

**THE PRAYER OF BIBLICAL LAMENTATIONS****Luminita POP<sup>1</sup>****ABSTRACT**

*LAMENTATION PSALMS ILLUSTRATE THE HUMAN FEELINGS AS THEY TRANSPIRE DURING THE PRAYER, DEMARCATING THUS A SPIRITUAL PASSAGE TO BE RE-ENACTED BY EACH HOMO RELIGIOSUS. OUR INTENTION WAS TO UNDERLINE THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE OF THE COMMUNICATION WITH THE ABSOLUTE THROUGH PRAYER AND TO ESTABLISH A PATTERN FOR THE ANALYSED SUBGENRE OF PSALMS. THIS PATTERN CONTAINS A SPECIFIC VOCABULARY FOR THE INVOCATION, FOR THE WAY THE AUTHOR ADDRESSES THE DEITY; A REPETITIVE SUBSTITUTION OF THE LAMENTATION WITH THE HYMN ONCE ONE CAN FORESEE THE HOPE FOR SALVATION IN THE MIDST OF A DISCOURAGING SITUATION WHICH TRIGGERED THE ORIGINAL LAMENTATION; REASONS FOR LAMENTATION: THE FEAR OF DEATH, FEAR OF ENEMIES, A DISEASE OR AN AWARENESS OF YOUR OWN SIN – AND LASTLY PRAYER AS A LAYOUT FOR THE HUMAN QUEST FOR THE DIVINE. THIS ARTICLE DEALS WITH THE LAST COMPONENT OF THE ARCHITECTURAL SCHEME OF THE PSALMS.*

**KEYWORDS:** PRAYER, DIVINE, BIBLICAL LAMENTATIONS, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE PSALMIST, ANGST

Lamentation psalms are permeated with the human need of divinity, with seeking Yahweh, as well as with the assertion of faith in Him. The Biblical psalms have expressed a wide variety of feelings and human emotions, however, as readers, we can find ourselves left out of the hermeneutical sphere if we do not identify the types of egos resulting in an overlap of the poetic psalmist ego with the one of the actual reader. Without taking in account this fusion, the Psalms remain a mystery, they lock away their meanings and richness, and as readers we need to have a soul that is prone to prayer, hungry for adoration, willing to call for consolation, for the divine mercy and help.<sup>2</sup> And this is how we will enter the atmosphere of the psalms, aware of our incurable sin, but hopeful beyond the limits of our grey reality; next to the psalmist we will pendulate between faith and disbelief: “Definitive is the fact that in many psalms one can find an unnerving mixture of anguish and faith.”<sup>3</sup>

The term prayer (in Hebrew “tefilla”) occurs in the psalms five times as a description of an individual psalm; as a religious experience it manifests itself in the most critical moments of the human existence. The only indispensable criteria for prayer is the truth, thus lacking the principles or techniques which would constitute the real theory of a prayer:

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<sup>2</sup> Cf Michel Gasnier, *Los Salmos- Escuela de espiritualidad*, (Madrid: Studium, 1960) 16-17

<sup>3</sup> Cf Michel Gasnier, *Los Salmos- Escuela de espiritualidad*, 92 „Cierto es que en varios Salmos se encuentra una mezcla bastante desconcertante de angustia y de confianza” translation.

(...) “Prayer is born spontaneously from hopeless situations, of distress, of injustice, of disgrace adopting at the same time the most vivid forms of celebration.”<sup>4</sup> In the midst of difficult and distressing situations, the prayer keeps its dramatic character becoming the instrument through which the man searches for the divinity. The psalmist appropriates his own status, of a special partner in a conscientious covenant that cannot be broken, at least not by the divinity. God’s faithfulness and steadfastness has been portrayed in the history and culture of the Jewish people, but also in a specific way, in each destiny. His presence was not something intermittent, but it was felt by Israel as something always current. One could not have uttered the holy name without feeling that by belonging to Yahweh, the man would become an object of His care and be in total dependence of the divine will. Consequently, from all the antic religions, the Jewish religion is mainly characterized through its personal tones: the God of Israel interacts with the individual in a direct manner, interested in his problems or unrest. The personal relation between the psalmist and the deity does not fall into the extreme of the secularism which is penetrated by the futility of religion for the the day to day problems, nor in a form of piety which chooses to entirely disconnect from the external reality, but is a relation of a third way, the middle way, constantly anchored in deceptions, defeats and disappointments that are brought in front of the deity without any hesitation.<sup>5</sup>

For that matter, the theologian G. Dominique Mailhiot observes, the possessive pronoun from “My God” underlines the profound intimate nature of the relationship between the psalmist and the deity; He is not some anonymous being, but He speaks to the man equally as He used to talk to Moses, in the same spirit of covenant reaffirmation, “therefore You are my God, on account of the continuity of your presence”<sup>6</sup>

The psalms are a transposition, in a very predetermined fixed form, of the human prayer towards the deity. They are subjective constructs, lyricism in a language of absolute intimacy. The image of the deity from this specific context of a lamentation is that of a personal and relevant God, and not a distant isolated and vague one. Yahweh is seen to have human attributes: He sees, hears, listens, gets angry and revengeful, with a liberty that is surprising many times, however this proximity does not cause any prejudice to the divine transcendence. Because Israel’s faith is not founded on philosophical reflections on Yahweh’s spirituality but on a vital experience of His persona, His might and His proximity.

The psalmist has a double perspective on the deity: he was aware on one side of the fact that Yahweh does not belong to the profane world in its ontological sense, spatially being situated in “a beyond” compared to the limits from here and now. The heavens are a sacred place, in a complete opposition to the earth, the human space and implicitly a profane territory. On the other hand, the main motif of the lamentations lays in the persistent quest for the deity by eliminating the aforementioned spatial and ontological barriers, thus the psalmist calls for an epiphany, a manifestation of the divine into his concrete laic existence. Considering that God Yahweh, despite His ontological alterity, He is close to people, eager to lay the ground for a personal relationship with them, to enter into a real dialogue with them through the medium of prayer: “An overall confirmation of this aspect of the theology of the psalms is the fact that one sees the psalmists turning towards God constantly to worship him, to beg from him, to thank him, which demonstrates their conviction that it is possible to

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Pierre Prevost, *Diccionario de los Salmos*, (Estella- Navarra, Verbo Divino, 1991) 36 [...] La oración brota espontáneamente de la situaciones de desamparo, de angustia, de injusticia, de desgracia, lo mismo que sabe adoptar los acentos de fiesta mas vibrantes, our translation.

<sup>5</sup> Vezi discuția în Evode Beauchamp, Jean Pascal de Relles, *La oracion del pueblo de Israel*, (Belgica,, Nova Terra, 1969) 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> Giles Dominique Mailhiot, *El libro de los Salmos*, (Madrid, Sau Pablo, 2005) 58-59 „ En conclusión, tu eres mi Dios por la continuidad de Tu presencia”, our translation

communicate with him directly.”<sup>7</sup> The poet feels the need to confess his emotional state of mind, regardless of how depressing or anguishing it is, yearning thus for a release of this burden and for divine intervention. To pray, notes N. Fuglister, means to talk to God, to have a direct contact with him in a very concrete here and now. It means to be with Him, offering yourself to Him, realising there is a public and personal relationship between the divine alterity and the ego of the psalmist.”<sup>8</sup>

Talking to God means to open all the private and public spheres of our lives by exposing ourselves to the divine. Within the ego’s horizon there isn’t, at least not in a natural and profane way, any trace of God because our fundamental selfishness is the actual axis around which the individual revolves, equally functioning as a limitation to the self. Most of the people do not remain constraint in the limitations of their own self-sufficiency but they long for breaking the barriers by engaging in a search for the alterity. In other words, Luis Maria Almendariz says, one can see a resurgence of the same paradox of limitation and lack of limitations out of which the ego is interwoven; he lives in just one point of the reality and inevitably leans towards its margins and questions it.”<sup>9</sup>

God represents the Ultimate Other who the man interrogates, this being the beginning of the prayer through which the man feels that the barriers of his own existence open up towards a new dimension. The opening is not only towards a new section of reality but towards a new perspective, the only one that confers meaning to the sadness and bitterness that seem to surround the human heart. The psalmist exhibits all throughout the lamentations this yearning towards the divine, the ultimate referent; he gravitates towards the sacred from the depths of his being therefore his prayer is deeply rooted in love and in a deep feeling of emptiness. The truest freedom for the human being lays in the deep-rooted belief that God represents the real foundation of the human existence, the horizon that confers meaning and value to the concrete reality. The Spanish exegete previously mentioned portrays the rapport between sacred and man when in a dialogue characterised by incongruous and superficiality:

“You and I know very well how fragile are my end goals, that’s why I ask you to come closer to me and to convert Yourself in a permanent background presence.”<sup>10</sup>

The human being is searching for that immovable firm point of his own existence, the desire to relinquish all his fears to God, especially when he does not have any solution to the conflictual situations he find himself in. The man is the one who initiates seeking God’s face because in prayer “it becomes reality the ultimate desire of a person, which is to believe, hope and love without any limits”<sup>11</sup>

God represents thus the ultimate need, the most profound and transcendent need of the human being, one that screams inside ourselves for satisfaction and fulfilment. The ultimate You attains all throughout the lamentations, the yearning of the psalmists, either from the biblical psalms or from the Romanian literature, a dimension conducive to hope. Searching

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<sup>7</sup> Garcia Trapiello, *Introducción al estudio de los Salmos*, (Madrid, Salamanca, 1997) 162 „Una confirmacion global de este aspecto de la teologia de los Salmos es el hecho de ver a los salmistas acudir continuamente a Dios para alabarle, suplicarle y darle gracias, lo que demuestra su convencimiento de poder entrar en comunicacion directa con El”, trad. noastră.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Notker Fuglister- *La oración salmica*, (Estella- Navarra, Verbo Divino, 1970) 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Luis Maria Almendariz- *Hablar con Dios, en la intimidad, en la naturaleza y en la historia*, (Sau Pablo, 2008) 15

<sup>10</sup> Luis Maria Almendariz – *Hablar con Dios en la intimidad, en la naturaleza y en la historia*, (Sau Pablo, 2008) 35-36 „Pero como Tu y yo sabemos muy bien lo fragiles que son mis propositos, te pido que tu te acerques a mi y te conviertas en una presencia de fondo permanente”, our translation

<sup>11</sup> Cf Luis Maria Almendariz- *Hablar con Dios en la intimidad, en la naturaleza y en la historia*, (Sau Pablo, 2008) 38 „Se hacia realidad el sueño ultimo de la persona que consiste en poder creer, esperar y amar sin limite”, our translation

God goes beyond any type of profane search and confers to the psalmists an acute awareness of the tragic nature of their own lives. The divine interventions, “*mirabilia Dei*”, are constantly reaffirmed by the psalmist, illustrating thus the guaranty of Yahweh’s steadfastness.

Regardless of the divine faithfulness, the religious psychology of the psalmists contains a diverse variety of emotions: solitude, fear, a sense of abandonment, doubts and dark moments. During our times of despair and confusion, of pitch black, we are not acclimatized to the temporary blindness, say the biblical psalmist, a sightlessness caused by God’s absence. We feel the fear of failure, pain, our own uselessness, however, by far, the pain of losing God is the most agonizing. “ We have made ourselves idols out of clay, sand castles or houses of cards. We actually need a gust of wind or a storm in order for us to get hold of God and to feel Him closer to us”<sup>12</sup>

The biblical lamentation psalms portray this kind of existential moments when the poet asks for a reaffirmation of God’s presence. He has to undergo through different stages of divine silence, but slowly slowly hope is reborn; those moments when everything seems lost, they are the fatidic hour for those who truly believe. The path leading to the peak undeniably is crossed by trials devised by the divine, sometimes as difficult as learning again how to walk, step by step. Each achievement unlocks a new stage where suffering is necessary as well as the deep feeling of abandonment; the biblical psalmists acknowledge that beyond everything, there is the certitude that God has not abandoned them. (Ps. 71:5 and 130:5-6)<sup>13</sup>. Although they often feel exiled and far, despite their deep sense of forsakenness as reflected in the lamentations, God has never deserted them.

The prayer from the biblical psalms also teaches us to be willing to confront our own truth, even though we are afraid of what we might find. Being authentic means reaching the ultimate and complete truth of our existence, and this reality is impregnated with God, as per Juan Esquerda Bifet<sup>14</sup> Whoever choses to live in truth discovers that all things, events and people reflect an authentic life, satisfying with its own reality.

The biblical psalmist knows that the source of his truth, authenticity and sadness is God, and he is equally aware that the climb is a lifelong process. There is pain, but it is worth it, because God speaks in silence and this brings hope.

Consequently, the prayer constitutes a requisite religious experience, essential to any homo religious. The biblical psalmist acknowledges and appropriates God’s faithfulness and steadfastness who would never break the covenant made with his people Israel, and implicitly with every individual. On account of these personal interrelations, the psalmist dares to address himself to the deity, through prayer. This is a spontaneous occurrence in life’s darkest moments and the biblical lamentations become testimonies of the unshakable faith in the Absolute Other.

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<sup>12</sup> <sup>12</sup> Juan Esquerda Bifet, *Todo es mensaje*, (Madrid, Paulinas, 1986) 61 „ *Nos hemos fabricado idolos de barro y castillos de arena o de naipes. Necesitamos algun soplo de aire o alguna tormenta para agarrarnos mas al Señor y sentirle mas cercano.*”. our translation

<sup>13</sup> Ps. 71:5 For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord,  
my confidence since my youth.”

Ps. 130:5-6 „I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,  
And in his word I put my hope”

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<sup>14</sup> Juan Esquerda Bifet, *Todo es mensaje. Experiencia cristiana de los Salmos*, (Madrid, Paulinas, 1986) 177-178.

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