately pursue the truth which is a vital aspect of knowing God and growing in him. However, these kinds of questions are often considered as expressions of a lack of faith and of disrespect towards God the Almighty.

²⁰ Ibid, 69.

²¹ Federico Villanueva, 152.

²² Ibid, 153.

The most common argument against lament is that it indicates lack of faith and exposes too much of human doubt. Also, for some reason, the evangelical church has embraced the idea that religion should always be peaceful and soothing and religious folk optimistic and positive. By contrast, the lament psalms which express so much suffering, loss, sadness, frustration, doubt and desperation are not so popular in Indonesia.

Lament psalms teach us, however, that we can be honest with God and ask questions without him being offended. These psalms help us to truly embrace and express our painful feelings to God. They express struggles, sufferings and disappointments to the Lord.

Lament psalms force us to delve deeper. They acknowledge a valid dimension of Christian experience – the “dark side” of faith. Walking with God is not always relaxing and cheerful, optimistic and positive. Walking with God demands a journey through the real world of suffering and disappointment.

Lament psalms recognize the reality of evil and its impact on all people. The world is full of darkness, dangers, sadness, suffering and difficulties. We live in a groaning creation (Rom. 8:18-23). The Spirit teaches us how to groan through psalms of lament. The psalmists are honest with their feelings. It is clear they are pursuing truth in their frustration, doubt and anguish, and are desperate for an answer from God.

This effort to pursue truth is an essential part of spiritual formation practice. God wants a real relationship with us, and needs us to be real with him. This is the heart of a genuine relationship. Faith sees all experiences of life, including its worst, in terms of our relationship with God. The goal of prayer is not “theological correctness” but a real relationship in real life with a real God who really wants to know the real us. Craig Broyles writes:

The psalms allow for a free vent to one's feelings. Remarkably, believers are not required first to screen their feelings with a reality check or to censor “theologically incorrect” expressions before voicing their prayer to God. In effect, God allows our feelings to be validated, even if in the final analysis they miss the mark.²³

Only true believers experience crises of faith. Only those who doubt take their faith seriously. The opposite of faith is not doubt, frustration, or complaint, but unbelief. Only those with true faith have the freedom to express their doubts and frustrations to God. It is impossible to experience the agony of the absence of God unless we have at one time known the comfort of his presence.

²³ Craig Broyles 1999. *Psalms*, Peabody: Hendrickson: 32-33.

Lament psalms demonstrate that the psalmists have a realistic faith. They are bluntly honest with the realities of life, and yet they take the promise of God seriously. Such faith grounds our spiritual formation and enables us to grow into maturity.

4.2 Pursuit of intimacy

The common feeling of the persecuted churches is the distance of God or even his absence. Why does God allow such disaster, suffering and persecution? Where was God when all those situations happened? Sometimes others who do not face the same situation come up with analyses, conclusions or even accusations to the victims, which only add to their sorrow and pain. Often they increase the feeling of God's distance. This situation provides an opportunity to start pursuing intimacy with God.

God and grief come together in the Scriptures more often than we might think. The psalms of lament provide an interesting look at this dynamic relationship. Through lament, the one praying engages in relational conflict in order to pursue relational depth. Such disclosure and honesty opens up the possibility for intimacy that otherwise would not exist. The expressions of lament indicate the close relationship the psalmists have with God. Only those who have a close connection dare to argue, complain, protest and question. Not only that, but in lament we also see trust, faith, dependence on and praise to God.

The laments typically begin with a personal address to God, who is not some distant stranger: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

In the foreword of Ann Weems' book *Psalms of lament* Walter Brueggemann says, "It is a trusting utterance set down in the middle of an ongoing friendship of trust and confidence."²⁴ The very fact that the writer is addressing these feelings to God suggests a level of confidence that God will in fact listen and care enough to do something about the situation. The Psalter is bold enough to believe that the Divine can be persuaded to change history because of this complaint. It is the risky honest speaking to God in the first part of the lament that paves the way for new possibilities in the relationship.²⁵

The dynamic emotional dimension of lament that swings from lament to praise and then returns to lament afterwards shows a relational struggle expressed in poetic language. Along with the emotional struggle, the reader can feel the tension between the closeness and the distance of God, the absence and the presence of God, and the psalmist's joy and frustration towards God.

²⁴ Ann Weems 1995. *Psalms of lament*. Westminster: John Knox Press: x.

²⁵ Brueggemann, 56.

The goal of spiritual formation is Christian growth. That growth entails development of character, inner transformation, and a deepening friendship with God and others. Lament psalms show us that growth through human suffering and affliction, doubt and frustration, joy and praise. They all deepen one's spiritual life and relationship to God.

4.3 Pursuit of faith

It has been reported that many Indonesian Christians have recently abandoned their faith and chosen to deny Christ in order to save their lives from persecution. Of course this is not an easy issue to discuss. But although the psalmists' doubts about God are never stated clearly in the laments, the struggles of faith are there.

The movement from lament to praise and from praise to lament is not just a psychological or liturgical experience, although it includes these. Nor is it a physical deliverance from the crisis, although that is often anticipated. The movement is a profoundly spiritual one. It is a spiritual battle.

The struggles between belief and doubt intensify and sometimes come to a climax in a cry of desperation or exclamation of joy. The reality of faith in lament is honest and truthful, and important for our spiritual maturity.

4.4 Pursuit of justice

The main question of the lament psalms concerns the justice of God. When evildoers persecute the people of God and God seems to ignore them, the issue of God's justice becomes paramount in the mind of the psalmist.

The pursuit of justice is an important aspect of spiritual growth. We believe in the justice of God. In the case of persecuted Christians in Indonesia, one of the newest cases was the closing down of a large church in Bogor. This created a mass movement to seek justice in the Supreme Court. Even though the church won the case, they did not regain their church. So the communal lament was used as a means of protest against the government and to draw the attention of the international community.

That was the first communal lament I ever noticed in Indonesia, and it functions as a testimony that Christians have one voice in their cry for justice – not only to the government but ultimately to God.

As stated by Bland and Fleer in their book, *Performing the psalms*, communal lament is important to show an evil world that the people of God take a firm stand on issues of social justice:

Without communal lament, the cry for social justice remains behind the closed doors of private discussion. Or worse, it is left in the hands of faithless secular

advocates, and the community of faith has no voice in the public square. Without communal lament, social justice becomes the task of the individual rather than the church.

Without faithful communal lament, sin and injustice remain private matters of individualistic concern. Sin and injustice, just as spirituality itself, remain private. It is an individual problem and not a structural one. It is a personal problem and not a generational one.

Without faithful communal lament, communities of faith do not share the hurt and pain of public, national, or global tragedies and anxieties. Without faithful communal lament, we do not participate as communities in the realities of the human predicament. Consequently, we exist as superficial, inauthentic, and uncaring communities in a fallen world filled with hurts and pains.²⁶

5. Conclusion

Based on our study of the lament psalms and the assumptions we used, we can see the importance of lament psalms for spiritual formation. Through the similarities in the life settings and the unique structure and movement of lament psalms, we can draw a close parallel between the Psalter and the persecuted Christians in Indonesia.

The function of lament psalms in spiritual formation can be seen in four categories: the pursuit of truth, the pursuit of intimacy, the pursuit of faith and the pursuit of justice. The importance of communal lament is stressed as a means of testimony to the world.

The persecuted churches in Indonesia will surely benefit from the lament psalms as they anticipate the ultimate justice of God and their ultimate praise to him, while evildoers will experience the ultimate lament.

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²⁶ David Bland and David Freer (eds.) 2005. *Performing the psalms*. Denver: Chalice, 78.

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