Risking Truth: Reshaping the World Through Prayers of Lament: A Response to Scott A. Ellington*

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Abstract
This response is directed to ch. 6 of Risking Truth in which Ellington examines the use of lament in the New Testament. His discussion falls into four parts: 1) A reflection on the paucity of prayers of lament in the New Testament. Ellington hints at but does not articulate the best accounting for this paucity of lament, namely that early Christians found the prayers present in the Old Testament to be effective and satisfactory instruments for the expression of their own lamentation; 2) A discussion of the effect that the New Testament teaching on the shared suffering with Christ has on the ongoing validity of lament. In this section Ellington could explore further the function of lament within the eschatological framework of the kingdom message announced by Jesus as well as the function of the Pauline language of ‘joy’ and ‘rejoicing’ which all too often is interpreted in a too facile manner; 3) An analysis of the function of lament within the structure of the Apocalypse. Ellington correctly discerns the important role lament plays in the theological structure of the book; and 4) An argument for the canonical function of lament in Matthew. Ellington’s treatment of lament in Matthew, wherein he regards Jesus’ encounter with the lamenting Canaanite woman as marking a major structural transition in the narrative, is not so convincing. Ellington’s brief foray into the New Testament cannot be faulted since his main intention is to explore the contours of lament in the Old Testament. His preliminary statements do reveal that a study delving more deeply into the shape, character and function of New Testament lament would be of great value to the academy and to the Church.

Keywords
lament, prayer, complaint, Gospel of Matthew, suffering

Scott Ellington provides his readers with a very thoughtful analysis of and reflection on the biblical prayers of lament. His considerable gifts as a writer means that this work is distinguished by a prose style that nicely complements

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the poetic beauty of the laments that are the focus of the study. Far too often academic work on the Bible falls very short of the aesthetic character present in scripture, so it is a delight to read a book that not only reflects sound scholarship but also evinces an elegant literary quality.

My comments on the book will be directed to Chapter 6, entitled ‘Can Messiah Come Without a Cry?’, in which Ellington examines the use of lament in the New Testament noting in particular the ways that lament functions and the roles that it fulfills. Ellington’s discussion of lament in the New Testament falls into four parts: 1) the extent to which the lament prayer form is present in the New Testament; 2) the effect that the New Testament teaching on the shared suffering with Christ has on the ongoing validity of lament; 3) the function of lament within the structure of the Apocalypse; and 4) the canonical function of lament in Matthew.

Ellington observes that prayers of lament are almost entirely absent in the New Testament. Where lament is present is in fragments and allusions. However, as he correctly notes, this evidence should not be interpreted as suggesting a movement away from lament on the part of early Christians or the New Testament authors. Rather, lament is ‘embedded in the fabric of the New Testament’; it ‘communicates in a type of shorthand that carries with it an excess of meaning’ (p. 167). Ellington would do well to develop further these interpretive fragments of his own in order to answer the question of why there are so few prayers of lament in New Testament writings. It is likely that there are so few prayers of lament because early Christians were not only familiar with those of the Old Testament but found them to be effective and satisfactory instruments for the expression of their own lamentation. As Ellington himself states on p. 29 in his response to Fackenheim: there is no severing of the Old Testament from the New Testament. The Old Testament served as a valuable worship resource for the new covenant community. No further meaning need attach to the absence of prayers of lament from the New Testament than that the Christian community was well served by what they found in those earlier writings. To compose additional laments might be seen as a redundant activity. Given the relationship early Christians saw between the ancient scriptures and their own writings it is not surprising that we find only fragmentary and allusory references to lament in the New Testament.

In discussing the New Testament concept of suffering Ellington draws attention to two distinct features: 1) in the New Testament the believer is called upon to participate in Christ’s suffering and 2) such suffering calls for rejoicing rather than plea or protest. He further notes that because of this distinctive emphasis expressions of lament are often regarded as contrary to