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Lament, Trauma, and Scripture: Reclaiming the Language of Sacred Protest

John Umaru Rikka

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands

Abstract

Lament is a biblical genre of profound theological significance that remains underappreciated in many contemporary contexts. It stands at the intersection of suffering, protest, and divine encounter, offering individuals and communities a sacred language through which to voice anguish and pursue meaning amid trauma. This article explores lament as both a theological and pastoral model for responding to trauma in its personal, communal, and systemic forms. Drawing insights from trauma theory and biblical theology, it argues that lament is more than an emotional release; it is a profoundly theological act that nurtures resilience, sustains faith, and restores relational wholeness. By engaging Scripture alongside lived expressions of lament, such as those found among the Mafa people of northern Cameroon and northeastern Nigeria, the study demonstrates how lament functions as sacred protest and communal healing. It concludes that Scripture provides marginalized and wounded communities with the liturgical and linguistic resources necessary to confront suffering honestly while cultivating hope for redemption.

Keywords: Lament, Trauma, Scripture, Sacred Protest, Resilience

Introduction: Lament in a Culture of Denial

In many contemporary Christian contexts, lament is conspicuously absent. Western liturgies tend to privilege celebration over grief, resolution over ambiguity, and praise over protest. This liturgical imbalance mirrors a broader cultural discomfort with vulnerability, particularly within traditions that emphasize victory and triumph. Yet the biblical canon, from Genesis to Revelation, is

replete with lament. These cries of grief and protest challenge any sanitized vision of faith, inviting us instead into a sacred dialogue shaped by suffering and trust.

The recent rise of trauma-informed theology underscores the importance of language and ritual in the healing process. As Shelly Rambo observes, trauma disrupts linear narratives and coherent meaning-making, often leaving survivors with fragmented stories and unspoken pain.[1] In this regard, the genre of lament, marked by honest complaint, unresolved questions, and relational appeal, functions as a theological analogue to trauma recovery.[2]

Yet lament is not only a biblical or theological concept; it is also a lived practice that continues to shape communities struggling under the weight of trauma and loss. Across different cultural contexts, such as those found in parts of Africa, lament endures as both sacred protest and social resilience, offering powerful models for how faith traditions can confront suffering without losing hope. This study explores lament as a theological and pastoral response to trauma, recovering it as a vital practice for healing, resistance, and communal solidarity.

Lament in Scripture: Sacred Protest and Divine Dialogue

Psalms of Lament: Canonizing Grief

The Psalms of lament constitute the largest single genre within the Psalter, comprising nearly one-third of its 150 compositions. These psalms give a structured voice to distress, complaint, and protest within the context of covenantal faith. They typically follow a recognizable literary pattern: an initial address to God, a vivid articulation of complaint, a petition for intervention, and, in many cases, a turn toward affirmation of trust or praise (e.g., Pss 13; 22; 55). This structure enables the sufferer to move within

[1] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 7–9.

[2] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining,* 15.

a theological framework that accommodates emotional honesty without severing relational fidelity with God.[3]

These laments are not merely devotional outbursts; they are theological discourse. They express deep personal or communal pain, while simultaneously affirming the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh. The very act of lamenting presupposes that God hears and responds, even when God appears absent. As such, lament is both a form of prayer and a declaration of ongoing faith.

Psalm 88 stands out as a profound counter example to the typical movement from complaint to praise. Instead of resolving with a confession of trust or thanksgiving, it ends in unrelieved darkness: *"You have taken from me friend and neighbor, darkness is my closest friend"* (Ps 88:18, NIV). The psalmist does not arrive at a theological resolution or emotional uplift in this passage. Instead, the lament remains suspended in sorrow.

This inclusion of unresolved grief within the canon is both theologically and pastorally significant. It affirms that faith does not require emotional closure or resolution to be valid. As Walter Brueggemann insightfully observes, such psalms "refuse to settle for false comfort or premature closure."[4] Instead, they sanctify the ongoing experience of disorientation, legitimizing the believer's cry when answers are absent and healing is delayed.

In this way, the lament psalms function as a canonical space for trauma. They canonize grief by allowing woundedness to be voiced without requiring resolution. These texts become theological safe spaces in which the pain of loss, betrayal, abandonment, or death can be articulated without being theologically silenced. They thus provide a liturgical framework in which trauma is not denied but dignified.

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3 Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 175–78.

4 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 52.

Lamentations and Prophetic Grief

The Book of Lamentations is a poetic and theological response to one of the most traumatic events in Israel's history: the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile in 586 BCE. It reflects a communal voice grappling with the aftermath of devastation: the loss of temple, land, leadership, and perceived divine favor. Lamentations are traditionally attributed to Jeremiah, though the text itself is anonymous. Regardless of authorship, the book bears witness to trauma as both theological and social dislocation.

The acrostic structure of the poems, particularly in chapters 1 through 4, imposes a formal order on emotional and theological chaos. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, suggesting an attempt to "contain" grief within the liturgical and literary form. This tension between poetic control and theological disorder mirrors the traumatized mind's struggle to create coherence out of disorientation. As Tod Linafelt observes, "the acrostic structure both resists and gives voice to the chaos of destruction." [5]

Theological themes in Lamentations include divine abandonment, communal guilt, and the breakdown of covenant identity. Yet, even in its darkest moments, the poetry retains relational language with God. The closing verses juxtapose God's sovereign permanence with a desperate plea: *"You, O Lord, reign forever… Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored"* (Lam 5:19, 21). The unresolved nature of this ending, offering no divine reply, models lament as a faithful appeal rather than a closed argument. As Kathleen O'Connor writes, "Lamentations refuses to end with resolution because trauma is ongoing; its grief must be given space, not smoothed over." [6]

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[5] Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 56–58.

[6] Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 13.

In parallel, the prophetic literature, particularly the confessions of Jeremiah (Jer 11–20), offers an embodied form of lament. Here, the prophet himself becomes the site of suffering. Jeremiah's laments are intensely personal, revealing a man caught between divine calling and emotional collapse: *"Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?"* (Jer 15:18). These texts model lament not as resistance to faith but as an expression of covenant intimacy. They articulate anguish while maintaining theological fidelity, showing that protest is not a departure from the relationship with God but an act of devotion within it.

Such prophetic laments destabilize neat theological systems. They make room for ambiguity, emotional complexity, and the refusal to explain suffering too quickly. As O'Connor notes, prophetic lament "disrupts theological certainty and opens space for divine response amid suffering." [7]In this way, the prophetic voice offers a precedent for communities today who wrestle with theological silence in the face of trauma. It affirms that protest, even when unanswered, remains part of faithful speech.

Christological Lament: The Cross as Canonical Cry

At the heart of Christian theology stands a cry, not of triumph, but of abandonment. Jesus' lament from the cross, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matt 27:46; cf. Mark 15:34), is a direct citation of Psalm 22:1, firmly situating his death within Israel's liturgical and theological tradition of lament. In this moment, the incarnate Son does not invent a new form of suffering; he adopts the ancient voice of Israel's affliction and revoices it within his own redemptive suffering.

This cry from the cross does more than signal physical pain or psychological despair. It reveals a theological mystery: the one in whom God is fully present experiences God's absence. As Richard Bauckham notes, "Jesus does not merely echo Israel's lament;

[7] O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* , 37.

he inhabits it so fully that it becomes the definitive expression of divine solidarity with human suffering."[8]

By quoting Psalm 22, Jesus anchors his suffering in a communal narrative. The psalm begins in abandonment but moves toward trust and vindication. However, on the cross, the psalm's trajectory is arrested, and the narrative of hope is suspended in silence. In this theological moment, Jesus enters into the full depth of unrelieved lament, identifying not only Israel's historic suffering but all who suffer under divine silence, political violence, or cosmic estrangement.

Theologically, this act of lament is not incidental; it is constitutive of Christ's mediatorial work. Jesus does not merely bear sin; he bears the cry of the forsaken. His lament does not contradict his divinity but reveals it. God is most fully known in this moment not as one who escapes suffering, but as one who bears it. As N. T. Wright aptly observes, "The cross is not only the means of atonement; it is the moment when God in Christ identifies with the full range of human agony, including the sense of divine abandonment."[9]

This cry has liturgical and pastoral significance. In quoting a lament psalm, Jesus not only validates the legitimacy of protest before God but canonizes it within the very event of redemption. Lament, far from being a deficiency of faith, becomes the medium through which the most profound truths of divine-human engagement are expressed. As Jürgen Moltmann famously argued, "The God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For God

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8 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 282.

9 N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 336.

is love, and love suffers."[10] In Jesus' lament, we witness not the eclipse of divinity but the fullness of divine empathy.

Thus, the cross becomes the ultimate site of lament: it is the place where human grief meets divine grief, where protest becomes prayer, and where suffering is neither ignored nor minimized but carried into the heart of God. In this way, Christological lament does not stand outside of redemptive history; instead, it defines it.

Trauma and the Theological Necessity of Lament

Understanding Trauma

Trauma is not reducible to pain or suffering alone. It is the profound rupture of meaning, identity, and relational trust. Judith Herman defines trauma as a condition that "overwhelms the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning."[11] Trauma disrupts memory, fragments narrative coherence, and erodes a person's ability to articulate their experience. It is not simply what happens, but what happens to the capacity to make meaning of what happened.

Within such disorientation, traditional theological responses that seek to explain suffering, impose doctrinal closure, or prematurely move toward praise may deepen the sense of alienation. As Shelly Rambo emphasizes, trauma resists resolution and demands presence rather than proclamation. "Healing," she argues, "is not found in declaring an end to suffering but in remaining with it."[12] In such contexts, what survivors of trauma require is not explanation but the freedom to grieve, publicly, honestly, and without shame.

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[10] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 222.

[11] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 33.

[12] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, 24.

It is here that Scripture's lament tradition proves indispensable. The Psalms of lament, the cries of the prophets, and the anguish of Jesus on the cross validate the experience of the traumatized. They provide theological space for the wounded to speak without censure, without forced resolution, and without the demand for emotional sanitization. In this way, lament is not ancillary to biblical theology; it is essential to the divine-human conversation, particularly in the aftermath of rupture.

Lament as Theological Resistance

Lament is often mischaracterized as passive sorrow or resignation. In fact, it functions as a form of theological resistance. To lament is to protest reality as it is in light of God's character and promises. It is to hold God accountable, not in irrelevance, but in covenantal trust. This is the posture we find in Moses' intercession on behalf of Israel (Exod 32:11–14), in Jeremiah's complaints against divine injustice (Jer 12:1), and in many psalms where the petitioner demands divine action based on prior acts of faithfulness (cf. Ps 74; 89).

In each of these instances, lament serves as a voice of resistance against despair, injustice, and silence. As Soong-Chan Rah argues, "Lament is not only a spiritual discipline but a prophetic act of protest against the status quo. It disrupts false narratives and creates space for truth-telling, healing, and justice."[13] Lament becomes a subversive practice that refuses to normalize suffering or accept theological triumphalism.

Moreover, lament reclaims agency for the traumatized. In many contexts, trauma silences its victims socially, spiritually, and psychologically. Lament restores voice. It authorizes the sufferer not only to name the pain but to direct it Godward. This is not to imply that God is always expected to respond on human terms, but rather that God's covenantal relationship invites, even demands,

[13] Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 21.

the honesty of complaint. Theological resistance, then, is not blasphemy but faith refusing to be quiet.

Thus, lament functions not simply as an emotional release but as a theological stance, one that upholds divine justice, refuses resignation, and reimagines hope within the very conditions that threaten to extinguish it.

The Eschatology of Lament: Hope Without Denial

Biblical lament is eschatological, and it grieves what is while yearning for what should be. The structure of lament always assumes a relationship; even in complaint, the supplicant speaks to God, not to the void. The presence of lament in Scripture affirms that unresolved pain and active faith can coexist.

Lamentations 3 models this dialectic well. In the center of a book filled with anguish appears the confession: "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope" (3:21). The "yet" is not a pivot to false optimism but a theological stance. As Nicholas Wolterstorff writes following the death of his son: "Lament is the voice of the wounded faith, not its denial."[14]

Theological and Pastoral Implications

The recovery of lament within Christian theology is not merely an academic project; it carries profound implications for the life, worship, and witness of the church. In an age of global trauma and spiritual dislocation, lament must be reclaimed as a formative practice, liturgically, pastorally, and prophetically. Lament is not an interruption of faithfulness but its faithful expression in the face of suffering.

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[14] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 34.

Liturgical Formation: Holding Sorrow and Hope Together

The absence of lament in much contemporary worship reflects a theological deficit. When liturgies consistently prioritize celebration, victory, and emotional uplift, they risk alienating those whose lived experiences do not match the tone of praise. As Walter Brueggemann warns, "a community that negates lament becomes a numb community, unable to voice suffering or recognize injustice."[15]

Liturgical lament must therefore be reintegrated into the church's worship life. This involves the intentional inclusion of psalms of lament, prayers that name grief and injustice, and moments of silence that allow space for unspoken pain. Lament is not a detour from worship; it is worship in its most honest form. A church formed by lament becomes a community capable of bearing one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), confronting brokenness, and living with integrity between the already and the not-yet of redemption.

Pastoral Theology: Presence over Prescription

Pastoral ministry in a trauma-shaped world demands a recalibration of theological posture and pastoral practice. Many traditional models emphasize problem-solving, theological explanation, or emotional management. Yet trauma resists resolution on demand. As such, pastors and caregivers must cultivate a *ministry of presence*, one that listens before it speaks, and abides rather than fixes.

Trauma-informed pastoral care recognizes lament as a faithful theological response, not a failure of belief. It resists spiritual clichés that minimize pain (*"God has a purpose for everything"*) and instead affirms the biblical legitimacy of crying out, questioning, and even protesting God's silence. As theologian Serene Jones writes, "Pastoral theology in the face of trauma must be grounded

[15] Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 98.

in a theology of rupture, of broken bodies and broken language, yet still committed to presence and grace."[16]

In contexts of death, displacement, abuse, or injustice, lament must not be peripheral but central to pastoral care. It is through lament that faith finds voice in sorrow, and through presence that healing begins to take root.

Public Witness: Prophetic Lament and Social Solidarity

Lament must also shape the church's public theology. In an era marked by war, displacement, ecological collapse, systemic racism, and economic disparity, the church cannot afford to speak only in tones of comfort or triumph. It must become a wounded healer, a body that mourns with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15), speaks truth to power, and stands in solidarity with the suffering.[17]

Prophetic lament is an act of theological resistance in the public square. It refuses to normalize violence or sanitize injustice. Like the prophets of Israel, the church must learn to weep publicly over the world's brokenness, even as it intercedes for healing. As Emmanuel Katongole argues, African theology rooted in lament offers a unique contribution to global Christianity: it "challenges the church to inhabit the pain of history without losing sight of God's future."[18]

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16 Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 32.

17 Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 98–100.

18 Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 155.

The experiences of the Mafa people[19] of northern Cameroon and northeastern Nigeria provide a compelling example of lament as sacred protest and communal resilience. In the face of recurring hardship, marked by drought, displacement, and social fragmentation, and more recently amid the Boko Haram insurgency, the Mafa have preserved a ritualized language of grief that integrates theological depth with social cohesion. Their laments, often performed in public gatherings characterized by rhythmic drumming, communal wailing, and prayer, serve as both protest and renewal. As anthropological studies note, Mafa mourning rituals articulate a shared theology of suffering that resists isolation by transforming private pain into communal solidarity.[20] Within these ceremonies, lament functions not as despair but as an act of faith that binds the community together, giving voice to collective trauma while affirming divine presence amid loss. Furthermore, the rereading of the Psalms of lament provides the voice through which the Mafa people articulate their grief and pain, voice their protest, and find solace and comfort.[21]

This living tradition illustrates the practical outworking of the theology of lament developed in this study. For the Mafa, lament is not an isolated cry but a shared liturgy of endurance and hope. It creates space where grief is named, solidarity is enacted, and faith is renewed through communal participation. In this way, their

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[19] The Mafa are one of the major ethnic groups inhabiting the Mandara Mountains, a region of remarkable linguistic and cultural diversity straddling the border between northeastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon. They belong to the Biu-Mandara subgroup of the Chadic language family and live mainly in the Gwoza and Madagali Local Government Areas of Nigeria, as well as in communities around Mora and Maroua in Cameroon. Traditionally, they occupy the plateaus and foothills of the Mandara range, practicing terrace farming and maintaining a caste-oriented social structure that distinguishes blacksmiths from other groups. Nicholas David, "Introduction" in *Metals in Mandara Societies and Culture,* ed. Nicholas David Walter (Trenton: African World Press, 2012), 1–10; and Jean Claude Zeltner, *Peuples du Nord-Cameroun: Les Montagnards de la Mandara* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1980).

[20] David, "Introduction" in *Metals in Mandara Societies and Culture*, 10–5.

[21] Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 267–72.

experience affirms that lament, when practiced within a theological framework of covenantal trust, becomes a transformative act, bridging divine encounter and human resilience.[22] It demonstrates that the biblical language of lament continues to bear relevance across cultures, offering marginalized communities a sacred vocabulary for both protest and healing.

Public lament, then, becomes a form of witness not of resignation but of eschatological hope. It reminds the world that the church is neither numb to suffering nor content with injustice. Instead, it testifies that the God of Israel, the God who hears the cry, is still present and still acting through a people who refuse to forget the wounded.[23]

Conclusion: Recovering the Cry

Lament is not a failure of faith but one of its most profound expressions. It is the theological act that refuses to let suffering be silenced or scripted into premature resolution. Within the biblical canon, lament functions as the language of sacred protest, holding divine promises and lived pain in creative tension. It is the place where theology finds its wounds and refuses to look away. To lament is to tell the truth, to name loss, injustice, and divine silence without surrendering the relational bond between God and the one who suffers. It is Scripture's way of resisting cheap hope and shallow praise. In lament, the church finds a grammar robust enough to bear trauma, a liturgical voice adequate to historical catastrophe, and a theological posture that stands both with God and with the wounded.

The experience of the Mafa people demonstrates that lament is not only a biblical or theological construct but a living tradition capable of shaping resilience and restoring community. Their ritualized language of grief, rooted in faith and solidarity, mirrors the same sacred protest found in Scripture. In such practices,

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22 Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*, 72–74.

23 Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 277.

lament becomes a bridge between divine presence and human endurance, revealing that theology takes its deepest form when it is embodied in the cries of real communities. In recovering lament, the church retrieves a lost dimension of its identity. It becomes the community that listens deeply, prays honestly, and refuses to rush the healing process. It becomes a prophetic witness in a world addicted to denial, a sanctuary for those who grieve, and a foretaste of a kingdom in which every tear will be wiped away, though not yet.

As theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote in the wake of his son's death, "I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see."[24] Lament is not the end of theology but its cruciform heart. It is where protest becomes prayer, where sorrow deepens solidarity, and where healing begins, not through explanation, but through presence, not through answers, but through sacred honesty.

[24] Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 26.