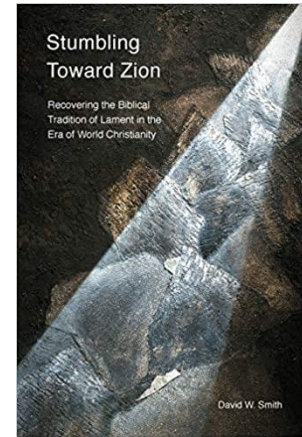


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Stumbling Toward Zion – Recovering the Biblical
Tradition of Lament in the Era of World
Christianity

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Central issue of this book: 'Can we hope that a still-emerging world Christianity will grow into a multi-cultural community united in a new form of catholicism and characterized by the practice of a biblical pattern of spirituality in which the interaction between praise and lament sustains the hope of *shalom* for a still broken and bleeding world?'

Preface

Stimulus was death of his wife. But 'I have come to realize that the theme of lament is of far wider significance... All my work has been concerned with the struggle to discern the nature of the still-emerging paradigm of Christian identity and testimony in a time of massive change and uncertainty, and it has become ever more obvious to me that the transformation demanded of Christianity today involves far more than structural and organizational changes. It related above all to fundamental issues concerning Christian identity and the outworking of the core values which flow from our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord.' Xiv

'The following pages contain some radical criticisms of contemporary expressions of the Christian faith, and especially what seems to me to be the triumphalism and complacency of so much public worship in the churches of Europe and North America. The one-sided emphasis on celebration not only ignores the suffering, struggles and doubts of people within congregations, so increasing their distress by making them feel guilty that they are unable to join the party, but, even more seriously, it suppresses knowledge of the rises threatening the very survival of our world and so undermines the credibility of faith in the eyes of suffering people who are searching for genuine hope... There is need for radical transformation in contemporary Christianity, especially in the Western world.'

In the Majority world 'The lament remains very much alive, both because it expresses the anguish and trauma which is so often part of everyday experience... and because it gives birth to the *hope* of transformation, of the coming of justice, mercy and peace. If Christianity in its former heartlands is to recover credibility it is imperative that it hears the cries of the members of the body of Christ across the Majority World, and responds to them in solidarity, growing militancy and in its own recovery of the biblical tradition of the prayer of lament.' Xv

1. Recovering a lost biblical tradition

Author's experiences on missionary service in Nigeria, returning to Scotland aware that his theology had no answers for the issues raised. Read Davidson on *The Courage to Doubt*, and the lament texts of the Bible began to explode for him. How could the western Christian community seem so happy, in a world so troubled?

Westermann on the Psalms: it is an illusion to suppose that: 'there can be a relationship with God in which there was only praise and never lamentation. Just as joy and sorrow in alternation are part of the finitude of human existence (Gen 2-3), so praise and lamentation are part of man's relationship to God. Hence, something must be amiss if praise of God has a place in Christian worship but lamentation does not. Praise can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentation. (p267).

Davidson asks why we say such an emphatic no to this element of Israel's hymnbook – when we find just such a lament on the lips of Jesus on the cross? And when our churches are full of people who have radical doubts about some of their traditional certainties, who are crushed by the bitter reality of evil in their lives, who find it hard to affirm the presence of God in their experience, who have ceased to pray since they meet only with silence, people who still ask the psalmists' questions – why? How long?

'The biblical tradition of lament has receded ever further from the worshipping and devotional life of the churches in the West, lost and largely forgotten as the onrushing tide of postmodernism has left us with new forms of Christianity which focus almost exclusively on celebration and victory and appear to interpret the gospel as a kind of therapy for

the satisfaction of personal needs and desires. Beyond, and very likely *within*, this distinctively contemporary form of religion there remain aching hearts and a host of people in an ever-increasing fringe who have profound and important questions and how must either suppress these in order to retain credibility within the believing community or turn elsewhere in the quest for sympathetic and understanding listeners who will take their sense of the *ambiguities* of faith seriously.' ... 'The prayer of lament is neither marginal within the biblical tradition, nor is it superseded in the New Testament, left behind as an archaic form of Jewish religion once the light of the world has shone upon us.' 6. Easter Sunday does not obliterate the memory of Good Friday or Easter Saturday.

2. The Testimony of biblical Israel

Visit to Pakistan, and speaking from Job. The book describes the external reality of the tragic events which devastated Job's life – 'but it then proceeds to bring to the surface the *private and internal anguish* which is the inevitable result of such tragedies... This is the phenomenon we have come to describe as *trauma*, the deep internal wounding of the spirit and the emotions as the pain of loss undermines previously secure and stable beliefs and can drive the sufferer to the brink of a precipice of despair and meaninglessness.' 14

Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori wrote, after Hiroshima, a book called *Theology of the Pain of God* (SCM 1966). Bonhoeffer had written that 'only a suffering God can help'; Kitamori wrote:

God in the gospel is the One who resolves our pain and the Lord who heals our wounds. This means that he is our "Savior." What is salvation? **Salvation is the message that our God enfolds our broken reality.** A God who embraces us completely - this is God our Savior. Is there a more astonishing miracle in the world than that God embraces our broken reality? Our reality is utterly and hopelessly broken. Yet the gospel brings us the message of "hope even for the hopeless" - yea, rather, "hope only for the hopeless." Those who believe this gospel believe against their own hope (Rom. 4:18). This all-embracing God resolves our pain and heals our wounds. Accordingly, the pain of God which resolves our pain is "love" rooted in his pain." 17

He found the evidence in the incarnation and death of Jesus; it's already anticipated in Job. 'If the book of Job reveals the depths of the spiritual crisis which can arise for an individual in the face of unbearable personal suffering, Lamentations reflects the impact of a terrible catastrophe which has overwhelmed an entire community. In this respect, these two neglected biblical books parallel the distinction between personal and communal laments in the book of Psalms.' 17

Brueggemann (on Jeremiah) notes how the managers of the status quo imagine that there is no illness, threat will soon disappear, God loves rather than judges, the threat will soon disappear, the economy is almost back to normal, religion needs to be affirmative, and things will hold together if we all hug each other (*Hopeful Imagination* 1986). To this we may add our modern belief that science and technology will provide solutions to all human ills and lead us toward a world of ever-increasing human happiness. As Robin Perry observes (*Lamentations*, 2010), we are averse to pain and tragedy; we seek to insulate ourselves against life's vicissitudes. Result – we have lost a vocabulary of grief. Lamentations offers us a poetry of pain. We would be wise, Perry says, to pay attention. 22

3. The Testimony of the Jesus Movement

Tom Wright describes the cross as 'the moment when something *happened* as a result of which the world became a different place, inaugurating God's future plan.' The NT creates a new context for faith by affirming the identification of God's power with God's love in the crucifixion of Jesus. But we still live in the real world of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

Hengel (*Crucifixion*): 'the earliest Christian message of the crucified messiah demonstrated the "solidarity" of the love of God with the unspeakable suffering of those who were tortured and put to death by human cruelty... This suffering has continued down to the present century in a "passion story" which we cannot even begin to access... which is based on human sin in which we all without exception participate.'

Alan Lewis (*Between Cross & Resurrection*), notes that Easter Saturday is not a day of waiting, but 'an empty void, a nothing, shapeless, meaningless, and anticlimactic: simply the day after the end.' It contained no suggestion that triumph and vindication lay just around the corner. It's a day which bears huge theological significance, for the death of God has become the new normal for millions in a postmodern, globalized world. It was a day of atheism.

'Does that not suggest the existence of a vital point of contact between the gospel and a culture built on the foundation of atheism?' The Enlightenment began a process which resulted in serious questions for Christian theology; Nietzsche understood that God was dead, viz that 'belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable'.

The tragedy of modern Western culture is that it compels people to live in Easter Saturday. We live in a broken world but it's our world too, and we share in its pain.

4. The Witness of Paul: Ecstasy and Agony

Romans 7 is one of the few NT texts to echo the lament. We can read it not simply as Paul's own experience, but with an eye to the context in which he lived and worked; in which the counter-cultural message of the cross was spoken into a world governed by an imperial power with quite other values. He was imprisoned many times and for long periods. He was presumably charged with treason, which carried the death penalty. Philippians, written from (and read by the authorities in) Rome, was subversive, promoting values far from those of the empire – eg on sexuality.

5. Speaking of God

'Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt omnipotence made God incomplete' – GK Chesterton. Lament seeks to initiate a dialogue with heaven; it voices doubt and questions the relationship between the Almighty and the recurrent tragedies in human history. Lament moves the practice of prayer beyond a passive acceptance of whatever life brings upon us and raises questions which require answers.

Maybe the God who died (Nietzsche) is the God of our own theology – the omnipotent God, the one who became fixed in our minds as a response to the influence of Greek thought – and not the God of the Bible. The Bible clearly permits the questioning of God's justice and competence. 'Western theology became trapped within a tradition which had parted company with the biblical narrative at certain critical points.' The form of theism we had adopted became increasingly incredible in the face of world wars and genocides. Dutch theologian JC Hoekendijk (*The Church Inside Out*, SCM 1967) quotes a returned POW:

'There is a preacher talking from behind the pulpit. We don't understand him. A glass cover has been put over the pulpit. This smothers all sound. Around the pulpit our contemporaries are standing. They too talk, and they call. But on the inside this is not understood. The glass cover smothers all sound. Thus, we still see each other talk, but we don't understand each other anymore.'

'Could there be a more vivid picture of the breakdown in communication between a church deploying theological language which had become tired and devoid of relevance and a generation recovering from the traumas of mechanized warfare, asking serious questions which went largely unheard or misunderstood?' 77

Lost in translation. Scott Ellington: Among the most significant Greek ideas to reshape Christian thought and belief the philosophical concept of perfection implied the absence of change, and when God came to be perceived through these cultural and philosophical lenses his character began to be understood in ways which were very different from the testimonies of the Hebrew prophets. Whatever else Nietzsche intended, it was true that the image of a God whose primary attribute was omnipotent power had become unbelievable.

We must get back in touch with the suffering of God. The dead god is not the covenantal Lord known to the Hebrew prophets, to Jesus and to Paul. We are rediscovering a God who knew suffering and weakness. Jewish scholars point out that the OT confirms that from the creation onwards, through covenant and exile, God has always been profoundly engaged with humankind and its history, deeply moved by a broken relationship, and shares the anguish of those who remain faithful to him. Scholars from Asia, Africa and Latin America, whose contexts owe little to the ancient Graeco-Roman world, read the Bible through different cultural lenses, and in contexts often marked by deep suffering.

How can we do otherwise than speak to our suffering world of a suffering God? Moltmann, writing after imprisonment in a POW camp, said that the real crisis of Christianity in the 20th is not a choice between assimilation to the culture shaped by modernity or retreat to a religious ghetto in which a conservative form of faith might be preserved, but rather it consisted in 'the crisis of its own existence as the church of the crucified Christ'. The future of W Christianity would be determined by whether the crucified Christ is a stranger to it or the Lord who determines the form of its existence. 85

'The symbol of the cross in the church points to the God who was crucified not between two candles on an altar, but between two thieves in the place of the skull, where the outcasts belong, outside the gates of the city... It is a symbol which therefore leads out of the church and out of religious longing into the fellowship of the oppressed and abandoned. On the other hand, it is a symbol which calls the oppressed and godless into the church and through the church into the fellowship of the crucified God.' Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, SCM 1974.

The emergence of world Christianity has, among many other significant changes, resulted in the renewed prominence in worship and prayer of the biblical lament. New forms were shaped by African-American slaves. Lament has reappeared in sub-Saharan Africa – and see Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*. 'What we encounter in lament is not simply a silent God but a suffering and vulnerable God' – Emmanuel Katangole, *Born from Lament* (Eerdmans 2017).

'However, the loss of lament has significance beyond the spiritual and theological realms since when oppressed and suffering peoples articulate their distress in poetry and song, the earthly powers who benefit from the existing structures of political and economic power become extremely nervous. Where lament falls silent, drowned out by the noise of celebration, those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death must hold their tongues and join in praise which they know to be inauthentic. 41 At the same time, the powers that be can rest assured that religion can be viewed as an ally since it appears to be incapable of voicing opposition to injustice and oppression. In Brueggemann's words, "A community of faith that negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise.' (his article 'The Costly Loss of Lament', in *The Psalms* ed Patrick Miller, Fortress 1995). 95

And finally, the loss of lament is linked to the culture of modernity and the myths of historical progress through the onward march of science and technology which underlie it.

6. Biblical Lament and the Future for World Christianity

Slavoj Zizek describes three versions of Christianity: Orthodoxy (shaped by John; Eastern), Catholicism (shaped by Peter; Western), Protestantism (shaped by Paul, Northern). To this we might add a fourth, World Christianity (shaped by Jesus, Southern).

Central issue of this book: '**Can we hope that a still-emerging world Christianity will grow into a multi-cultural community united in a new form of catholicism and characterized by the practice of a biblical pattern of spirituality in which the interaction between praise and lament sustains the hope of *shalom* for a still broken and bleeding world?**' 107. For this to happen, Christians in the West will need to learn from those in the Majority World, beginning with an understanding of the interrelatedness of our world and the social, cultural and economic consequences of the security and prosperity which they have so long taken for granted.

'The life of Jesus reproduces and makes visible on the stage of human history the Hebrew pattern of lament, of cries of distress in a broken world, and the response in the form of divine healing and deliverance, which then triggers outbursts of praise and joy and the creation of a new community.' 108.

The Psalms of lament are capable of meeting specific pastoral needs in situation in which suffering threatens to overwhelm faith and destroy the meaning of life itself. Our society is dominated by anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness (cf art). And yet our culture is fixed on the meaningfulness of progress, and on happiness. So we deny the reality of suffering, forcing despair and fear beneath the surface. 'A Christianity which allows no place for either private or public lament consequently becomes complicity in this tragic denial and thereby contributes to a cover-up which deepens the hidden pain of those who suffer.' 110. Instead, our churches are places where people feel constrained to be even more hidden than usual...

Sometimes there are no answers - Ps 88.

Shostakovich found inspiration for his 7th Symphony (written during the siege of Leningrad) 'having been deeply moved by the psalms of David'. He never professed faith; but the message of the psalms helped him express both grief and hope.

'I propose that.. the pattern of praise and lament which we have seen to be embedded within the biblical tradition must become a core part of [our] spirituality, worship, theology and .. identity.' As Moltmann observes, the resurrection of Jesus is not merely a consolation in a life full of distress and doomed to die, but also God's contradiction of suffering and death, of humiliation and offence, and of the wickedness of evil.