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Book Review Pastoral Liturgy Vol 44, 2

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David Cohen has an interesting background. He comes from Jewish heritage but is now a Christian lecturing in Old Testament at Vose Seminary (Perth, Western Australia) and actively ministering in a Baptist community. In his reformed tradition psalms are not used as they are in the Catholic tradition so he brings to his study of the psalms a wonderful freshness that can revivify our response. Cohen's PhD was centred on the psalms of lament and through that research he developed what he calls "The Matrix of Lament". It is a model that helps to explain the content and the function of the psalms of lament, or, as Cohen calls them, psalms of distress.

All human beings suffer distress at some time. Pastoral ministry constantly deals with those who are distressed so this material is very useful. The psalms of distress have not come from some person's imagination but are anchored in the experiences of people over a considerable period of time. While each person has a unique experience, because we are human there are considerable similarities in our emotional and spiritual response to distress.

The structure that holds Cohen's exploration of the psalms is the analogy of a journey where he signposts the distinctive nature of the psalms. His first 'signpost' develops an understanding of lament – a product of the experience of individuals and communities and the way in which they express their distressing experiences to a God who cares for them.

His second 'signpost' considers their liturgical function and their place within the ritual life of the individual and of the worshipping community. Cohen views this through the broader context of covenant. The people of Israel could cry out to their God in times of distress because the covenant gave them permission. This freedom given by the covenant in the Old Testament is often lacking in our contemporary worship. The new covenant formed through the Paschal mystery should give us utter confidence to cry out to God as did Jesus on the cross. As Cohen describes, the psalms of distress make up over a third of the Psalter which in itself affirms the value of lifting our voices to God in the realities of individual or communal distress.

His third 'signpost' considers the language of the psalms. Both narrative and poetry are prominent. In articulating the story of the distress the individual or community is moved from desolation to consolation. By articulating the story of distress, the deepest levels of emotion are touched. In this way the human person can express their difficulties to God in times of greatest need. But also, by crying out these psalms at times where distress is not as crushing, the human emotions are practiced and strengthened so that when the worst happens, we are able to accommodate the emotion and express it in a way that is valuable in a healing sense as well as confirming a spiritual connection that helps us understand the redemptive love of God. The question is also raised as to whether it is a dialogue with God, or is it dialectic in nature where the distressed person is trying to make sense of the relationship with God and others that seems to be failing and therefore giving rise to the distress?

In the fourth 'signpost' Cohen looks at the shape and function of the psalms of distress. He argues that the actual structure of the psalm is in contrast to the lack of control and lack of

structure that can be the cause of the distress. Purpose and meaning are restored by the very way in which the distress is presented to God.

The above 'signposts' lead to a detailed view of the Matrix of Lament that Cohen has developed. The actions of expressing, asserting, investing and imagining give form to the way in which the psalms function and then fulfil a purpose for the praying community. Such a model has value in helping those in pastoral ministry understand the way in which they work and therefore the way in which they can be engaged in a liturgical manner.

In terms of pastoral ministry, the second half of the book is immensely useful. Following his theoretical discussion of psalms, Cohen looks at the practice of lament and how it can be formative and curative in times of distress. He engages with the psychodynamics of lament to bring specific expertise to the needs of real people in real situations. He recounts real stories of peoples' journeys and how the psalms have been valuable. This leads to a formation of a ritual that involves six steps for the person who is using the psalms of distress in a healing way. Once preparations are made in terms of environment and personal orientation, there is a preparation prayer. This leads into praying the psalm, giving time to contemplate it, meditate and then reflect. Cohen offers suggestions about particular psalms to use but it is not prescriptive. What the ritual offers is a comfortable structure that enables the use of the psalms of distress in either an individual's own use in solitude or with another to assist in the process and help with the distressed state of the one in need.

While this work has a very scholarly background, it is very accessible and very useful for practical ministry and gives a fresh look at the way in which we can engage with the psalms of lament.