

METAPHORS AND PERCEPTIONS OF SUFFERING IN THE LAMENTS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Abstract. Laments are an integral and essential part of the Hebrew Bible. This paper explores the metaphorical descriptions of suffering and their implications for understanding the perception, subjective experience and theological interpretation of suffering. The investigation focuses on two actors: God, who causes suffering passively, through non-involvement, or actively, by inflicting pain, and the human being who experiences pain as personal dissolution and conflict with God.

Keywords: laments, Hebrew Bible, metaphor, suffering, God-lament, I-lament.

To state the obvious, laments are an integral and essential part of the Hebrew Bible.² While typically associated with the psalms of lament, they also surface in prophetic and wisdom literature and occasionally in earlier prophets / historical books. This paper explores the metaphorical descriptions of suffering and their implications for understanding the perception, subjective experience and theological interpretation of suffering. The investigation focuses on two actors: God, who causes suffering passively, through non-involvement, or actively, by inflicting pain, and the human being who experiences pain as personal dissolution and conflict with God. I do not tackle the metaphoric description of the enemy.

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² Ulrich BERGES, *Schweigen ist Silber – Klagen ist Gold: das Drama der Gottesbeziehung aus alttestamentlicher Sicht mit einer Auslegung zu Ps 88*, Münster: LIT, 2003, 3, 5.

I will not delve into the definitions and interpretations of the metaphor. As a premise, I follow Ricoeur in focusing on the sentence, more precisely on the metaphor as statement, as predication (*énoncé, énoncé métaphorique*), as unusual attribution of meaning, which results from the interaction of the words within the sentence, instead of narrowing the metaphor to a word that has undergone a deviation of meaning.³ Metaphors are innovative and creative, as they break the common conventions of language.⁴ Beyond an aesthetic function, metaphors express in a dramatic manner realities for which adequate words are missing. This is particularly true for the speech about God,⁵ and even more about suffering. More importantly, in terms of function metaphors are speech acts: they do not simply describe a condition in a vivid and dramatic manner, but they call for a change and expect a result. In laments, metaphoric statements demand from God a change of heart and an immediate action.⁶

³ Paul RICOEUR, *La métaphore vive*, Paris: Seuil, 1975, 72, 87, 100, 109, *passim*; Engl. *The Rule of Metaphor. The Creation of Meaning in Language* (tr. Robert Czerny et al.), London, New York: Routledge, 2004, 49, 74–75, 115, 153, 225.

⁴ Peter RIEDE, “Die Sprache der Bilder: zur Bedeutung und Funktion der Metaphorik in den Feindpsalmen des Alten Testaments am Beispiel der Psalmen 57 und 59“, in Pierre VAN HECKE (ed.), *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (BETL 187), Leuven: Peeters, 2005, 19–40 (19).

⁵ Brian DOYLE, “Where is God When You Need Him Most? The Divine Metaphor of Absence and Presence as a Binding Element in the Composition of the Book of Psalms”, in Erich ZENGER, *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, Leuven: Peeters, 2010, 378–390 (379, 382, following Daniel Bourguet). God-talk is a patchwork which combines notions from different semantic fields and different descriptions of reality that acquire a different meaning. On metaphors speaking only indirectly about God: Antje LABAHN, “Fire from Above: Metaphors and Images of God’s Actions in Lamentations 2.1-9”, *JSOT* 31.2 (2006) 239–256 (240–242, 250). One wonders however whether the emphasis on the merely indirect description of divine actions is not too concerned with rescuing God.

⁶ On metaphors as speech acts: Brian DOYLE, “God as a Dog. Metaphorical Allusions in Psalm 59”, in VAN HECKE, *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, 41–53 (41–42); ID., “Where is God?”, 378–379. On the similar function of laments: Thomas HIEKE, “Schweigen wäre gotteslästerlich. Klagegebete – Auswege aus dem verzweiferten Verstummen“, in Georg STEINS (ed.), *Schweigen wäre gotteslästerlich. Die heilende Kraft der Klage*, Würzburg: Echter, 2000, 45–68 (52, 56).

Preliminary Considerations. The Lament as Expression of Trust and Protest Against Unacceptable Suffering

Laments are powerful expression of the feeling that the world has changed, has become unreliable, and human existence is falling apart. The sufferer feels abandoned, ostracised, touched by death.⁷ As a consequence the supplicant turns to God with the experience of an incomprehensible pain that may not be justified by entertaining feelings of guilt.⁸ The supplicant fervently demands God to end this pain. The abyss of suffering makes any rationalisation, any patient or heroic acceptance unthinkable. This is the standing point of the inquiring Job, of Jeremiah's laments, of Lamentations, and most notably that of the psalmist. The person or the community turns to God to inquire and question suffering, in which God inexplicably tears apart the human being created with much effort and care. In prayer and quest the sufferer challenges an unjust decision and action. No attempts are made to justify suffering or exculpate God.

Laments consider suffering as anomalous, as inconsistent with God's righteousness, goodness and might. Suffering contradicts the faith and earlier experience of the individual and the community.⁹ The supplicant turns to God appealing to his sense of justice, his mercy and compassion, questions his attitude, inquires, protests, brings a charge against God.¹⁰ The purpose of the inquiry is not informative; questions do not ask for a

⁷ Bernd JANOWSKI, *Arguing with God. A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms (Konfliktgespräche mit Gott. Eine Anthropologie der Psalmen)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, ³2009, tr. A. Siedlecki), Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013, 46–47, 50.

⁸ A few examples to the contrary (like Lam 1 or a few psalms) may be quoted, but even there the magnitude of suffering cannot be justified by the sins of the supplicant.

⁹ Craig C. BROYLES, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms. A Form-Critical and Theological Study* (JSOTSup 52), Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1989, 39, 42–46; 111–122; Thomas HIEKE, "Schweigen wäre gotteslästerlich. Zur Phänomenologie und Theologie der Klage im Alten Testament", *BiLi* 71 (1998) 287–304; ID., "Schweigen" (2000), 58–59; Erich ZENGER, *Psalmen. Auslegungen I. Mit meinem Gott überspringe ich Mauern*, Freiburg, ²2006, 76.

¹⁰ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 55–59. On the law-court pattern of laments: Anson LAYTNER, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1990, republished at Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998, XV, XVII–XVIII.

rational explanation. In terms of function these are not questions.¹¹ The “why” reminds that God’s actions are incomprehensible and wrong.¹² The “how long” shows that suffering has to cease.¹³ The charge, the lament is an intrinsic part of the argument. In an “argumentum ad deum”¹⁴ the supplicant reminds God that suffering is incompatible with his identity, with his earlier kindness; consequently God has to act according to his nature, to his promises.

Laments express the dual conviction that suffering comes from God, yet in the same time God is the only one who can rescue the sufferer. God is the sole responsible and cause of all events.¹⁵ He is the giver of life and death (compare 1 Sam 2,6; Deut 32,39; Isa 45,6-7; Lam 3,37). Therefore, although in one way or another God is responsible for suffering, the supplicant turns to him, as there is no other succour in need.¹⁶ The lament is thus an expression of crisis,¹⁷ a cry from the depths of suffering, but also a manifestation of hope, of the faith that God can put an end to pain.¹⁸ God has broken his promises, has acted against his own nature, and has disappointed the supplicant. But no other can solve the crisis, but God; moreover he is compelled to do so, given the conflict between divine nature and actions that are irreconcilable with this nature.¹⁹ The sufferer protests against God in front of God, brings charges *against* God by turning *to* God.²⁰ Communal lament evokes God’s saving deeds, promises

¹¹ HIEKE, “Schweigen” (2000), 53.

¹² BROYLES, *Conflict*, 80–81.

¹³ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 81.

¹⁴ Walter GROB, “Gott als Feind des einzelnen? Psalm 88“, in ID., *Studien zur Priesterschrift und zu alttestamentlichen Gottesbildern* (SB AB 30), Stuttgart, 1999, 164, quoted by Erich ZENGER, *Psalmen 51–100* (HThKAT), Freiburg: Herder, ³2000, 568.

¹⁵ JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 45; HIEKE, “Schweigen” (2000), 50.

¹⁶ HIEKE, “Schweigen” (2000), 55, 59; BROYLES, *Conflict*, 225.

¹⁷ HIEKE, “Schweigen” (2000), 57, 59.

¹⁸ JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 45 (following Westermann); HIEKE, “Schweigen” (2000), 58.

¹⁹ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 224.

²⁰ HIEKE, “Schweigen” (2000), 63; BROYLES, *Conflict*, 224; LAYTNER, *Arguing*, XVIII.

and covenant.²¹ The individual lament conjures the personal relationship with God (“my God”, “my rock”, “my stronghold”, Psa 31,4; 42,10; 71,3). Trust is repeatedly affirmed (בטח; Psa 22,5-6; cf. 13,6; 31,7.15; 44,7-8; 56,5.12).²² God has broken this relationship based on trust. Yet, in a renewed act of trust the supplicant places his (her)²³ existence in the hands of God.²⁴ This trust is the key to understanding the common change in mood, the transition from lament to thanksgiving.²⁵ Laments are “purposeful paradigms of trust”.²⁶ The lament is a manifestation of trust even in its darkest forms, like Psa 88.²⁷ It makes sense only because it bears the conviction that God is capable and willing to rescue the sufferer. The lament is therefore an integral part of the prayer; without it there can be no supplication or thanksgiving.²⁸

²¹ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 111–112, 142, 169, 221.

²² BROYLES, *Conflict*, 121–122, 222; Christoph MARKSCHIES, „Ich aber vertraue auf dich, Herr!“ – *Vertrauensäußerungen* als Grundmotiv in den Klageliedern des Einzelnen“, *ZAW* 103 (1991) 386–398 (391–395); HIEKE, “Schweigen” (2000), 50; BERGES, *Schweigen*, 25.

²³ The Hebrew uses the masculine and implies a male supplicant. Moreover, as JANOWSKI argues, following G. von Rad, women were excluded from the temple cult, the Sitz im Leben of the laments (*Arguing*, 43). However I use inclusive language, as laments could express the experience of men and women alike. For a more differentiated discussion of female participation in the sphere of religion: Phyllis TRIBLE, “The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus”, in Patrick MILLER *et al.*, *Ancient Israelite Religion. Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, Augsburg: Fortress, 1987, 397–419, reprinted in Alice BACH (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, New York / London: Routledge, 1999, 3–20. 1 Sam 1,10-11 envisages Hannah praying at the sanctuary in Shiloh; the issue here is not the historicity of the episode, but the view that women could pray at sanctuaries.

²⁴ MARKSCHIES, “Ich aber vertraue auf dich, Herr!”, 389–390.

²⁵ JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 78–85 (Psa 13,6).

²⁶ “Ich aber vertraue auf dich, Herr!”, 397–398 (“zielgerichtetes Vertrauensparadigma”).

²⁷ JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 75–76; BROYLES, *Conflict*, 41–42; HIEKE, *Schweigen* (2000), 50, 62, cf. 58; ZENGER, *Psalmen 51–100*, 576; ID., *Psalmen. Auslegungen I*, 77; MARKSCHIES, “Ich aber vertraue auf dich, Herr!”, 386–398.

²⁸ BERGES, *Schweigen* 23; BROYLES, *Conflict*, 220–221; JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 40.

Suffering touches all three dimensions of human existence – one’s personal life, one’s relationship with God and with the world.²⁹ As a consequence, the lament encompasses the theo-logical, sociological and psychological dimension of suffering.³⁰ The sufferer laments about the personal situation (Ich-klage, I-lament), the attitude of God (Gottesklage, God-lament) and the harassment of the enemy (Feindklage, enemy-lament).³¹ In what follows, I focus on the two first aspects, on the situation of the person (the I-lament) and the attitude of God (the God-lament).

The I-lament and the Metaphorical Description of Suffering

As speech acts, the metaphors of I-laments protest against suffering and invoke divine mercy with dramatic images, drawing from the spatial-natural-physical environment or the social realm.

Spatial, Situational and Natural Metaphors

The experience of suffering is abysmal. The person is thrown into the pit (בִּירָה), covered by darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ), in the shadow of death (Psa 88,5.7.19; Lam 3,53.55; compare Job 22,11 – darkness and the flood of waters). Darkness evokes hopelessness and death.³² The imagery of the pit conjures the *sheol*, the land of the dead (also Psa 28,1; 30,4; 143,7). The sufferer cries out from the depths (מֵעֲמֻקִּים, Psa 130,1; often explicitly the depth of waters or of the sea, Psa 69,3.15; Isa 51,10; Ezek 27,34). With the fall into the pit / the *sheol* God becomes even more distant; the supplicant is therefore compelled to cry aloud to be heard (Psa 130,1-2; 88,3; Lam 3,53.55). The metaphor of depth does not envisage a space properly speaking, but the condition of loss, of demise; as Janowski puts it, it is the

²⁹ JANOWSKI speaks of a constellatory understanding of the human being (*Arguing*, 42–43, 49, 52–54, following Jan ASSMANN, *Tod und Jenseits im Alten Ägypten*, 13ff, 34ff, 54ff).

³⁰ Claus WESTERMANN, *Ausgewählte Psalmen*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984, repr. 2011, 56–57; BERGES, *Schweigen*, 26.

³¹ WESTERMANN, *Ausgewählte Psalmen*, 57, 85–86; JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 37–38, 41–43, 46, 49, 52–54, 62–64 (Psa 13 and other examples); BERGES, *Schweigen*, 26, 37–40; Göran EIDEVALL, “Images of God, Self and the Enemy in the Psalms. On the Role of Metaphor in Identity Construction”, in VAN HECKE, *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, 55–66 (56).

³² JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 68–72 (as opposed to light).

intersection point between two semantic fields, that of space and of an existential condition.³³

Waters overflow the man in suffering; he (she) is swept over by streams of water (שבילה), sinking in a deep mire (יין), and the abyss (מצולה) swallows him (her) (Psa 69,2-3.15-16; Job 22,11; Jon 2,4). The waves (משברי) of God clash over one's head (Psa 88,8; Jon 2,4; compare 2 Sam 22,5, the waves of death). The imagery suggests more than instability. The overflowing waters, the abyss, the waves as metaphors of an unbearable, desperate pain show that suffering and hopelessness threaten human existence just as the chaos threatens creation.

Physical / Bodily Metaphors and the Experience of Death

The pains of the supplicant are unceasing, the wounds find no healing (Jer 15,18; Job 16,6; Psa 39,3), the sufferer is deadly afflicted since youth (Psa 88,16). After vainly crying out to God night and day, the sufferer grows weary, his (her) throat is hoarse and his (her) eyes tired (Psa 6,7; 69,4). Tears are the sufferer's bread day and night (Psa 42,4), up to the point of drenching one's bed (Psa 6,7). Are these physical complaints or metaphors? The ostensible concreteness of the physical details may support a reference to more or less specific diseases, all the more for psalms which explicitly speak of illness (Psa 88).³⁴ But the "symptoms" are so vague and often combined so surprisingly with

³³ JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 30–31, 33.

³⁴ Sigmund MOWINCKEL, *Psalm Studies 2* (SBL History of Biblical Studies 3; tr. Mark E. Biddle), Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014, 636–637; Artur WEISER, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (tr. Herbert Hartwell), Philadelphia / Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1962, 324; Walter GROß, Karl-Josef KUSCHEL, "Ich schaffe Finsternis und Unheil": Ist Gott verantwortlich für das Übel?, Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1992, 48–53. JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 73, 164–166 speaks of psalms of illness and healing, yet he notes with good reason that "Trying to derive and exact medical diagnosis [...] is inappropriate. The point is rather 'the subjective experience of disturbed life' or the theme of imminent death, which is not expressed through the semantic content of the basic anthropological terms 'bones', 'heart', and 'skin', but through their deliberate combination into a whole image" [referring to Brunert, *Psalm 102*, 116].

For caution: Nancy DECLAISSE-WALFORD, Rolf A. JACOBSON, Beth LANEEL TANNER, *The Book of Psalms* (NICOT), Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2014, 101–102 (on the example of Psa 6, following Zenger).

references to totally different circumstances (e.g. the poor and the enemies in Psa 41) that physical “symptoms” and illness itself appear to be metaphors. In fact laments transcend particular situations and concrete conditions; they are open enough to voice the suffering of any person, regardless of one’s particular circumstances.³⁵

Take two common physical images – the bones and the melting heart. The bones of the supplicant are disjointed, broken, shattered, burnt (Psa 6,3; 22,15; 31,11; 42,11; 102,4) or tremble with fright (Job 4,14). God has wasted away the flesh and skin and has broken the bones of the sufferer (Lam 3,4). This repeated reference to bones can hardly be taken as indicative for a medical condition. As a matter of fact we see here the fundamental structure of the body, ultimately of the self, falling apart. This image comes close to that of the heart, the core and epitome of the person, melting away like wax, paralleled by the image of God pouring man out like water (Psa 22,15; compare 2 Sam 14,14 [NAB]: “we shall surely die and are like water spilled on the ground which cannot be gathered up again”).

It appears thus that even physical details should be taken for metaphors, expressing in a particularly vivid manner the existential threat carried by suffering. Awareness of the metaphorical character of this imagery leads to a different perspective on laments. It becomes clear that suffering is far more than a manifestation of illness. It leads to the dissolution of the physical and psychological unity of the person, who finds thus him(her)self a step away from death. The life of the sufferer draws near to the *sheol*, he (she) is reckoned and forsaken among the dead (Psa 88,4-6; Lam 3,6). This common motif describes the experience of death in this life (“Todeserfahrungen mitten im Leben”), a real, although partial encounter with the power of death (compare Job 17,1.14).³⁶ This is

³⁵ HIEKE, “Schweigen” (2000), 46. Laments are typical prayers with which any sufferer can identify. ZENGER, *Psalmen. Auslegungen I*, 70 (Gebetsformulare); MARKSCHIES, “Ich aber vertraue auf dich, Herr!”, 387, 391–392 (“ein typisches Formular zur Identifikation”).

³⁶ Kathrin LIESS, “Von der Gottesferne zur Gottesnähe. Zur Todes- und Lebensmetaphorik in den Psalmen”, in Pierre VAN HECKE, Antje LABAHN, *Metaphors in the Psalms* (BETL 231), Leuven: Peeters, 2010, 167–195 (172–174); Johannes SCHNOCKS, “Metaphern für Leben und Tod in den Psalmen 23 und 88”, in the same

a way of telling God that there is still some time left to save the sufferer from this dramatic situation, but he should intervene quickly, – as long as it is not too late!³⁷

Animal and vegetal metaphors express the same near-death experience: the sufferer is like a lamb led to slaughter, like a plant (a tree) to be cut off (גזר, כרת) from the land of the living (Jer 11,9; compare Isa 53,7-8; Psa 88,6, cut off from the hand of God). The supplicant is like a locust / grasshopper (ארבה) shaken off, an image that parallels the heart pierced within oneself, suggestive of the sense of unsettledness, of a shaken existence (Psa 109,22-23).

The Social and Emotional Dimension of Suffering

From a less metaphorical and perhaps more concrete perspective, laments also envisage the social and emotional dimension of suffering. The sufferer is left alone, abandoned by God, forsaken by family and friends, and assaulted by enemies (Jer 12,6; 20,10; Psa 38,12; 41,10; 69,8; 88,19; Job 19,13). The total forsakenness and solitude, the hyperbolic exaggeration of these feelings clearly point to a topos rather than to an actual condition. While real emotions, forsakenness, isolation, the feel of threatened existence and the sense of worthlessness find their expression in animal-imagery: the sufferer feels like a bird (קאה)³⁸ in the desert, a lonely bird (כצפור) on the rooftop (Psa 102,7-8).³⁹ The supplicant has lost his (her) human dignity and has become a worm (חולעת), Psa, 22,7; compare Job 17,4: the sufferer must call the maggot (רמה) “mother” and “sister”.

In the depths of pain, and paradoxically because of his (her) trust in God, the sufferer is mocked, scorned and turned into a laughing stock.

volume, 235–249 (244). (This does not refer to near-death experiences reported after clinical death.)

³⁷ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 85.

³⁸ Various translated as pelican or owl, BDB, s.v.

³⁹ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 106; Peter RIEDE, *Im Spiegel der Tiere: Studien zum Verhältnis von Mensch und Tier im alten Israel* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 187), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002, 50, 56; William P. BROWN, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, Louisville, KY, London: Westminster John Knox, 2002, 146 (pointing to the uncleanness of these birds and their association with devastation).

Mockery is expressed physically: the enemies or onlookers shake their head in sign of derision (Psa 22,8; 109,25; Lam 2,15; compare Job 16,4). This leads to the painful experience of shame, a common concern in honour and shame mentality.⁴⁰ Shame is a constant motif in laments (Psa 22,7: *הרפת*, as opposed to the fathers, who were not put to shame, *לא־בושו*, v. 6; 25,2.20; 31,2.18; 44,14-16; 69,6-7.20; 71,1; 119,6.31 *passim*; Lam 3,14.45). Shame ultimately amounts to social death.

The suffering of the innocent who bears pain and shame because of his trust ultimately brings shame upon God and on all those who put their faith in him. Thus God's honour and his own best interests require him to act on the sufferer's behalf and change this unbearable situation.

Metaphors of the God-Lament

The God-lament (Gottesklage)⁴¹ blames God for suffering.⁴² In doing that the supplicant envisages God as close and distant at the same time, as causing pain and capable to rescue, as sovereign and impressionable. Most commonly, pains draw near when God is distant or passive. Yet, other passages envisage God as very much present and actively causing suffering.⁴³ The supplicant does not feel the urge to defend God or his actions.

God is Absent or Indifferent

Laments make striking statements about God's passivity.⁴⁴ Pain comes foremost from the experience that God has drawn far away.⁴⁵ The

⁴⁰ Johanna STIEBERT, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible. The Prophetic Contribution* (JSOT SUP 346), London, New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, 25–44.

⁴¹ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 37–40.

⁴² GROB, KUSCHEL, "*Ich schaffe Finsternis*", 215–218; HIEKE, "Suffering" (2000), 59–62. As opposed e.g. to deuteronomistic tradition, which assigns to man the responsibility for suffering, or traditional wisdom literature that minimises the scandal of suffering by envisaging it as trial.

⁴³ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 60–61, 76–78.

⁴⁴ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 78–80.

⁴⁵ On the experience of divine remoteness: JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 57–58; DOYLE, "Where is God", 383.

absence of God is thus a central metaphor.⁴⁶ But occasionally God is said to have limited capabilities, in that he forgets or fails to keep awake. God has forgotten, no longer remembers the supplicant (Psa 10,11; 13,2; 42,10; 88,6); he has forgotten the affliction and oppression of the people (Psa 44,25; Isa 49,14-15).⁴⁷ As a consequence the sufferer is approaching the land of death, the land of oblivion. The metaphors of oblivion and remembrance have an incredible significance and power. God's memory keeps humans alive, his oblivion lets them perish. Forgetting is total extinction (Isa 26,14; Psa 31,13; Qoh 2,16; 9,5; Sir 44,9). But in death God himself, his praise and miracles are also forgotten (Psa 6,6; 88,5-6.11; cf. 115,17a; Isa 38,18-19; LXX Sir 17,27-28),⁴⁸ and God ceases to exist to those in the *sheol*.⁴⁹ Therefore if God wishes to be remembered and praised, he has to save the sufferer. In death God loses the human being: „for now I shall lie in the dust; you will seek me, but I shall not be”, says Job bitterly (7,21).

God may be present but unconcerned. The supplicant has to call and demand him to raise his hand and act on his (her) behalf (Psa 10,12). God has to rise and mobilise himself (Psa 7,7; 35,23; 59,5). He may even fall asleep (יָשָׁן) and has to be wakened up (Psa 44,24; 78,65). In that, surprisingly, YHWH is not very different from Baal, mocked by Elijah in the Carmel-episode, and the supplicant acts pretty much like the Baal-prophets (1 Kgs 18,25-29).⁵⁰

Frequently anthropomorphic, physical metaphors dominate the lament. God has turned away (Psa 6,5); has hidden or turned away his face from humans (Psa 10,11; 13,2; 44,25; 69,17; 88,15), and can no longer see

⁴⁶ DOYLE, “Where is God”, 383.

⁴⁷ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 70–73.

⁴⁸ Claus WESTERMANN, *Lob und Klage in den Psalmen*, Göttingen, ⁵2011, 120–121.

⁴⁹ ZENGER, *Psalmen 51–100*, 573.

⁵⁰ LAYTNER, *Arguing*, 29. Marjo C.A. KORPEL and Johannes C. de MOOR suggest that because of the polemical depiction of pagan deities as dumb, „there remained little room for the concept of divine silence because of incapacity in the Hebrew Bible” and the reference to sleep is here “merely provocative language” (*The Silent God*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011, 255, 259). Yet, the argument is not entirely convincing: if incapacity (dumbness and sleep) is literal in the case of pagan deities, why should it be merely provocative in the case of YHWH?

their misery.⁵¹ God can move away. He has forsaken, has abandoned (עָזַב) the sufferer (Psa 22,2; 71,11-12; Isa 49,14; 54,7; compare 38,22; 71,9.18, God should not to forsake him). God has become so remote that he can no longer hear the cries, the yell of the sufferer, and does not respond to prayers (Psa 22,2-3; 69,4; 88,2-3). Relief is thus delayed (Psa 6,4). God did not leave the sufferer on his (her) own accidentally, through an oversight, but has deliberately hidden from the supplicant (Psa 10,1). He is nowhere to be found (Job 23,8-9). God is unreliable, like a deceptive stream, whose waters are not to be relied upon (Jer 15,18): one looks for God in vain in times of anguish, as he is no longer there.

Ultimately, the effect is the same: if God forgets, falls asleep, goes away, turns away, hides his face, turns away his ear, suffering draws near and the supplicant perishes.⁵²

When do these metaphors make sense in laments? If the supplicant is convinced that God has to stand by his creatures in all times, turned toward them, relentlessly keeping his eye on humans, within sight, close enough to hear their cries. If the supplicant knows that God's protecting, caring proximity preserves humans from suffering, – whether foes, illness or death. If the sufferer knows that under normal circumstances God remembers humans he created, recalls that they are evanescent, and bears in mind his mercy and promises.⁵³ God's turning away, distance, silence, oblivion, and passivity upset this normal state of affairs. The lament does not claim God's inexistence, but deplores his absence or manner of acting.⁵⁴ The psalmist ultimately reminds God that his attitude contradicts his natural way of being.

The Hostile Presence of God

Even more startling are those passages according to which God is very much present and causes suffering actively.⁵⁵ God is filled with wrath

⁵¹ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 73–76.

⁵² Whereas if remembered, creation is revived (Psa 104,27-30). JANOWSKI, *Arguing*, 64–66; compare the prayer to Ishtar, *IBID.*, 66–67.

⁵³ Zoltán ADORJÁNI, “Isten emlékezése és felejtése a zsoltárok alapján”, *Pannonhalmi szemle* 2 (2005) 22–33.

⁵⁴ DOYLE, “Where is God”, 383; GROB, KUSCHEL, “*Ich schaffe Finsternis*”, 215.

⁵⁵ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 76–78, 119–120.

and brings about suffering in his anger.⁵⁶ His wrath (חמה) is like threatening water or as sweeping fire:⁵⁷ it lies heavy upon the sufferer and overwhelms him like waves; his burning anger (חריו) has swept over the afflicted (88,8.17; compare Lam 1,12; 4,11). The supplicant prays God not to chastise man in an outburst of wrath (Psa 6,2) or inquires about the end of his anger burning like fire (Psa 79,5; 80,5; 89,47). Fiery anger is a mighty heavenly weapon destroying cities and humans (Lam 2,2-4.6).⁵⁸ Wrath (אף) envelopes God, turning him inaccessible to the prayers of the sufferer (Lam 3,43-44).

God has cast man into the deep, into the heart of the seas (Jon 2,4). He has rejected and shamed his people (Psa 44,10).⁵⁹ He has encircled, besieged, imprisoned the sufferer, blocked his way with hewn stones and twisted his path (Lam 3,5.7.9). God is behind the solitude and isolation of the sufferer – he has removed his friends and acquaintances, to the point that his sole companion is darkness (Psa 88,19).

God deceives and overpowers man (Jer 20,7). He abuses and rejects the work of his hands (Job 10,3). It is God who wastes away the flesh and skin and breaks the bones of man, feeds him and makes him drink bitterness, breaks his teeth with gravel and presses him into ashes (Lam 3,4.15-17). He turns sufferers into a laughing-stock to the people (Lam 3,14.45).

God has turned man into a target and a prey (Job 7,20; 10,2.7; Lam 3,1.3). He pierces man with his arrows like a warrior or a hunter (Psa 38,3; Job 6,4: arrows are poisonous; Lam 3,12-13). Startlingly, laments apply to God the metaphors of wild, dangerous beasts, usually used for the enemy: God is like a lurking bear, a lion in hiding; he leads man off his way, tears

⁵⁶ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 61–67. The motif is even more poignant in prophetic literature: God is envisaged as jealous and vengeful husband (Hos 2,4-15, Ezek 16,38.42); he mercilessly brings destruction and death on his people (Jer 15,1-4.7-9.13-15).

⁵⁷ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 66.

⁵⁸ LABAHN, “Fire”, 246–254. Whether the entire scene in Lam 2,1-9 envisages destruction by fire is debatable, but not impossible.

⁵⁹ BROYLES, *Conflict*, 67–70.

him to pieces, and makes him desolate (Lam 3,10-11; compare Psa 22,15 [ארי]; Job 10,16; Hos 5,14 [שהל]).⁶⁰

It is God who casts man into the pit (Psa 88,7), leads him (her) into darkness, to the *sheol* (Lam 3,2.6); it is he who causes the death of his creation (Psa 22,16c; Job 10,8-9; 30,23). Communal lament holds against God his unfaithfulness: he hands over his people like sheep for slaughter and scatters them among the nations; his act is unjust, being at odds with the faithfulness of the people (Psa 44,12.18-23). Moreover, he is a merchant with poor commercial spirit, as he sells his people for a trifle, making no profit (Psa 44,13).⁶¹ God has broken his covenant, rejected the anointed one, destroyed his land, and fought against his people to the joy of the enemy (89,39-46).

God's painful presence, his permanent and hostile scrutiny is so unbearable that the sufferer feels compelled to ask for a short respite (until he swallows his spittle), before he takes the path of no return and goes into his death (Job 7,16-19; 10,20-21; 14,6.20). The supplicant hopes that someone might rescue him from the hands of God (Job 10,7), but even that seems unfeasible. What can be more startling and tragic than the hope that God would hide the sufferer in the *sheol*, and remember him only after his wrath is past (Job 14,13)?

Final Thoughts

Theodicy and apologetics attempt to rescue the righteousness and goodness of God by rationalising suffering, referring to its positive function, its soteriological and spiritual value.⁶² But Karl-Josef Kuschel has rightly pointed to the failure of theodicy, which functionalises suffering within a theology of order or as part of a spirituality of love, patient enduring and passive acceptance. Inquiry and lament show that suffering is radically irreconcilable with the goodness of God and of the

⁶⁰ On the emotional impact of these metaphors (as opposed to an abstract reference): RIEDE, *Im Spiegel der Tiere*, 55.

⁶¹ Matthew W. MITCHELL speaks of an accusatory lament; "Genre Disputes and Communal Accusatory Laments: Reflections on the Genre of Psalm Lxxxix", *VT* 55 (2005) 511–527 (525–526).

⁶² HIEKE, "Schweigen" (2000), 53, 59–60, 61 (responses to the reasons of suffering are either romantic or cynical).

creation. The suffering of the innocent cannot be understood (*verstehen*), but only withstood (*bestehen*), and lament is one way of withstanding suffering.⁶³

Laments have no rational explanation for suffering, thus the question of theodicy remains ultimately open.⁶⁴ Against common views, the supplicant does not think that God needs to be defended or exculpated, certainly not when he causes suffering. As Zenger put it, if God is unable to save the sufferer, salvation history becomes mere ideology.⁶⁵ As puzzling as it may seem, in the lament the supplicant preserves a deep and vivid relationship with God, without, however, justifying suffering, turning it into ideology, or shifting responsibility onto humans. Prayer voices the conviction that God is bound and capable to change the situation.⁶⁶ Thus, the lament becomes an expression of faith and trust.

The language of laments is eminently metaphorical. Vivid images present the sufferer as threatened in his (her) existence and falling apart. Metaphors speak of God's departure and absence, of God turning (away) his face, eyes, ears, of his fiery or wave-like, overflowing anger, his oblivion and remembrance. These metaphors envisage God as someone normally entertaining a personal, caring relationship with humans. As speech acts, the metaphors of laments attempt to persuade God to restore this normal situation by putting an end to pain and despair. Laments challenge theological systems that exonerate God, placing an unbearable burden on the suffering person, and allow the expression of pain in the hope of change.

⁶³ Karl-Josef KUSCHEL, "Ist Gott verantwortlich für das Übel: Überlegungen zu einer Theologie der Anklagen", in Gotthard FUCHS (ed.), *Angesichts des Leids an Gott glauben? Zur Theologie der Klage*, Frankfurt a.M., 1996, 227–261 (246), quoted by BERGES, *Schweigen*, 8; also GROß, KUSCHEL, "Ich schaffe Finsternis", 167; HIEKE (2000), 60 (theodicy absolves God and burdens man).

⁶⁴ HIEKE, "Schweigen" (2000), 60–62; Georg STEINS, "Klagen ist Gold!", in STEINS, *Schweigen*, 9–15 (11).

⁶⁵ ZENGER, *Psalmen 51–100*, 573. God's behaviour is absurd: if he abandons man to death, his great deeds will not be remembered.

⁶⁶ HIEKE, "Schweigen" (2000), 62–63; ZENGER, *Psalmen. Auslegungen I*, 78; Georg BEIRER, "Die heilende Kraft der Klage", in STEINS, *Schweigen*, 16–41 (20).

