

Psalms Session 2
Psalms of Complaint

The most common type of psalm is the complaint, or lament. These appear in two distinct varieties in the book of Psalms: individual and communal. An individual complaint may look like this, from Psalm 3:

*O LORD, my foes are so many! Many are those who attack me;
many say of me, "There is no deliverance for him through God." Selah.
But You, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, He who holds my head high.
I cry aloud to the LORD, and He answers me from His holy mountain. Selah.
I lie down and sleep and wake again, for the LORD sustains me.
I have no fear of the myriad forces arrayed against me on every side.
Rise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! For You slap all my enemies in the face; You
break the teeth of the wicked.
Deliverance is the LORD's; Your blessing be upon Your people!*

This is a relatively simply individual lament, but it is utterly typical in its formulation. The speaker declares himself to be in crisis, "My foes are so many!", and calls upon God to deliver him from his situation.

On the communal side, we may take as exemplary Psalm 44(8-14):

*In God we glory at all times, and praise Your name unceasingly. Selah.
Yet You have rejected and disgraced us; You do not go with our armies.
You make us retreat before our foe; our enemies plunder us at will.
You let them devour us like sheep; You disperse us among the nations.
You sell Your people for no fortune, You set no high price on them.*

You make us the butt of our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us.

You make us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples.

Here, rather than an individual, it is the community as a whole that is in trouble; “my foes” have become “our enemies.” Yet the fundamental complaint remains the same, and the call for God’s deliverance: “Arise and help us, redeem us, as befits your faithfulness.”

What is apparent in virtually every psalm of complaint is the lack of specificity. “My foes are so many!” suggests that the speaker is in some sort of trouble, but we have no access to the particulars of the individual’s situation. We might note that Psalm 3 is the one that is attributed in its superscription to David, when he was fleeing from Absalom—yet there is nothing in the psalm itself that has any direct connection to that historical event. The lament is, in this way, fundamentally reusable: it could be applied to a king escaping a rebellion, but it could just as easily be applied to anyone in any sort of straits. As we have seen, it is this universal nature of these psalms that in part led Gunkel to recognize them as a category to be reckoned with as a whole, and that supports the notion that these were stereotyped expressions that could be employed by anyone seeking divine assistance, in almost any range of personal turmoils.

Psalm 22 is among the most famous of these individual laments, because its opening lines were taken up by Jesus: “My god, my god, why have you forsaken me?” But even this psalm is quite broad in its litany of woes: “Dogs surround me . . . deliver me from a lion’s mouth, from the horns of wild oxen rescue me.” We are dealing here with the realm of metaphor, not with a specific real-world situation. That the speaker of this psalm, or others from this category, is suffering is not in question. But we can hardly pin down what that specific suffering may have been. Any problem that seemed to demand divine attention—from sickness to financial loss—would be a perfectly appropriate backdrop for these types of laments.

We can see a good example of metaphorically specific language being used to express a universal sentiment in Psalm 69:

Deliver me, O God, for the waters have reached my neck;

*I am sinking into the slimy deep and find no foothold; I have come into the watery depths;
the flood sweeps me away.*

I am weary with calling; my throat is dry; my eyes fail while I wait for God.

It is surely safe to say that the speaker of this psalm is not literally up to his neck in water, or drowning in the watery depths. But almost everyone knows the feeling that is expressed by the metaphor of drowning—the utter loss of control and certainty that there is no hope except a miraculous rescue.

A feature that crops up with some regularity in psalms of complaint is a rather abrupt transition, often near the end of the psalm, in which it appears as if the complaint has been successfully addressed:

*You who fear the LORD, praise Him! All you offspring of Jacob, honor Him! Be in dread
of Him, all you offspring of Israel!*

*For He did not scorn, He did not spurn the plea of the lowly; He did not hide His face
from him; when he cried out to Him, He listened.*

*Because of You I offer praise in the great congregation; I pay my vows in the presence of
His worshipers. Psalm 22 (23-25)*

This reads much more like a psalm of thanksgiving than a psalm of complaint; what is it doing here, at the end of Psalm 22?

We may consider here the likelihood that these psalms, used in a cultic liturgical setting, may have been interwoven with some oracular aspect on the part of the priest. We might imagine

the speaker bringing his offering, reciting the complaint part of the psalm, and then waiting for the priest to make an oracular determination as to God's reaction. Upon receiving an affirmative response, the speaker would then continue on with the second part of the psalm, thanking God, in advance, for the divine attentiveness to his pleas. Alternatively, it is possible that the second part of the psalm might have been recited sometime later, after the speaker had in fact successfully escaped from his plight, whatever it might have been. In either case, the almost "call and response" nature of this structure contributes to the scholarly opinion that these psalms, like so many others, were originally for use in a cultic setting.

Many laments not only describe the abject condition of the speaker, but are also clear that the speaker is not at fault. Psalm 69 says, "My zeal for your house has been my undoing; the reproaches of those who revile you have fallen upon me." The speaker is undeserving of his fate: in fact, he has been nothing but faithful to God, while those who oppress him are enemies of the deity. This is a clear rhetorical move, intended to appeal directly to God's sense of justice. Generally, psalms of complaint are psalms of injustice, personal or communal. They seek to elicit divine outrage, or at least attention: "Answer me, O Lord, according to your steadfastness; in accordance with your abundant mercy turn to me." It is often assumed that God has simply been too busy to attend to the individual's situation, even as it has progressively worsened. The psalm—and, one can safely assume, the sacrifice that accompanies it—are intended to rectify that inattentiveness.

Unusual in this regard, then, is Psalm 51:

*Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify me of my sin;
for I recognize my transgressions, and am ever conscious of my sin.*

Against You alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight; so You are just in Your sentence, and right in Your judgment.

A rarity among the psalms of complaint, here the speaker admits to error, to iniquity and transgression, and appeals less for divine attention and more for divine forgiveness. Indeed, here the speaker is seeking something akin to a conversion experience, in what looks like a recognition that his situation has resulted from a life of disobedience: “Fashion a pure heart for me, O God; create in me a steadfast spirit.” In return, the speaker promises to enter a life of proclaiming God’s ways to others: “I will teach transgressors your ways, that sinners may return to you.”

This psalm also echoes some of the great early Israelite prophets in declaring the ineffectual nature of sacrifice: “You do not want me to bring sacrifices, you do not desire burnt offerings; true sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit.” As with the prophets who make similar statements, we should not imagine here a wholesale rejection of the sacrificial system; such a thing would have been unthinkable in ancient Israel. What we do see, however, is the notion that sacrifice alone, as a rote cultic motion, is not effective in calling forth divine mercy. Sacrifice, like prayer, must always be accompanied by a contrite spirit, by what the ancient rabbis called *kavvanah*, “attentiveness”: you cannot just go through the motions, but you have to really mean it. The downplaying of sacrifice is a highlighting of the speaker’s authentic spiritual state. It might be noted that this psalm, Psalm 51, is attributed to David in the wake of the episode with Bathsheba. Although psalms of complaint are often spoken by those in externally-imposed difficulty, there is some comfort in knowing that there is also recourse for those who have erred and are now regretful, and seek to reenter the divine presence.

When it comes to communal laments, we see many of the same features as in the individual complaints. Rather than appeal to God's sense of justice, however, we often find appeals to what God had previously done for Israel, as in Psalm 44:

We have heard, O God, our fathers have told us the deeds You performed in their time, in days of old.

With Your hand You planted them, displacing nations; You brought misfortune on peoples, and drove them out.

It was not by their sword that they took the land, their arm did not give them victory, but Your right hand, Your arm, and Your goodwill, for You favored them.

The rehearsal of God's glorious deeds in the past is intended to elicit similar acts in the present: God is being reminded of the efforts he had previously gone to for Israel. This is a move straight out of Moses's playbook, when the people had sinned in the wilderness: "Let not your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against your people, whom you delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand." Here, however, in Psalm 44, there is no admission of sin:

All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, or been false to Your covenant.

Our hearts have not gone astray, nor have our feet swerved from Your path, though You cast us, crushed, to where the sea monster is, and covered us over with deepest darkness.

If we forgot the name of our God and spread forth our hands to a foreign god,

God would surely search it out, for He knows the secrets of the heart.

It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Rouse Yourself; why do You sleep, O Lord? Awaken, do not reject us forever!

This is very much parallel to the individual complaints: “Why do you sleep?” God has been inattentive to his people’s undeserved suffering.

In another communal lament, Psalm 74, the speaker goes even further, appealing directly to God’s pride and honor: “Rise, O God, champion your cause; be mindful that you are blasphemed by base men all day long.” Again, we can hear echoes of Moses here, as in Numbers 14, after the episode of the spies: “If you slay this people to a man, the nations who have heard your fame will say, ‘It must be because the Lord was powerless to bring that people into the land he had promised them on oath that he slaughtered them in the wilderness.’”

In the communal laments, but also in the individual psalms of complaint, the constant refrain is that God should come to the speaker’s or community’s aid because, effectively, “we are your people.” The appeal is both to God’s sense of justice and God’s sense of obligation. In this idea too we can see how the psalms of complaint serve a universal function: anyone who considers himself to be part of God’s chosen community can take up almost any one of these and apply it to his situation.

Questions for Discussion:

What does it say about ancient Israel, or us, that so many of the Psalms are complaints and laments?

How does the lack of situational specificity in these psalms help or hurt us when we use them liturgically or individually?

Do we have contemporary equivalents to either individual or communal psalms of lament?