

W. David O. Taylor
November 2019

Writing your own psalm of lament

“A poem requires re-reading. Unlike prose which fills the page with print, poems leave a lot of white space.... We sit before the poem like we sit before a flower and attend to form, relationship, color. We let it begin to work on us. This attending, this waiting, this reverential posture is at the core of the life of faith, the life of prayer, the life of worship, the life of witness.” —
Eugene Peterson

“As we read the Psalms, they read us.” — **John Goldingay**

TASK:

1. Taking the basic shape of a lament psalm as your pattern, write your own lament psalm.
2. Choose whether you wish to write an individual lament or a communal lament.
3. Keep your phrases/lines succinct; no long sentences, no wordy phrasings.
4. Be specific and concrete in your statements, rather than abstract and idiosyncratic.
5. Choose evocative imagery or metaphors that will help you see what you're praying.
6. Take advantage of the unique devices of Hebrew poetry and of the language of the Psalter.
7. Title your psalm.
8. Share your psalms with others.

THE SINGULAR POWERS OF POETRY

1. Poetry is a language that says *more* and says it *more intensely*, *more densely*, than does ordinary language.
2. Poetry accents the musical textures of human language.
3. Poetry brings us into metaphor-rich, imagery-rich territory.
4. Poetry draws our attention to the particularity of things.
5. Poetry invites us to slow down as a way to pay careful attention.
6. Poetry brings to our awareness the “more than just” quality of things.

THE SINGULAR POWERS OF HEBREW POETRY

1. Shorter sentences than in prose. One line = 6 Hebrew words divided in two halves/cola, or 9 words in a tri-cola. EX: Ps. 2:1 + 2:2.
2. Default rhythmic arrangement is 3 Hebrew words or 3 stresses per half line. EX: Ps. 2:2, 7 and 8. The second most common is the 3-2: Pss. 14 and 27.
3. Its language is terse. Things are said in the most economical way possible. It is not a flowery style of poetry.

4. It relies on the following devices:

- **Strophe and Stanza:** Ps. 13 and 19.
- **Rhyme:** 5:1-2; 18:46; 26:11; 35:23; 44:5
- **Paronomasia** (play on words): 6:10; 28:5; 37:2.
- **Alliteration and Assonance:** Ps. 127:1 and Ps. 102:6.
- **Alphabetical psalms:** Pss. 9-10; 25; 35; 37; 111; 112; 145; 119.
- **Chiasms** (abba): Ps. 29.
- **Refrains:** 42:43; 67; 80.
- **Parallelism** (“stereophonic complementariness”). Three of the most common types of parallelism include:
 - a) **Synonymous** (Ps. 77:11)
 - b) **Antithetic** (Ps. 30:5)
 - c) **Synthetic** (a heightening or specifying of first line: Ps. 33:8; 6:5).

5. Its language is suggestive rather than discursive.

6. Its powers reside in its rich use of metaphor and imagery.

THE BASIC SHAPE OF LAMENT PSALMS

With individual and communal psalms of lament, there is a recognizable pattern. Psalm 13 is typical.

A Complaint (vv. 1-2)

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

A Petition (vv. 3-4)

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

A Resolution (vv. 5-6)

But I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

While there are plenty of variations on this pattern, the complaints are directed chiefly to God. Psalm 3:1, “Oh Lord, how many are my foes!” Psalm 10:2, “Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up Your hand. Do not forget the afflicted.” What are the complaints about? They may be about God, or about one’s life, or about a presumed enemy. Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 38:3, “There is no health in my bones because of my sin.” Psalm 72:4, “Save the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor.” The kinds of petitions that the psalmists make of God range widely. They include requests for healing, deliverance, vindication, provision and protection, and, in the cases of confession of sin, forgiveness. The final resolution of a psalm of lament may involve a confession of trust; it may involve a resolve to praise or a promise to obey; or it may involve a confident affirmation of God’s own faithfulness, even if there is no empirical data to prove it.