

Nancy Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. (xii +196 pp). [ISBN: 9780800663018 0800663012]

Nancy Lee's *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation* is a timely reminder of the power and promise of lament across time, geography, faith, and culture. From Ancient Mesopotamian city laments, to laments for New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Lee gathers a vast spectrum of lament literature and demonstrates its unique ability to give voice to human pain and suffering in all its specificity and universality.

Chapter one introduces a variety of laments from various times and cultures, all of which have in common the understanding that a particular deity is behind the lamentable events. In this chapter Lee posits the role of women in composing and performing dirges and notes the continuing tradition of women lamenters/protesters in many cultures. Lee also observes the power that a lament for a hero figure can have in inspiring the followers of a political or reform movement. She further comments on the difficulty of lamenting for so many after the Shoah. In this chapter Lee identifies two major literary forms, that of the dirge and the lament prayer, that she maintains are common across religions and cultures. The chapter thus exposes the reader to some different types of lament and make some interesting comments upon them, but otherwise there's not a lot keeping the chapter hanging together.

Chapter two identifies features of lament and explores the difference between dirge and lament prayer. After Jahnow, Lee identifies the elements of the dirge as: death, and possibly cause of death; complaint about that death; weeping; accusation; call for vengeance/justice/a curse; call and response elements; address to the dead; questions; a summons to mourn; mourning of the incomprehensibility of the loss; the impact of the death on survivors; a reconciling motif; praise for the deceased; maybe a prayer to God (p. 52). Further features include personification (of city, nature, war, and death) (pp. 56-61), and contrast between then and now (pp. 61-65). Following Westermann, Lee's explanation of the defining features of lament prayer is much less comprehensive, comprising simply the 'expression of suffering or need, and the plea to the deity for help' (p. 65).

Chapter three grounds lament tradition firmly in the Hebrew Bible. Lee explores two major paradigmatic narratives where someone laments and God answers, in order to demonstrate the precedent for the efficacy of lament. Abel's blood crying from the ground; and the Israelite people in Egypt. According to Lee, 'The Exodus liberation narrative and

the lament psalms in the Tanak/Hebrew Bible/Old Testament provide the primary theological paradigm for lament genres' (p. 73).

Chapter four purports to examine the lament in the three Abrahamic traditions, and includes selections from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Koran. This chapter also contains a wealth of additional lament literature from other sources, particularly blues/jazz music and South African poetry, upon which Lee comments at length. This is curious, given the stated intention to focus on sacred literature in this chapter. Lee casts the net wide; perhaps, at times, a little too wide, including literature that others might not easily identify as lament. It may be simply that I am not familiar with the Koran, but I found Lee's defense of selected passages as lament literature for the most part unconvincing. For example, she quotes Sura 14:39: 'Praise be to Allah, Who hath granted unto me in old age Isma'il and Isaac: for truly my Lord is He, the Hearer of Prayer!' (p. 129). Lee earlier identified the key features of lament prayer as expression of suffering and plea for help, neither of which I find evident here (unless *any* prayer can be considered a plea for help of sorts!) While other passages she cites do clearly contain lament elements, it would have been helpful had Lee included some further explanations of *how* they demonstrate the elements of dirge or lament prayer she has previously outlined. As it is, her listing of various passages without including much in the way of context is not, for me, entirely satisfying.

Chapter five sets out to create links between lament, prophetic voices, and social justice. This chapter draws on Lee's previous work on voicing of lament in Jeremiah and in *Lamentations* (Nancy C. Lee, *The Singers of Lamentations* [Leiden: Brill, 2002], where, it should be noted, Lee flows against the tide of scholarly consensus by suggesting a return to the traditional ascription of (at least some of) *Lamentations* to Jeremiah). Lee argues on the basis of her selection of lament literature from Jeremiah and from contemporary resistance movements that lament literature is associated with prophetic individuals.

Chapter six highlights the role of lament in mourning an entire community of people, and again includes examples, both ancient and contemporary. Again, this chapter is a little fragmented, being as it is, mostly comprised of selections of lament literature without much in the way of comment to segue between them. However, the literature she has selected for the most part speaks for itself; and eloquently so.

Chapter seven explores the very real issue of the call for violent vengeance that appears in so much lament literature. Here Lee's political agenda comes to the fore. She argues that traditional lament forms must be innovated such that they protest violence and instead work towards

peace in the world, seeking what she calls 'higher spiritual principles.' She calls for 'Renaissance and People's movements' in reclaiming and revising lament forms to create new, non violent laments. The crucial part of this process for Lee is the involvement of individuals-in-community in creating and performing their own laments.

Chapter eight finishes the book with the twin realisations that children are often the greatest victims of disparity and violence in the world; and yet it is often children and youth who call for and lead movements for change. Thus while there is clearly cause for lament in the world, there is also, in Lee's final analysis, cause for hope.

One of the great gifts of this book is in the scope and breadth of lament literature Lee has collected, with selections of laments from ancient Mesopotamia right through to laments in contemporary culture. Lee's work draws on the best of scholarship but is still very accessible, not least because the text is interspersed with so many examples of lament songs and poems. These laments are often truncated, which leaves the reader wanting more. The website supplementing the book goes some way towards alleviating this, with links to full versions, readings, and performances of many of the laments Lee cites (www.fortresspress.com/lee).

Lee states from the outset that she wishes the laments gathered here to speak for themselves; and they do, eloquently, in a veritable cacophony of voices. However, perhaps because of the wide variety and scope of laments she has collected, the book seems at times fragmentary, moving from one expression of lament to another with little in the way of explanation as to how the juxtaposed pieces hang together. This is perhaps because the work is neither a simple anthology of lament literature; nor a sustained academic study of lament literature, but falls somewhere in between. While making it accessible to a wide audience, this leaves the academic reader wanting a little more in terms of engagement; and the interested reader looking for expressions of lament wanting a little more in terms of completeness of each work cited. However, the variety and universality of the selection makes this book in itself a wonderful resource for those interested in exploring ways of expressing human suffering and pain that is common to us all.

Lyrics of lament, as the title and content would suggest, is not a cheerful read. It is at times relentless. And yet there is profound hope, hope that lament might change the world.

Lee's book is political. It is not a call to arms, but a call to *lay down* arms – a call to nonviolent resistance of injustice through the use and innovation of the lament tradition. Lament, for Lee, is at once an

expression of sorrow and a vehicle of protest, and she seeks change in political structures by the voicing of lament by people seeking justice in the world. Lee maintains that the innovation of lament by people utilising and recreating the lament traditions might promote lasting change toward peace in the world. This is, perhaps, an ambitious political agenda; but it is a worthy one. And when reading the collection of laments that have arisen from and seeded into movements for change it's hard not to wonder if there might be something in it.

This is a book to be dipped into time and time again. Its expressions of grief and lament resonate with all who share humanity. These laments in turn may inspire both our own expressions of grief, and solidarity with those whose mourn, gentling God's people to action in a hurting world.

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