

## Empires and Enemies

### *Re-Reading Lament as Politics*

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The biblical lament is a cry for God's help in the midst of distress. Save! Rise up! Hear! Especially in apocalyptic contexts, the lamenter insists—despite the available evidence—that all the nations fall under God's sovereignty and are subject to the justice of the judge of all the earth (Pss. 67:4; 82:8; 94:2; 96:10, 13; 98:9). In the midst of injustice, the lamenter challenges God to act according to God's own character, that is, to bring about justice. In this way, lament is a public expression of protest regarding the way things are, and hope in the way things will be in God's good future. When we read the laments of scripture today in our own political settings, or with our suffering neighbors, we participate in a practice that possesses an inherently political character. Indeed, lament functions as resistance and renarration: resistance to the idea that the oppressor gets the last

word, and a renarration of the present injustice in light of God's inexorable promise of peace and justice for those who suffer (Rev. 21:3-4).

To investigate the claim that reading biblical lament is a Christian political practice, this essay explores the lament of the martyrs under the altar in Revelation against the backdrop of Daniel's lament, which helps to situate the martyrs' lament within the long history of Israel's laments.<sup>1</sup> Both Daniel and Revelation are apocalyptic texts, both use Babylon as a cipher for another political threat, both are embedded within contexts of imperial oppression and communal challenge, and both use lament to call upon God's justice to defeat the oppressor and vindicate God's suffering people. The essay concludes with a brief consideration of the relationship between *reading* biblical lament and *enacting* it through contemporary nonviolent public protests against injustice.

### Enemies and Empires

The enemy is such a defining element of the biblical lament that Claus Westermann calls it one of the three constitutive elements of the lament, alongside God and the lamenter.<sup>2</sup> While the "enemy" could be sickness or slander, Israel's paradigmatic enemy after 587 B.C.E. is Babylon, which in turn becomes a cipher for later enemies, especially Antiochus IV (as in Daniel) and Rome (as in Revelation). The enemy of empire poses a special problem for Israel's identity as God's covenant people, as expressed so eloquently by the pseudonymous author of 4 Ezra: "And now, O Lord, behold, these nations, which are reputed as nothing, domineer over us and devour

1. I am grateful to Stephen Fowl, John Kiess, and Matt Moser for commenting on earlier drafts of this essay.
2. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim (Atlanta: John Knox, 1989), 169.

us. But we your people, whom you have called your first-born, only begotten, zealous for you, and most dear, have been given into their hands” (6:57–58; cf. 3:32, 35b; 5:23–27).

As Israel’s laments over time protested the domination of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, the Seleucids, and Rome, the New Testament authors likewise appropriated lament within their own sociopolitical reality: the Roman Empire as represented by Herod the Great, Caesar Augustus, Quirinius of Syria, the colluding Sadducees and the chief priests (“We have no king but Caesar,” John 19:15), Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate, Nero, Domitian. Inasmuch as Jesus is the Messiah-King who weeps, is abandoned, and is executed as a criminal, lament in the New Testament contributes to the power-reversal inherent in the gospel: the last shall become first; the mourners shall be comforted; the martyrs who lose their lives to the empire shall be vindicated, the mighty emperor thrown down, and the slaughtered Lamb shall ascend his rightful throne.<sup>3</sup> The cry of lament that echoes in the New Testament protests all that is “not yet” about this good news: the last are still last; the emperor still reigns; the faithful are dragged to trial and killed; Christ has not yet returned and creation groans with longing for that day. But the lamenter also trusts in the fulfillment of what God began by taking on flesh in Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

### **Antiochus IV as Babylon: Lament as Resistance in Daniel**

In the Old Testament, Daniel and his companions are the exemplars of faithfulness to God under oppression: they choose death in a fiery

3. Donald Juell argues that the frequent allusions in the passion narrative to the lament psalms, especially Pss. 22 and 69, “contribute to the irony” of a Messiah-King who suffers and dies a shameful death. See Juell, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 97.

4. For a detailed study of the role of lament in the New Testament, especially in relation to Jesus’ laments, see Rebekah Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Lament in the New Testament*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2015).

furnace rather than commit idolatry by worshiping the Babylonian king's golden image. In Dan. 7–12, Daniel receives a series of visions, one of which includes four beasts that correspond to four empires: Babylon, the Medes, the Persians, and finally the Greeks, from which spring the ten “horns” of the Seleucid dynasty. These details prompt scholars to locate the composition of Daniel's latter chapters to the crisis in Judea under the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who in 167 B.C.E. outlawed key Jewish practices (most notably, circumcision) and desecrated the temple by replacing its holy objects with a statue of Zeus. Daniel is thus a symbol of resistance both in exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E. and in occupied Judea 400 years later.

After an especially distressing vision, Daniel prays a lengthy lament, which contains a strong element of penitence for Israel's past sins.<sup>5</sup> First, Daniel fasts in sackcloth and ashes, which are acts of ritual mourning, and then he prays and makes confession to God (9:3–4a). Daniel pleads with God to forgive Judah, Jerusalem, and all Israel for their rebellion (9:5–11), pointing out that God's reputation is at stake, since the city of Jerusalem and the people of Israel both “bear your name” (9:18, 19; cf. 9:16b; Exod. 32:9–14). Daniel concludes with a series of imperative petitions, a common feature of lament: Hear! Forgive! Listen! Act! Do not delay! (9:19).<sup>6</sup>

While Daniel is still praying, the angel Gabriel arrives to explain the vision that had left Daniel appalled in the previous chapter (8:27).

5. Several scholars describe a shift toward penitence in post-exilic prayers: see especially Richard J. Bautch, *Developments in Genre between Post-Exilic Penitential Prayers and the Psalms of Communal Lament*, *Academia Biblica* 7 (Leiden: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Rodney Werline, *Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); and William S. Morrow, *Protest Against God*, *Hebrew Bible Monographs* 4 (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2007).
6. The petition is the heart of the lament, and it typically occurs in the imperative. See, for example, Patrick Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 86–114; James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 28–29.

While the angel provides no easy assurance of the enemy's defeat, his answer declares that God controls and has decreed even these turbulent historical events. Every empire is under the sovereignty of the God of Israel, the judge of all the earth. By laying claim to God as the one who continues to be God of Israel despite Israel's sins, Daniel's lament "contradicts imperial claims to ultimacy," whether those of Babylon or Antiochus, and thus functions as a form of radical hope in the midst of calamity.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Anthea Portier-Young proposes that "the book of Daniel urges Judeans persecuted by Antiochus IV to adopt specific forms of nonviolent resistance," including "persevering in the practices of their faith even at the cost of their lives."<sup>8</sup> Daniel's lament is itself a practice of nonviolent resistance to oppression, as it provides a "recitation of alternative values" and a reshaping of Israel's identity as the people of God.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the lament of the martyrs in Revelation renarrates the apparent triumph of the Roman Empire and represents one form of resistance to imperial demands to abandon God and worship the emperor's idols instead.

### **Rome as Babylon: Lament as Resistance in Revelation**

If Daniel is implicitly or by application a text of encouragement to a suffering community, Revelation is explicitly an exhortation, directly addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor. Revelation's apocalyptic visions<sup>10</sup> encourage nonviolent resistance to the imperial cult and

7. Anthea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 244. Portier-Young argues that "the first Jewish apocalypses emerged as a literature of resistance to empire" (xxii). She contrasts the nonviolent resistance commended by Daniel with the armed resistance envisioned by the Apocalypse of Weeks of *1 Enoch* (*ibid.*, 219, 313–45).

8. *Ibid.*, 262.

9. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Biblical Theology of Exile, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 121–22 (121); see also Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 252–53. Smith-Christopher and Portier-Young discuss the penitential prayer, which is usually considered a post-exilic form of the lament.

public witness to Christ's Lordship, all in the light of God's ultimate victory over both Satan and Rome.<sup>11</sup> The lament of the martyrs contributes to this overarching purpose. Their cry occurs early in Revelation, after John's vision of the heavenly throne and just after the slaughtered Lamb is declared worthy to open the scroll. The "souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given" cry out from beneath the altar, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" (Rev. 6:10).<sup>12</sup>

10. In terms of the function of lament in an apocalypse and in relation to Rome, Revelation has an interesting parallel in 4 Ezra, a roughly contemporaneous Jewish text. This comparison depends in part on dating 4 Ezra to ca. 100 c.e., based on 4 Ezra 3:1 as a reference to 30 years after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 c.e., and Revelation to 90–95 c.e., based on its apparent knowledge of Domitian. In the visions of both 4 Ezra and Revelation, the Roman Empire is thinly veiled as Babylon, the ancient enemy of Israel (see especially the eagle vision of 4 Ezra 11; cf. Dan. 7:3; Rev. 13:1). In both sets of visions, after a time of tumult and oppression under the eagle/beast (Rome), the lion/Messiah arises, destroys the wicked, and delivers (in the case of Ezra) the remnant of Israel or (in the case of Revelation) those who have remained faithful to Christ. Of course, they are significantly different on other points; N. T. Wright points out several important differences between Revelation and other apocalypses, including 4 Ezra; see Wright, "Revelation and Christian Hope: Political Implications of the Revelation to John," in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco: University of Baylor Press, 2012), 105–24 (109–10). For analysis of the parallels between 4 Ezra 4:35–37; Rev. 6:9–11; and 1 Enoch 47:4, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 52B (Waco: Word, 1998), 391. For 4 Ezra as a theological response to the events of 70 c.e., see Karina Martin Hogan, *Theologies in Conflict in 4 Ezra: Wisdom Debate and Apocalyptic Solution*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 130 (Leiden: Brill, 2008). See also Bruce W. Longenecker, "Locating 4 Ezra: A Consideration of its Social Setting and Functions," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 28, no. 3 (1997): 271–93; and Michael E. Stone, "Reactions to Destructions of the Second Temple: Theology, Perception and Conversion," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 12, no. 2 (1981): 195–204.
11. See Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); N. T. Wright, "Revelation and Christian Hope: Political Implications of the Revelation to John," in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, 105–24; Stefan Alkier, "Witness or Warrior? How the Book of Revelation Can Help Christians Live Their Political Lives," in *ibid.*, 125–41; Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?: Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
12. The cry "How long?" is a common complaint in lament psalms regarding the apparent delay of God's vindication. The Greek phrase ἕως πότε ("how long") appears in the LXX in Pss. 6:4; 12:2–3; 73:10; 78:5; 79:5; 81:2; 88:47; 89:13; 93:3. Cf. Luke 18:7, "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?"

The martyrs have presumably lost their lives in one of the waves of imperial persecution.<sup>13</sup> When they cry out, they address God as δεσπότης (NRSV: Lord), a relatively rare word in the New Testament. Although δεσπότης can refer to God in the LXX and in Jewish and Christian literature (for example, Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24), it is also “a regular Greek translation of two Latin terms for the Roman emperor, *dominus* and *princeps*.”<sup>14</sup> Here, as perhaps also in Luke-Acts, the slaughtered souls address God as the true δεσπότης, not the emperor, just as Jesus is the true Lord (κύριος).<sup>15</sup>

Additional symbols undergird the martyrs’ lament with political force. The martyrs’ lament occurs when the Lamb opens the fifth seal, after the first four seals have unleashed the famous four horsemen of conquest, war, famine, and plague. As symbols of war, horses represent the might of Rome, but John repurposes them: “Those thundering hoofs that once heralded the irresistible power of Roman armies are now signaling the inevitable doom of the empire.”<sup>16</sup> The sword (μάχαιρα) of the second horseman is another “symbol of imperial authority” (see Rom. 13:4).<sup>17</sup> Even the altar under which the martyrs cry out may function as an allusion to Rome’s authority and

13. The first great wave of persecution occurred under Nero (64–68 c.e.) and a more scattered persecution may have taken place under the reign of Domitian (81–96 c.e.), although scholars split over whether any real evidence exists for the persecution of Christians during Domitian’s reign. No evidence exists that Christians before Constantine actively revolted against Roman rule; instead, some of them simply refused to participate in the imperial cult. See, for example, David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2000). This kind of Christian resistance in the first century is assumed rather than specifically narrated in Revelation and in other NT books (for example, Rev. 2:12–13; Heb. 10:32–34). For other early Christian documents, see George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and Military Service* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

14. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 407.

15. For the title “Lord” in Luke-Acts, see C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 103–15.

16. Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 63.

17. Justo González, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 38.

its blasphemous claims to divinity. While most interpreters take the altar in 6:9 as a heavenly altar, David May argues that it is a Roman altar, meant to evoke the “monumental altar to Zeus at Pergamum,” where the first martyr mentioned in Revelation died (2:13).<sup>18</sup> Even if the altar is meant to be the heavenly altar and not an earthly, Roman one (cf. Rev. 8:3-5; 9:13; 14:18), the blood of the martyrs and the motif of their sacrifice, combined with the symbolism of the altar, is surely evocative of the power of Rome to bear the sword. Perhaps the ambiguity is deliberate, or at least fortuitous; the heavenly altar connects the sacrifice of the martyrs to the death of Christ, as does the application of the verb σφάζω (slaughter) to both the Lamb and the martyrs (Rev. 5:6, 9, 12; 6:9), whereas the earthly Roman altar reminds the reader of the blasphemous pretensions of Rome and her imperial idols, and who it was who shed the blood of those now crying out for justice.

The martyrs petition God to judge and to avenge their blood on “the inhabitants of the earth,” a phrase always used in Revelation of the enemies of God and the church.<sup>19</sup> In verse 11, they receive an initial response (the passive suggests a divine response): they are given white robes as signs of their purity or their cleansing by Jesus’ blood (see Rev. 7:14) and told to remain, or rest, a little while longer (see 4 Ezra 7:75). In the rest of the book of Revelation, the martyrs and their lament appear again and again: through the angelic visions, the churches are assured that God hears and will answer the martyrs’

18. David M. May, “Interpreting Revelation with Roman Coins: A Test Case, Revelation 6:9-11,” *Review and Expositor* 106 (2009): 445-65 (458). May suggests that “Satan’s throne” in Rev. 2:13 is another reference to the altar at Pergamum. The concept of souls under the heavenly altar has parallels in Judaism: Aune cites *’Abot R. Nat.* 12 (“the souls of all the righteous are in safekeeping under the throne of glory”) and *’Abot R. Nat.* 26 (“He who is buried in the land of Israel is as though he were buried under the altar; for the whole land of Israel is fit to be the site of the altar. And he who is buried under the altar is as though he were buried under the throne of glory”) (Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 405). An altar (θυσιαστήριον), probably a heavenly one (although it is sometimes ambiguous), also appears in 8:3-5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18 (cf. 15:5); 16:7.

19. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 410.



plea for justice (8:4-5; 10:6-7; 16:4-6; 17:1-6; 18:4, 8; 19:2). God's vindication of the suffering faithful culminates in Rev. 20:4, when the seer writes, "I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. . . . They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years."<sup>20</sup>

### **Babylon v. God: God Wins**

In Rom. 13, Rome is the government ordained by God; in Rev. 13, it is the beast that derives its authority from Satan. If the gospels (and Paul) portray a Rome who might be converted to the way of Christ, Revelation has no such optimism. Revelation aligns Rome with the enemies of God—indeed, with the great Adversary himself—and depicts the decisive downfall of the great empire. In this way, Revelation boldly reframes the current political reality of Christians in Asia Minor living under the threat of persecution: as God's enemy, Rome's coming destruction is certain. The lament of the martyrs in 6:9-11 plays a key role in this reframing, because Revelation depicts the fall of Rome as God's answer to the lamenters' cries. Indeed, Scott Ellington proposes that the movement from lament to response to praise in Revelation "lend[s] to the book of Revelation as a whole the tone of a lament prayer as the unfolding vision moves from a cry in the midst of suffering to a shout of triumph as God answers the prayer of lament."<sup>21</sup>

In chapter 18, toward the end of the book, an angel sings a dirge over the proleptic/promised fall of Rome (presented, of course, as Babylon): "Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come" (Rev. 18:10). Unlike the

20. On the thousand-year reign as a reward to the slaughtered souls of Rev. 6, see Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 354-55, 359.

21. Scott A. Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 172.

anguished dirge sung over the fall of Jerusalem in the book of Lamentations, this is a triumphant dirge, which concludes with the multitude of heaven shouting “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (Rev. 19:1-2). Several key words link the description of Babylon’s fall to the martyrs’ cry: servants and fellow-servants (δούλων, 19:2; σύνδουλοι, 6:11), and the action of God to judge and avenge the blood of God’s servants (ἔκρινεν and ἐξεδίκησεν, 19:2; κρίνεις and ἐκδικεῖς, 6:10; αἷμα in both).<sup>22</sup>

In the last few chapters of the book, the judgment on historical Rome and the end of history merge in a characteristically apocalyptic way, so that the final defeat of the empire includes the defeat of the devil and death itself and the descent of a new Jerusalem from heaven. As Richard Hays points out, “the politics of ‘Babylon, the mighty city’ (18:10) is judged and supplanted by God’s new *polis*, the New Jerusalem, in which God dwells with his people and wipes away all tears (21:1-4).”<sup>23</sup>

### God and the Lamenter

To return to Westermann’s famous “triangle,” the lament involves the one who cries out, the enemy, and God—the One who hears the lament. The biblical laments of Old and New Testaments depend on a particular God, who created and reigns over all the nations and who made specific promises. The lamenter cries out to God from within a

22. Heil notes an additional connection between servants (1:1) and fellow servants (6:11), and points out that the recipients of the letter can likewise expect to face death for their testimony; John Paul Heil, “The Fifth Seal (Rev. 6:9-11) as a Key to the Book of Revelation,” *Biblica* 74, no. 2 (1993): 220-43 (221).

23. Richard B. Hays, “Faithful Witness, Alpha and Omega: The Identity of Jesus in the Apocalypse of John,” in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, 69-83 (82).

defined relationship (covenant, fidelity to Christ) and invokes God's character as the grounds for his appeal. God has promised to help Israel: *rise up, then, and help!* God is a just God: *deliver justice!* In the Old Testament, the lamenter cries out to God for redemption because God has promised to be the God *of Israel*, the one who will bless and protect her, who will shelter her from her enemies, the one who carried her out of Egypt and settled her into a place of rest and safety, a land of milk and honey. The fundamental problem of every lament—whether the symptom of that problem be sickness, slander, or exile—is a rupture in that relationship, a threat to the integrity of God's own character and promises.

Of course, God is sovereign over the entire created world and all the nations, not just Israel, a point made with equal clarity by Genesis and Job. The prophets excoriate those who commit injustices and trample the poor, and the nations are not exempt from God's judgment (for example, Amos 1–2). Abraham appeals to God's responsibility for all the nations when he bargains with YHWH for the fate of two wicked cities: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" asks Abraham regarding Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:25). In 4 Ezra, a document probably composed ca. 100 c.e., Ezra frequently invokes the relationship between God and Israel, but he also challenges God to act justly toward the entire creation (4 Ezra 3:3–8, 20–23; 6:54; 7:62–69, 116–121).<sup>24</sup>

The Revelation martyrs likewise call upon God as the sovereign judge of all the earth ("Sovereign Lord, holy and true . . ."). Rather than naming the covenant as the factor that should motivate God to act, they invoke a different relationship, the one forged between God and those redeemed by Christ (Rev. 1:5b–6). Unlike Daniel, Revelation uses lament not to reframe past disobedience but to urge

24. Ezra's most strident complaint is a reworking of Psalm 8: "But what is man, that you are angry with him; or what is a mortal race, that you are so bitter against it?" (4 Ezra 8:34).

patient endurance and faithful witness to the Lamb who was slain.<sup>25</sup> Although the author of Revelation chastises those who have lost their first love, and urges repentance for those who have tolerated evildoers, the key of lament here is protest rather than penitence: the suffering of the churches is never construed as punishment for rebellion or disobedience. The martyrs do not narrate their oppression as the result of disobedience to the covenant; rather, their suffering is due to their *faithful* witness. Just as the Lamb was slaughtered (σφάζω, 5:6, 9, 12), so too can those who witness to the Lamb expect to be slaughtered (σφάζω, Rev. 6:9).

Their lament represents anguished longing but also hope, which is the twin impulse of lament in the New Testament and in the church, where lament is longing for God's kingdom, inaugurated in Christ, fully to come; and confident hope that it is already breaking into the world and that nothing will hinder its arrival. In his letter to the churches in Rome, Paul assures Christians in Rome that nothing in all creation, not even the sword of the empire that slaughters them (σφάζω again, Rom. 8:36), will be able to separate them from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:35–39).

### Reading and Embodying Lament as Resistance

None of this, of course, necessarily leads to a new kind of politics. The reading of Revelation—and the reading of lament—has not always occasioned thoughtful engagement with the world and its injustices. On the other hand, at least some of those who have read Revelation and other lament texts from their own contemporary contexts of suffering and oppression have found in those texts calls to resistance. Brian Blount, for example, consciously reads Revelation

25. For the emphasis on witness in Revelation, see Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?*, 46–67. See also Hays, “Faithful Witness,” 77–79. For the theme of patient endurance (ὑπομονή) in Revelation, see Rev. 1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12; compare Rev. 2:13.

through the lens of African-American experience, and he argues that the author of Revelation not only hears and joins in on the lament of the people, but he also “tries to turn that lament into transformative behavior,” that is, into “nonviolent resistance against the great power that afflicts them.”<sup>26</sup> Blount claims that lament and resistance are closely linked: “[L]ament breeds fury at the oppressions and the people who caused them, and—in John’s scenario at least—it drives those who lament to resist.”<sup>27</sup> But lament, he says, is risky business. The hearers of Revelation must decide whether to lament and thereby “do everything that lament requires,” which includes joining “the resistance of the Lamb,” or to “accommodate [themselves] to the ways of Rome and the draconian things it does.”<sup>28</sup> That’s the choice; there is no lukewarm option (Rev. 3:16). For Blount, there is no *violent* option either, at least not on Revelation’s terms. Vengeance belongs to God.

Likewise, in the context of South Africa in the 1980s, Allan Boesak identifies those who cry “How long?” with those currently suffering under apartheid.<sup>29</sup> Denise Ackermann writes from the same context, and she too identifies the power of lament to redefine reality and create change, through its combination of complaint and petition with trust in God’s power, goodness, and justice: “The combination of lament and praise [in the lament psalms] has powerful political implications. When lamenting people assume the power to define reality and to proclaim that all is not well, things begin to change. . . . The lamenters’ voices become subversive. They are, in fact,

26. Brian Blount, “Breaking Point: A Sermon,” in Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, eds., *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 145-53 (146).

27. *Ibid.*, 149.

28. *Ibid.*, 150.

29. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*, 69–72. Boesak dedicates his commentary to “all those who, true to their faith, have struggled and fought with us; gone to jail and shared pain and bread with us. They are seeing the power of the beast. They shall see the victory of the Lamb.”

celebrating God's ability to act in this world, to right the wrongs far beyond conventional notions of the possible."<sup>30</sup>

It is worth asking, then, what kinds of resistance might arise from lament today. James Cone and Brian Blount have identified the spirituals, the blues, and modern rap music as acts that participate in both lament and resistance.<sup>31</sup> Others focus on lament as penitence for national sins like slavery or apartheid.<sup>32</sup> I choose to explore a different example: public nonviolent protests against injustice. These kinds of protests are sometimes associated with the term lament (in a colloquial sense). And like the apocalyptic laments of Daniel and Revelation, they often participate in resistance to oppression. Since biblical lament is typically spoken, written, or read, actions like gathering in silent protest hardly seem to qualify as lament. On the other hand, other ritual actions often accompany the biblical lament: for example, tearing the clothes, putting ashes on the head, and fasting (Dan. 9:3).<sup>33</sup> Might protest movements participate in the ethos of the biblical lament, without using speech?

The women's peace initiative in Liberia offers one interesting test case. During the horrific civil war in Liberia in the 1990s, thousands of Muslim and Christian women gathered every day for weeks to

30. Denise Ackermann, "On Hearing and Lamenting: Faith and Truth-Telling," in H. Russel Botman and Robin M. Petersen, eds., *To Remember and To Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation* (Cape Town, South Africa: Human & Rousseau, 1996), 47-56 (116).
31. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972); Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?*, 91-117. See also Carol Antablin Miles, "Singing the Songs of Zion' and Other Sermons from the Margins of the Canon," *Koinonia* 6, no. 2 (1994): 151-75.
32. Ackermann, "On Hearing and Lamenting," 52; Soong-Chan Rah, "The American Church's Absence of Lament," <http://sojo.net/blogs/2013/10/24/american-churchs-absence-lament> (accessed June 2, 2015). Ackermann and Rah, among others, raise the pressing question of how one can lament from a position of relative power and comfort, rather than from a position of oppression or suffering. See also Blount, "Breaking Point," 148-53.
33. Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 5-7, 13. James Mays notes that even the individual laments were adopted and used in corporate worship: "psalms written for ceremonies centering on individuals came to be used by the community" (James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox, 1994], 11).

sit in the fish market along the president's daily route to demand peace.<sup>34</sup> They wore white T-shirts and white headscarves. Over time, they were instrumental in jumpstarting the stalled peace talks. On the surface of it, these actions bear a striking resemblance to the biblical lament. They protested injustice and cried for justice, much like the martyrs' cry in Revelation. Their white shirts and scarves and their visible gathering in the fish market could be analogous to the visible marks of fasting and ashes.<sup>35</sup> Norman Gottwald and Derek Suderman, among others, have argued that even individual lament psalms have a public function: the community, and not just God, is meant to hear the lament.<sup>36</sup> The prayer of the martyrs of Revelation is not private but is recorded and sent to churches throughout Asia Minor. When the women gathered in protest along a well-traveled road, and again outside the building hosting the stalled peace talks, their communities, both potential friend and foe, witnessed their actions.

In this way, the silent cries of the Liberian women may reflect lament as a form of challenge to God to enact God's justice, and a form of hope that God will do so. Leymah Gbowee, one of the initiators of the women's peace movement there, explains her decision to begin protesting with a simple lament, an invocation and a petition: "Please God, end the war."<sup>37</sup> Her decision to launch the

34. The story is told in Leymah Gbowee's memoir *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War: A Memoir* (New York: Beast, 2011), and the documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (produced by Abigail Disney, 2008).

35. Other modern protest movements often don visible symbols of their protest: the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina also wore white scarves; the women of the Black Sash in South Africa wore black sashes as a symbol of mourning over the constitutional rights denied to black South Africans.

36. Norman Gottwald, "Social Drama in the Psalms of Individual Lament," in Randall Heskett and Brian Irwin, eds., *The Bible as a Human Witness to Divine Revelation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 143–52; W. Derek Suderman, "Are Individual Complaint Psalms Really Prayers? Recognizing Social Address as Characteristic of Individual Complaints," in *The Bible as a Human Witness*, 153–70. See also Nancy C. Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 99.

37. Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 25. Of course, this analysis relies on Gbowee's own description of the movement.

Christian Women's Peace Initiative arises from a dream in which a voice speaks to Gbowee commanding her: "Gather the women to pray for peace!" Gbowee and the other women pray, "Jesus, help us. You are the true Prince of Peace, the only one who can grant us peace."<sup>38</sup> Once joined by their Muslim sisters, they begin every day of their silent protest in the field with Christian and Muslim prayers.<sup>39</sup> Gbowee writes, in language reminiscent of Ackermann's reflections on lament and empowerment in South Africa, "God's hands were under our effort. . . . You can tell people of the need to struggle, but when the powerless start to see that they really can make a difference, nothing can quench the fire."<sup>40</sup> This movement explicitly evokes God's commitment to peace as its motivating impulse, and narrates its efforts as a participation in God's design for peace. This coheres with the heart of lament as a cry for *God's* justice and an unwavering belief in God as the agent of true and lasting justice and peace.

If we return to the question of the relationship being claimed by the lamenter, the Liberian women's peace movement appears to operate out of two contexts. For Gbowee and the specifically Christian women, their actions laid claim to Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Yet unlike the Revelation martyrs, they do not claim that their suffering results from their faithfulness to Christ.<sup>41</sup> Instead, especially once they are joined by their Muslim sisters, their prayers appeal to the God of the whole earth, who loves justice and hears the pleas of *all* those who suffer. Thus, like the lamenter described in the first paragraph of this essay, they challenge God to act according to what they believe to be true about God's own character, as One committed to justice and peace.

38. *Ibid.*, 122, 123.

39. *Ibid.*, 136, 138.

40. *Ibid.*, 151.

41. Nor, of course, do they explain their suffering as the result of disobedience to God, as in the case of Daniel.



When the church laments as the church, whether in speech or action, it affirms the most basic trust of the biblical lamenter: that there is a God who hears and who wipes away all the tears, a God who defeated death and evil and invites us into abundant resurrection life, the God before whom all earthly powers are already disarmed. What this looks like in practice is difficult to prescribe in advance but surely deserves our attention. Which actions best witness to the victory of the slain Lamb while still crying out “How long?” to God? Which ones yield the greatest anger at injustice, the most courage, the greatest solidarity with others who suffer, and the most hope? Which ones allow us to express our outrage and anguish at the “not yet” of the kingdom of God while still embracing and celebrating its “now”?

Lamenting is only one practice of resistance and hope. But it may be a practice that encourages and flows into other Christian practices like peacemaking and bearing one another’s burdens and offering hospitality to strangers. It might help awaken us to the suffering of brothers and sisters that we might not see otherwise, because it forces us to see what is *not yet* set right in this world. It might be the prayer that uses the laments already in scripture to give voice to anger and grief in the midst of distress, the prayer that undergirds and shapes actions like truth and reconciliation commissions and silent public protests. Indeed, I suggest that lament is a necessary element of the church’s life in these in-between times, both as a witness *against* injustice and as a witness *to* God’s justice and peace—to the Christian hope in the God who redeems everything, even the worst of evils. Whether in speech or in action, the lament of the church today joins in equal measure with the anguished cry of the martyrs—*How long, Lord?*—and the final longing, hopeful plea of Revelation: *Come, Lord Jesus!*