LAMENT PSALMS, THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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Abstract

Managing and coping with distress is one aspect of human life that remains a puzzle. Different cultures and traditions have developed means of handling issues of distress. Psalm scholars have discovered that in the lament psalms ancient Israel's answer to the issues of life's distress. By lament, the focus is on the category of psalms located within the worship setting that bemoan distressing situations of life and plead for divine intervention. Apart from mourning, several times the psalmists' lament comes inform of protest in the face of injustice, persecution, individual and communal disasters, among others. Governance in the Nigerian state has been plagued with a number of woes including insecurity and social injustice. Thus, the need to further explore justification for the Christian community in mobilizing lament to ease distresses ushered in by contemporary security challenges, create awareness for justice and foster national cohesion. This paper written from the functionalist perspective of religion, explored how the reading of lament psalms can initiate a healing process for the distressed Nigerian church and promote social cohesion. A multidisciplinary research approach was adopted premised on form criticism and conceptual review and sourced datawas critically analyzed. The paper discovered that communal reading of lament psalms in the face of national disaster provided sharing platforms where the distressed expressed pain by composing their distresses. Thus, the work maintains the efficacy of lament in initiating a healing process, strengthening communal bonds and eliciting the hope of restoration in the Nigerian situation.

Key Words: Lament Psalms, Functionalist Theory, Christian Community, Nigerian Governance

Introduction

The present governance in Nigeria has presented to Nigerians a time of severe hardship, security challenge, hunger, political and economic instability. National and international dailies frequently feature Nigeria with series of breaking bad news. The situation is invariably distressing as the Nigerians face death daily

with nothing seemingly done by the government to end it (Abati, 2020; Kumolu, 2020). In ancient Israel's experiences of calamities, lament was integral to their worship life; and the book of psalms features laments of both individuals and the community (Westermann, 1981, p. 263). Lament psalms are prayers of appeals, complaints, and pleas addressed to God for intervention. It is important to note that apart from mourning, several times the psalmists lament comes in form of a protest in the face of injustice, persecution by enemies, individual and communal disaster. Rightly viewed, lament psalms are models of prayer composed for the generic needs of the people of God, providing worshipers with a framework to interpret their own experiences and to guide their expressions of prayers.

However, Suderman observes that by thedescription of lament as involving two parties: God and the supplicant, its social element is not adequately acknowledged. He argues further that the social address to the broader community moves lament from an individual encounter with the divine into a profoundly social context that highlights the significance of a listening community committed to hear such cries and discern a faithful response (2012: 214). Suderman' argument reechoes Herman's claims that remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.

Succeeding scholars have continued to toe the lines of Suderman. Harrichand for instance opines that lament is firstly the beginning of giving voice and/or language to those who weep in silence, even those whose voices have been muted. Secondly, he sees lament as the beginning of the process of hope for the return of God's voice and with it his favor towards those in distress in both this lifetime and the next (2014–2015:102). Dike (2020: 37) rightly classified imprecation as a sub-type of lament Psalms describing lament as a tool for calling for divine justice in the face of the injustices of life. This way, lament provides a platform for the silenced hurting individuals and communities to express and voice out life's distresses.

Dickie in recent research explains that the loss of lament in the modern church has had serious consequences, including a lack of compassion for pain-bearers, the failure to challenge injustice, and essentially the loss of the church's mission: bringing hope into pain (2021:1). The use of church here is necessitated by the fact that the Old Testament is a Judeo-Christian literature and does not limit the concept of lament to the Jewish and Christian circles.

With the background of a social context to the use of lament psalms, it becomes necessary to introduce a clearly defined sociological perspective to the study. Thus, the following questions arise: is there a sociological theory of religion that aligns with the use of lament being advocated by psalm scholars? How has the Nigerian state fared in governance? How is the Christian community pictured within the present Nigerian governance and why lament must be mobilized by the church?

Using the methodological tool of conceptual review, the paper interrogated the efficacy of the lament from the functionalist perspective of religion. It also examined the challenges of contemporary Nigerian governance posed on the Christian community and analysed why lament should be mobilized by the church.

Biblical Basis for Laments

Contemporary Christian worshipers seem to be losing the biblical ideals of lament as they are encouraged to praise God no matter the circumstances of life. Thus, lament is viewed as an ort of faithlessness. Ideally, lament or complaint is a natural response to pain and suffering.People in different cultures and traditions have used laments in various ways and reasons. The reality of lament in human experience does not however, explain the rationale for Christian lament. It becomes necessary to survey the biblical basis for lament in contemporary Christianity especially in the Nigerian context. by‘biblical’ here does not simply answer the question of whether the word ‘lament’ is found in the Bible but the theological perspectives to lament. Specifically for ancient Israel, lament is petitionary, a call to God to act on behalf of the psalmist and grant relieve from the experience of misery and distress. These appeals are either made on the basis of God's personality and reputation as a saving Godor on the basis of the supplicant’s innocence.

Studying the psalms from the form critical approach reveals different genres, including the lament- individual and communal.The fundamental structure of lament whether of individual or community includes: An address to God; description of complaint, request for God’s intervention and expression of trust in God. However, since the foci of this paper is on the use of lament psalms as a tool of communal cohesion. By communal lament, this category is believed to have been uttered during times of national or communal disasters. They are situated within some type of special festival set aside for lamentation with a common feature of rehearsal of the history between God and his people, often citing God’s mighty deeds in the past as a motivation for God to arouse from his

seeming silence and deliver his people. A typical example of communal lament is Psalm 44. Verses 22-26 is here presented:

22 Yet for your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.
23 Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
24 Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?
25 We are brought down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
26 Rise up and help us;
rescue us because of your unfailing love.

Going by the structure of lament psalms, this section of 44:22-26 will fall into 'request for divine intervention.' From the previous verses, God had been invoked and distress had been described. The protest of their innocence not minding the hopelessness of the imagery employed in their narrative clearly shows that this distressing community is faithful and God is not intervening. Thus, to draw the hand of God to their prevailing circumstances, the people throw it back at God saying, "…for your sake we face death all day long… Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" Thus, his lack of intervention makes God responsible for their misery. At a glance, one may question the rightness of this kind of prayer describing God as inactive and even presenting him as a sleepy God, thereby reechoing the scoffs of Elijah on Mt Carmel toward Baal. It is noted that representations of *'sleeping deity,'are found in other texts in the ancient Near East (*deClaissé-Walford & Tanner: 2014, 414*).*To presume that God is asleep sounds blasphemous in Christian thought as it is consistently affirmed that God definitely does not slumber or sleep (Psa 121:3). If not, what then is the case here?In his exegesis of the text, Edgecombe (2017) observes, that the scenario here demonstrates God's tolerance towards people under pressure. As such, while the tone is essentially faithful, it is clearly bewildered and frustratedhence, the questions 'Where are you?' "Why do you sleep?" "Why do you hide your face?"

Placed in proper context, what seems to be at stake here is the living experiences of the people fail to match the believed promises and purposes of God.Could it have been faith and pleasing to God if the people simply accept their pain as the will of God and live with it? Again, Edgecombe opines that God preserves a prayer where people get right to the edge of faith, challenging God on why

He is absent in their time of need to affirm his acceptance and willingness to engage in such dialogue. Futato has this to say:

> When we experience mysterious suffering in the service of the Kingdom, let us take full advantage of the freedom God has given us in Psalm 44, freedom to honestly admit our perplexity, to lament our situation, and to pray for help, depending all the while on God's unfailing love (2009:164).

It is also worthy of note that lament prayers are not limited to the psalter but found throughout the Bible. Below are some examples of lament in other books of the Bible:

2 Chronicles 20:12 "We are powerless before this vast multitude that comes against us. We are at a loss what to do, hence our eyes are turned toward you."

Job 3,11"Why did I not perish at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?"Note that while the book of Lamentations he main character in the book of Job battles with the concept of theodicy which continues to haunt humanity, it alsopresents the main character's honest interaction with God and resilient to hold in tension his beliefs about God with his experience of God (Dickie, 2019:2).

Jeremiah 15:18 "Why is my pain continuous, my wound incurable…?"

Habakkuk 3:16 "…my legs tremble beneath me. I await the day of distress that will come upon the people who attack us."

Mark 10:47 – the cry from Bartimaeus, the blind beggar; "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!"

Mark 14:36 – Jesus' own lament at the garden of Gethsemane; "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me…." On the cross Jesus prayed his own psalm of lament 22:1; "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me…?"

Hebrews 5:7 – Jesus' ministry could be best described in lament; "who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear …."

From the above examples, these biblical characters including the Lord Jesus Christ had reasons to lament in one occasion or the other. This was not in any way an expression of faithlessness. Far from that,it was faith singing in the midst of sorrow. Hence those who lament are seen trusting their entire being to God in times of God's seemingly absence; and in the midst of confusion and doubt. Moreover, deep in the heart of these laments is a relationship with God that can be depended on. He is viewed as a personal God and

this forms the basis for the invocation to intervene. Apart from the personal relationship, His characteristics also form part of the basis for faith as the supplicants trusted in his faithfulness, justice, righteousness, loving kindness among others.

Lament Tradition and Functionalist Theory of Religion

Thus far, it is clear that in lament, individuals or communities in the Bible give voice to the pains. By so doing, situations of suffering are described. Who knows, apart from God, who will hear the cries and come to their rescue. Social cohesion has been found to be one of the functions of religion in the society. For instance, functionalism has been described as a value consensus theory hence, functionalists perceive of religion as a positive apparatus in the society which promotes social solidarity and allows society to run smoothly. Functionalists express interest in the social and psychological functions that religion performs for the individual and society. They maintain that religion helps to create social order and uphold value system. Among the key functionalists, this paper is interested in two – Durkheim and Malinowski (Sociology Saviour: 2015).

In his analysis, Durkheim appealed that religion creates divide into the sacred and the profane. The sacred are things consecrated or forbidden often surrounded with taboos and prohibitions. The profane are ordinary things with no special significance. The significance of the object however, is what they symbolise – these he describes as Totems (a representative symbol). In religious life, the totems are a collective consciousness - a basic set of shared beliefs, norms and values which make social life possible. Without these, society would disintegrate. He argued that a regular shared religious rituals reinforce the collective conscience and maintain social integration. Participation reminds members that they are part of a single moral community.

Malinowski approaches religion from the anthropological perspectives. Being in solidarity with Durkheim, holds that religion promotes cohesion by providing psychological functions that enable individuals with emotional stress that would otherwise lead to social instability. He situates his claims in the use of a ritual to give people a sense of control in uncertain or difficult scenarios. Examples include; praying for a sick family member/ a member of the armed forces. Malinowski further observes how religion can support and help adherents to deal with issues that cause emotional stress and tension.

The Concept of Governance

The terms “government” and “governance” are mostly used in dictionaries interchangeably as designating the exercise of authority in organisations, institutions or states. However, while government connotes the exercise of authority, governance is concerned with the sound exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority to manage a country’s resources for development. It includes the institutionalization of a system through which citizens, institutions, organizations, and groups in a society articulate their interests, exercise their rights, and mediate their differences in pursuit of the collective good (Country Governance Assessment 2005). USAID (1998) emphasizes further that in governance, citizens have the right to be concerned with a government’s responsiveness to their needs and protection of their rights.

From the above descriptions, it can be deduced that governance impliesgovernment’s ability to develop an efficient, transparent, productive, and accountable public administrative process in government process that ensures inclusive participation of the people.Important to the understanding of governance is the World Bank’s (2010:3) presentation on the Worldwide Governance Indicators to include the following:

i. Voice and Accountability. This captures the extent citizens of a country are
able to participate in selecting their leadership, and expresses their freedom in terms of expression, association and use of media.

ii. Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism. By this, a scenario is captured in which the government is not likely to be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including politically-motivated violence and terrorism. Within the same scope is the ability of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies.

iii. Government Effectiveness. This features the quality of public services, the quality
of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies.

iv. Regulatory Quality. This showcases the ability of the government to formulate and
implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development.The respect of

citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them.

v. Rule of Law. As an indicator, rule of law captures the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence.

vi. Control of Corruption. This indicator is concerned with how public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption.

Put differently, the UN. ESCAP (2009) lists eight major characteristics of good governance; including: participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. Stating that good governanceguaranteesminimal corruption, minorities' views taken into consideration and the voices of the most vulnerable in society heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society.

Placing the indicators and characteristics of good governance side by side, bad governance will connotea process of government that is corrupt, lacks openness and accountability, arbitrary in policymaking, and the deception of the citizenry. In fact, the opposite of what good governance means and stands for.

The Christian Community and Governance in Contemporary Nigeria

With the present realities on ground, it will be difficult to score Nigeria good in terms of good governance. A careful application of the worldwide governance indices for instance, no doubt, Nigeria is governed by democratically elected leaders at all levels of governance, yet the country is struggling to institutionalise democracy after more than fifty years of existence as a political entity. Visible roadblocks to a viable democracy in Nigerian governance include the lack of transparent electoral system, political instability and Violence/Terrorism. The government has showcased great sense of ineffectiveness in terms of security of life and property in the country. It has been demonstrated that a good number of churches have become grooming ground for attacks, which is worsened by government failure to protect life and property (Enweonwu and others (2021). SBM Intelligence (2022), a Nigeria-based research firm reports the killing of 896 Nigerian civilians in attacks by extremist Islamic militants within the first quarter of the year 2022. Open Doors (2022) have rightly observed that while the violence affects everyone in Nigeria, Christians are often particular

targets because of their faith. It is important also to state that the paper is concerned with the Christian community in Nigeria as part of the world's recognized users of the book of psalm. Thus, the question of mobilizing the same faith in the face of extermination especially as the government seems incapacitated in the challenge of insecurity. It is worthy of note that the government is doing a lot in terms of security, however, some scholars are of the view that the efforts of the government have not yielded enough positive result (Uhunmwuangho&Aluforo: 2011; Achumba, Ighomereho&Akpor-Robaro: 2013).

Moreover, it has been rightly observed that in lament supplicants do not only bemoan distressful emotions but give voices to their silent sufferings. One's experience will always be better told by the person in question. As such, Dickie (2021:) has listed the consequences for undermining the use of lament in the modern church to include: a lack of compassion for pain-bearers, the failure to challenge injustice, and essentially the loss of the church's mission: bringing hope into pain. By her assertations, a particular local assembly does not need to be affected before raising a cry before God concerning the lamentable situation of another local church that has been attacked. Crying according to her is not only a demonstration of the Christian call to mourn with the mourning, but a way of challenging the government structures that seem to promote insecurity thereby bring hope into distress.

Lament Psalms and the Christian Community in Nigeria

From the functionalist perspectives, Christian worship has the ideal of a regular shared religious ritual which reinforce the collective conscience and maintain social integration.The lament as a ritualistic element works in the functionalist assessment providing religious adherents religion psychological functions that enable individuals with emotional stress that would otherwise lead to depression and social instability to cope with the circumstances of life. What exactly should the church do with the lament psalms in situations of crisis? Rightly viewed, the Psalms themselves are model for Christian worship. When faced with an utter loss of words and an oversupply of volatile emotions, the reliable and profoundly relevant laments of the Hebrew scriptures become the option. This strategy exploits the most salient features of the Psalter.

As Mowinckel hinted, the psalms of lament were likely composed ad hoc, for occasional festivals or times of crisis. Brueggemann has observed that the Psalms arise out of deteriorating situations of life, and out of the extremities of life and faith; the same context as contemporary communities in distress. By the

lament, the urgency expected of prayer is obvious presenting specific petition: heal us, free us, save us. This is in agreement with Westermann (1981: 266), that lamentation has no meaning in and of itself if it does not necessarily leadto petition.

Lament prayer ends with expressions of hope, confidence, and trust, no matter how pressing the situation may seem. No doubt, it may not be possible to sing praise in times of crisis. Yet the supplicant anticipates praise, even as the community yearns for the resolution of the crisis.

It therefore only expediate that experienced worship leaders or novices would benefit from rehearsing in private studies the practice of formulating prayer according to biblical models. The wordings of biblical lamentwith its passionate plea and lament against God; having a genuine and sensitive match between expression and experience can help to shape congregational prayers. The result translates into what Malinowski has noted in terms of religion being able topromotes cohesion, support and help adherents to deal with issues that cause emotional stress and tension such as births and deaths.

It should be recalled that on June 5, 2022 St. Francis Catholic Church, Owa-luwa Street, Owo, Ondo State was believed to have been attacked by members of the Islamic State of the West African Province (Daily Post, August 11, 2022). As a result of the attack, traditional worshippers of Ogun in Owo council area of Ondo State, planned to conduct an open ritual to curse the terrorists. The women in Owo Local Government Area of Ondo state, also staged a protest on Tuesday 7th June 2022, to mourn victims of the shooting at Saint Francis Catholic Church, Owo. Thus, armed with knives and leaves, the protesters performed traditional rites at the market, invoking the god of Iron (Ogùn) to go after the assailants as they also rained curses on the gunmen (Akinlotan and Ogundapo (2022). The traditional worshipers' approach to the attack has well been illustrated in the functionalists thought as the function of religion.

In response to the same terrorist attack on Owo Catholic Church, the Christian Association of Nigeria called on the Federal Government to enact a law permitting individuals to carry firearms, met with the security agencies and encouraged members to be more security conscious (Punch, June 12, 2022). Seen from the perspectives of the functionalist theory, the primary tool at the disposal of the Christian community in Nigeria is her rituals – in this case lament. The ritual of prayers and in this context communal lament to raise the platform of expressing the griefs and agonies occasioned by the toll of deaths. Both the functionalists and psalm scholars believe that such prayer rituals have a way ofcushioning the

effect of unexplained disaster. Those who suffer in this instance would have a feeling of solidarity seeing the Christian community in Nigeria is solidly beside them in their grieve.

Recall also that as usual, the Nigerian government promised to bring the perpetrators of this heinous act to book with no one being brought to book. Incidentally too, CAN seems not to be interested in justice maybe because it is not envisaged. But why not invoke divine justice if the earthly proves impossible? a lament by the Christian community would have served a tool for calling for divine justice and even a means of telling the world her stories of deaths and dying. Who knows who would hear and come to their help?

Conclusion.

Thus far, the study has examined the justification for the Christian community in Nigeria to take up lament in response to the life-threatening security challenges emanating from bad governance. The paper discovered that lament as a ritualistic element works according to the functionalist assessment in providing religious adherents psychological functions that enable individuals with emotional stress that could otherwise lead to depression and social instability to cope with the circumstances of life. However, the paper reveals that the church in Nigeria seems so silent in the midst of deaths and dying. Why the trust in God if He cannot be mobilized in the face of life's danger?Or what is the evidence of trust in God if the church cannot call on him to make good his promises? The paper discovered that communal praying of lament psalms in the face of national disaster is able to provide asharing platform where the distressed expresses pain by composing their distresses. Thus, the work maintains the efficacy of lament in initiating a healing process, strengthening communal bonds and eliciting the hope of restoration in the Nigerian situation.

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