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Book Reviews

Where is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible. By Joel S. Burnett. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 287.

Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation. By Nancy C. Lee. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010. Pp. xi + 255.

Both books under review in this essay—Joel S. Burnett's *Where is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible* and Nancy C. Lee's *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation*—deal with issues related to suffering and the response of human beings to the experience of suffering. Burnett's work focuses on the theme of divine absence in the Hebrew Bible as a whole, a source of anxiety and suffering in the biblical text. Lee's book builds on her previous work in the area of lament, which is one manner of response to the experience of suffering that results from a sense of divine absence. Each author approaches the issue of human suffering from a different vantage point, yet each author's argument reinforces the other's. Both are fine pieces of scholarship, deserving of attention from specialists yet also accessible to interested non-specialists.

Burnett begins his book with a description of an irony of the biblical text: though the biblical text is a collection of traditions that reflect the many ways human beings have encountered God, God is rarely actually encountered and more often sought. As Burnett writes, "Scenes of theophany or deliverance, while vivid and pivotal in their importance, are the exception in the Bible" (vii). Most of the time, the characters of the Bible pursue, ask, pray, inquire, and speak about the divine outside of God's actual presence. Indeed, several biblical books deal directly with the subject of God's absence (Lamentations, Job, and many Psalms, for instance). Burnett's goal is to make the absence of God, rather than the presence of God, the lens through which to read the biblical text, put the absent God center stage, and give this major biblical theme its due.

Burnett acknowledges that the theme of divine absence is not a new discovery, but rather a familiar theological and interpretive problem that has been addressed by previous scholars. Specifically, Burnett addresses Samuel Terrien's book, *The Elusive Presence*, which is one of the most significant works in the recent past that attempted to interpret the theme of divine absence. Burnett's work builds upon and responds to previous treatments, and also adds new depth to the issue in a number of important ways. Terrien, according to Burnett's construal, generally frames the absence of God positively as an articulation of God's power, mystery, and freedom (2). This interpretation has been developed and balanced by later authors who note the less positive

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aspects of God's absence for the divine-human relationship. More important for Burnett's project is another of Terrien's arguments that has largely gone unchallenged by scholars dealing with this issue of divine absence. Terrien attempted to locate the theme of divine absence in the broader cultural context of the ancient Near East, but concluded that the absent God of the Hebrew Bible was a unique element found only in Israelite religion. Burnett takes his cue from Terrien's initial attempts to locate this theme in the ancient Near East, yet Burnett comes to vastly different conclusions about the uniqueness of this theme to Israelite religion. For Burnett,

"[t]he perception of the deity's absence is an experience that ancient Israel clearly shared with its Near Eastern neighbors and forebears" (3). One of the most valuable elements of Burnett's project is that he recognizes the broader cultural interest in the theme of divine absence and interprets the Israelite expression of this theme within that context.

Burnett addresses his theme of divine absence in three main ways. The first section of the book, "Relational Worlds," examines the structures of the human-divine relationship in the Hebrew Bible. As Burnett notes, the theme of divine absence is understood as a "crisis of relationship" (14) in the Hebrew Bible; this helps to explain the importance of the theme and the anxiety and sorrow that often accompany expression of the perception of God's absence. Burnett explores the relational underpinnings of the portrayal of divine absence and sets up the significance of that theme in the context of those relational assumptions. He uses the increasingly important concept of patronage to interpret the relational framework of the divine-human interaction in the Hebrew Bible. This patronage model of relationship serves as a frame for the divine-human relationship and makes that relationship intelligible according to the social and political ideologies of the ancient Near East. Patronage provided certain roles to God (the patron) and to humans (the clients), offered ways for repairing perceived disruptions in the relationship, and also elucidates the importance of relational tools in the Hebrew Bible—such as covenant, kinship language for the divine/human relationship, as well as naming patterns in the Hebrew Bible that reflect the experience of divine absence.

The second section, "Boundaries of Divine Presence and Absence in the World," examines the spatial conception of the divine-human relationship. As Burnett describes, "The question 'Where?' frames matters of divine-human relationships and God's involvement in the world in terms of spatial existence" (59). Burnett responds to the biblical question about "where" God is by exploring the cosmology of the ancient Near East. In the Bible and in the broader ancient Near Eastern context, might it be the case that divine absence is not a failure of the divine-human relationship but signifies a more fundamental issue regarding the very construction of the world itself? Is divine absence in the structure of creation? In fact, Burnett concludes, there are some places (the realm of death, for instance) where Israel's God is not present; God is not everywhere in the Hebrew Bible. This attention to the spatial construction of the divine-human relationship attempts to answer that repeated biblical and, as Burnett makes clear, also widely shared ancient Near Eastern question: Where is God? Again,

Burnett balances a tendency to emphasize the presence of God in the structure of the world with the recognition that God's distance and the resulting sense of abandonment is a much more developed theme in the Hebrew Bible, one that is in the structure of creation itself.

The third section, "The Center of Divine Presence and Absence on Earth," also pursues the question of God's presence and absence spatially, this time with a more focused treatment of the role of Jerusalem as the geographic center for the narrative and prophetic treatment of God's presence and/or absence. While the second section features texts from Wisdom Literature and Psalms, this third section focuses on the historical narratives of the Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, as well as those prophetic books dealing with exile. In these texts, Jerusalem is the historical and geographical location of God's presence and, of course, with the Babylonian destruction and exile, the issue of God's absence comes to the fore in a most painful way: "In the Hebrew Bible, the Babylonian exile turns Jerusalem from the terrestrial center of divine presence to a place of acute divine absence" (172). This section extends Burnett's exploration of the theme of divine absence into another area of the corpus, and places the biblical interpretation(s) of the exile within his larger framework.

Burnett's intention to read the theme of divine absence in the context of the ancient Near Eastern context is one of the most helpful and illuminating aspects of this book that is frequently helpful and illuminating. One of the most specific elements of this culturally cued reading of a biblical theme is the succinct and clear description of the patron-client relational culture that so readily informs many of the thematic elements of the biblical texts that Burnett describes. The effect of combining our increasingly subtle knowledge of the ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu with familiar theological questions enlivens and enriches the study of biblical theology. This is a book that should be regularly assigned in biblical theology courses, both for the persuasive nature of Burnett's arguments and for the important methodological contributions he makes to the practice of interpreting and developing biblical theology.

What emerges from Burnett's effort to place divine absence at the forefront of the reader's mind when reading the biblical narrative is an important reassessment of previous attempts by biblical theologians to emphasize divine presence. Burnett does not sweep aside the reality of divine absence in the biblical text, but brings it into relief as one of the primary ways that human beings experience God. We may celebrate and memorialize those moments of encounter with God, but, as Burnett states, "an intense experience of God's absence deserves to be taken seriously" (178).

Nancy Lee's book is a poetic and creative treatment of the lament genre in the Abrahamic Faiths (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and the various ways it has been adopted and adapted in modern communities. One key element of Lee's thesis is that the lament tradition offers powerful ways of dealing with trauma, oppression, and suffering through expression of that pain before God. Lee herself laments the loss of lament in modern forms of worship that tend to move the worshipper toward praise before the full expression of grief is invited and allowed. This book is an attempt to

demonstrate the utility of the lament genre in the context of worship for processing grief and pain. One senses a deeply passionate authenticity in Lee's examination of the lament texts she has collected from all over the world. Her earnest conviction is that there is a practical use for the lament in the restoration of human lives. She strives to connect the impulse that results in the lament song—that is, the desire and the need to express pain—to modern situations of devastation and loss. This is a commendable and relevant piece of scholarship and one that stems from Lee's obvious conviction that lament is highly needed in our modern world and has much to offer as we struggle to heal ourselves from warfare, death, and devastation. Those who work with the scholarship of lament should immerse themselves in this book.

The book is organized in three sections. In the first section, "Lament: Ancient and Contemporary Voices," Lee draws from a wide range of texts that she believes fall into the lament genre, including her own poetry, ancient Sumerian poetry (The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur), Muslim lament, and Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!"

Casting her net far and wide, Lee presents the impulse to lament as a universal phenomenon, a mode of expression grounded in the universal experience of human suffering: "Death and tragedy—for individual, local communities, and nations—have produced laments worldwide" (48). From this foundational claim, Lee describes the features of traditional lament across cultures. One of the most important features of traditional lament, according to Lee, is that it combines traditional elements with innovation. In other words, the genre is built for flexibility, which is one of the reasons is has remained so powerfully relevant for those who suffer across the globe.

The second section, "Lament in the Abrahamic Texts and Contemporary Cultures," draws connections between the lament of the Hebrew Bible and the laments of other religious traditions and cultures, ancient and contemporary. Lee does not argue that the Hebrew lament tradition inspired lament across the globe. Rather, she claims that, for communities and cultures that claim the biblical tradition as sacred, the biblical laments solidified and encouraged the lament traditions of other cultures with which it interacted. According to Lee, the cross-cultural interaction with biblical lament accounts for the wide variety of distinctive elements within a genre that is still recognizable as "lament." This section of the book is a most useful synopsis of various types of lament, narrative and lyrical, in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Moreover, Lee creatively ties the laments of the biblical tradition to features of contemporary expressions of suffering and angst.

The third section, "Lament for Our Time," is where Lee's scholarly and theological voice is strongest and most creative. In this section, Lee addresses problematic issues of adopting and adapting the lament tradition for our current moment. This is no simple project, after all. One of the most important elements of Lee's treatment of the lament genre is that she fully recognizes that the lament genre has contained expressions of violence and vengeance that have contributed to the perpetuation of human tragedy in its own way: "At its core, the biblical lament model is one of appealing to God for help, for sustenance, rescue, and inspiration, especially in the face of suffering and

injustice. Yet even this bedrock is not without its fault lines to which our lives today might make needed adjustments—especially with regard to the troubling elements of vengeance and violence in some texts, implicitly or explicitly joined to God's purpose" (3). Lee confronts the violence that is part of the lament tradition, denying neither her conviction of the genre's healing power nor its often aggressive rhetorical tendencies.

Lee's treatment of the violent tendencies of the lament genre is connected to her understanding of the genre itself as reliant upon innovation and adaptation to specific cultural moments. Importantly, Lee does not argue that we simply have to incorporate the biblical laments into worship practices today; herein lies the truly innovative element of her work. Lee contends that what has to be restored is not particular texts (of the Hebrew tradition or of any other tradition) but the practice of creating lament: "I am convinced that a turning point for a new era among communities of faith and our societies is to go beyond the simple but necessary reaffirmation of the *idea* of lament" (15, author's italics). Lee believes that we actually have to create lament lyrics, use our own words and experiences to create lyrical poetry that will transform pain into empowerment. Lee finds in the living oral tradition process personal and communal empowerment to overcome suffering, for Lee hears in it an invitation to individuals and communities to give expression to the sorrows of tragedy and re-engage a vital element in living faiths all over the world that she feels has been underestimated and ignored.

With regard to troubling or uncomfortable elements of the genre (e.g., violence and revenge), Lee does not recommend a slavish adherence to the tradition but recommends that new creations address the issue of violence and revenge in their new textual creations. This response to the problem of rhetorical violence in the lament genre does not deny the validity of the problem of violent prayer and the potential for perpetuation of violence in that act. Lee does not recommend that new lament creations ignore and excise from their texts the anger and violence that individuals and communities feel when they are wronged. In fact, she does not support any attempt to censure human experience in the context of expression before God. The full range of experience should be included in lament. Rather than censure difficult texts before the community has a chance to interact with the sorrow and anger that produce such violent desires, Lee ultimately bows before the wisdom of each community when it comes to expressions of violence and revenge. Lee's book will be useful in any number of educational contexts, from the undergraduate and seminary classroom to the local church. The book is peppered with poetry from around the world, ancient and modern, and includes poetry from U2 to Elton John, from poets of South Africa to New Orleans. Additionally, Lee has created a companion website containing links to many of the texts included in the book, so that the reader can listen to the text performed or find relevant material for inclusion in course design. This is a helpful tool indeed.

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