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“Look and See If There Is Any Sorrow Like My Sorrow?” Systemic Metaphors for Pastoral Theology and Care

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I. A SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING OF PASTORAL CARE

This essay is about immeasurable human suffering and the role of the redeemer in pastoral theology and care. Here, pastoral theology is concerned with the practice, language, and normative traditions that help to ground acts of care and interpret God’s presence. In doing pastoral theology, I use metaphor as a way of seeing. Through metaphor we are able to make sense of mystery, the divine reality, and give meaning to our everyday experiences, thought, and action. I use metaphor to create images that represent the divine reality, the relationship be-

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Two biblical metaphors, daughter Zion in Lamentations and the redeemer in Second Isaiah, provide resources for pastoral care in the face of immeasurable human suffering. Pastoral care must come to terms not only with personal suffering but with the systemic suffering that arises from institutional, social, and political oppression.
etween God and people, the ethos of a group, the spirit of society, as well as its emotions, character, interactions, and environment. I often use metaphor to plant or find seeds of hope. Metaphor can describe and re-describe experience, offer choice, redefine and help transform understandings of our way of being in the world. Metaphor, then, is a way of understanding or experiencing something that may not be familiar by referring to something that is familiar.¹

Two metaphors are central to this presentation: the female, daughter Zion, and the redeemer. Both are systemic metaphors. Systemic metaphors enable us to think at the collective level, to consider the contexts of human suffering and the patterns that link one context to another.² The Old Testament prophets, for example, used the metaphor of a weeping woman—a childless widow—and her destitute state to express the grief of the suffering community and to give vivid description to the immeasurable destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Eighteen times in the five chapters of Lamentations the one who has experienced calamity is identified as “daughter.”³ The prophets use a second metaphor to describe the relationship of God to suffering humanity: the redeemer, a cultural term defining certain family obligations. Both metaphors are employed in this essay. There is tension between the two metaphors, as we shall soon see.

Pastoral care is shaped by responses to the problems people bring to a caregiver. Those “problems” are most often framed in personal or familial terms, often involving relationship difficulties. Sometimes they are defined as issues of faith or spiritual discernment. Loss of meaning, dying and death, mourning, loneliness and depression, abusive or broken covenants that may result in divorce and impact children—these are among the important issues that people bring to a pastoral caregiver. Beyond the personal aspect of these problems, each includes also a systemic and cultural dimension. As Cornel West observed:

> A pervasive spiritual impoverishment grows. The collapse of meaning in life—the eclipse of hope and absence of love of self and others, the breakdown of family and neighborhood bonds—leads to the social deracination and cultural denudement of urban dwellers, especially children. We have created rootless, dangling people with little links to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose in life.⁴

This systemic dimension—“the collapse of meaning in life”—is missed altogether when pastoral caregivers use Scripture to emphasize that people’s difficulties result solely from personal sin and guilt.


²For an excellent statement of the application of systemic thinking to therapeutic context, see Gill Gorell Barnes, Gwynneth Down, and Damian McCann, Systemic Supervision: A Portable Guide for Supervision Training (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2000).


⁴Cornel West, Race Matters (Boston: Beacon, 1993).
Whether recognized or not, pastoral care, generally defined in the United States as the care or cure of individual souls, is shaped by systemic influences and collective human suffering. What might we learn when biblical metaphors such as daughter Zion and the redeemer are used to describe immeasurable community suffering, the divine milieu, and hope? How might such metaphors inform a model of pastoral theology and care?

Ideally, pastoral care is a discipline where theoretical and practical interest intersect and make a beneficial difference in people’s lives. Understood traditionally as the care of souls, pastoral care among contemporary Protestants has come under the tutelage of secular psychology, developments in psychotherapy, and modern medicine. Not until recently has this contemporary development taken seriously the systemic influences (i.e., the interplay of societal and intercultural patterns, historical influences, changing economic conditions, and immediate social networks) that shape personal reality. Systemic influences help shape the specific context from which thought and action arise.

The paradigm that still dominates understandings of pastoral care is the one-to-one, individual seeker-helper relationship. Individual problems including ideas about sin and guilt, psychopathology, and other mental health issues have been treated within a psychodynamic framework. This is an important emphasis, but it may be limited and deceptive, especially when it results in privatized understandings of suffering that fail to take seriously the systemic and moral dimensions to the sufferings we experience collectively and individually. This individual and psychological emphasis is not helpful when it renders us impotent to assess violence that comes from religious organizations, the family, and from social and political oppression. Pastoral caregivers are challenged to assess institutional power arrangements and practices that create and maintain human trauma. They are challenged to address the impact of historical events that profoundly affect the lives of parishioners and care seekers. Not to do so assures the continuation of trauma and thwarts the possibility of healing. A sole focus on the individual can obscure awareness of resources, the relations among people, and the need to build communities of love, empowerment, and wider justice. From my perspective, contemporary pastoral care as taught and practiced in mainline Protestant seminaries has not related the social sciences and psychology to Scripture and historical consciousness in a way that might illuminate a systemic perspective on pastoral care’s subject, the human person-in-context.

In this essay I shall draw upon Scripture and historical consciousness as important resources for systemic pastoral care. By looking at a particular historical context that employed systemic metaphors such as daughter Zion in the book of Lamentations or the redeemer in Second Isaiah, we may reconnect with language and traditions that are older and deeper than modern psychology. Perhaps we may find new directions for the teaching and practice of pastoral theology and pastoral care.

Ideas about the book of Lamentations were inspired in conversations with
my colleague who teaches homiletics, Mary Donovan Turner. She has written about the role and significance of the female voice amidst suffering and especially in proclamation. Ideas about the redeemer role were stimulated by a course on “Biblical Families and Contemporary Families” that Norman K. Gottwald and I recently offered. We saw that the family stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Esau and Jacob involved challenging issues of loyalty, jealousy, secrets, deceit, betrayal, loss, indebtedness, debtor relationships, being sold into slavery by a family member, failed attempts at restoration, and the ever-present need for forgiveness and making a new life. In such a sequence of events, the role of the redeemer, the one who restores, was crucial. The need for a redeemer remains meaningful today—someone in the family or tribe who can set things right, buy back property, release a group member from bondage, restore a former sense of dignity, and make forgiveness a potent reality. Without such a figure and such redemptive acts, Israel’s history as well as our own would be replete with misery. And without a voice to articulate suffering, the depths of misery may never be known. Without voice and redeemer, history becomes a prison where people are hopelessly locked into pointless and violent struggles for survival—as in Jean-Paul Sartre’s No Exit, a story without end and a story without hope. The biblical drama tells a story of how women and men, boys and girls, “gifted and burdened by an immense freedom of imagination, search for some way to express their desire to create” in their relationship with an infinitely creative God. They are never free from the threat of losing their true identity as valued and purposeful beings in God’s eyes. Voice imaginatively articulates and enables us to hear the suffering. The redeemer, in turn, is the one who works to recover or restore a sense of intrinsic worth amidst the exigencies and vicissitudes of history, human suffering, the systems, principalities and powers that would diminish or destroy people as valued by God. Because there is a redeemer and someone to give voice, the biblical story moves from sin and suffering to hope, to restoration, to exuberant joy.

II. THE METAPHORS: DAUGHTER ZION AND THE REDEEMER

The church community is generally not familiar with the Old Testament book of Lamentations. Rarely is it used for sermon texts, and with very few exceptions its words are neither familiar nor cherished. There is good reason. The book of Lamentations describes the unimaginable suffering of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., and it does so through the metaphor of a desolate and destitute woman who has no one to comfort her. In a series of five poems that vividly describe the full scope of human suffering,
Israel is depicted as a woman disgraced by the enemy and abandoned. Passersby look upon her and sneer; her friends and lovers have betrayed her. Her children have been torn from her, and she is utterly alone with no one to comfort her. The suffering is astonishing and extensive. Every social category suffers: babes, sucklings, children, boys, young men, young women, mothers, fathers, and old men and women are portrayed as suffering varying degrees of trauma. Slaves, priests, prophets, widows, orphans, princes, and kings are all there as well. Her suffering is unparalleled. “Is there any suffering like my suffering?” she asks (Lam 1:12b).

As readers we move imperceptively and unknowingly between the image of the grieving woman and that of the city. The personal is communal and the communal is personal. As such, the woman comes to represent the community, the systemic dimension of suffering. The suffering that is concealed and haunts the city is broken when the observer gives voice to the communal suffering. The observer does not merely stand by. The observer’s role is to look and see and recognize what is going on. Seeing comes before words. Seeing establishes the observer’s place in the surrounding world and helps to establish a relationship between what is seen and what is known. Through the careful watch of the observer, experience that has been concealed is given voice, and the door is opened for release from suffering. It is the task of the observer to describe collective suffering so that collective resolution is possible.

People need certain fundamental things, including land and viable social, economic, and political structures, to help anchor a sense of spiritual, psychological, and physical well-being. They need love and acceptance, respect of self and others, self-determination (power), identity, voice, and justice (or a sense of fair play) to be fulfilled in relationships. This includes the divine-human relationship. People need ways to interpret their relationship to the unknown, and to the mystery that surrounds them. When conditions of national disaster occur and land is taken by coup or foreign invasion, the social and economic structures that help support love, power, and justice in relationships also collapse. Cultural and religious symbols of orientation that help to ground a secure base for affection are dislocated. People are demonized. Under such conditions the power of the enemy is in full force, regardless of one’s ascribed or acquired social status: rape, arrest, deportation, imprisonment, persecution, terrorism, torture, cruelty, betrayal, impotence, fear, mistrust, loss of control, violent death, inconsolable despair, surrender of self to others, insanity, and suicide become a way of life.

In poetic terms, the author of Lamentations describes the decimated Judahite community. Lamentations is Judah’s religious response to the loss of relationship

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9 Mary Donovan Turner, “Calling forth Redemption: Voices Ancient and New” (lecture delivered at Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, Texas, 10 October 2000).
with their land, with their spiritual inheritance, and with God. The anguish of the
community is depicted by the sobbing woman, daughter Zion. Is there a word of
hope? Of deliverance? Of restoration? Of redemption? While Lamentations un-
questionably acknowledges the woman’s sins, they remain unspecified:

- she is made to suffer for the multitude of her transgressions (Lam 1:5b)
- she has sinned grievously (Lam 1:8)
- she has rebelled against God’s word (Lam 1:18)
- her ancestors sinned, and daughter Zion bears their iniquities (Lam 5:7)

Is this sinfulness sufficient to call forth the level of fierce anger and destruction vis-
ited upon daughter Zion? We hear much more about Yahweh’s destructive power.
Yahweh has:

- given full vent to his wrath (Lam 4:11)
- made daughter Zion suffer for the multitude of her transgressions (Lam
  1:5b)
- humiliated daughter Zion (Lam 2:1)
- destroyed without mercy (Lam 2:2)
- destroyed Israel, laid in ruin its palaces and strongholds, multiplied
  mourning and lamentation (Lam 2:5)

Daughter Zion’s unspecified sins are in marked contrast to the great detail
taken to name the destruction of the city and the suffering of the people. Moreover,
the poems explicitly and implicitly question the appropriateness and the degree of
punishment (Lam 1:9c, 11c, 12; 2:20-22; 4:6; 5:1, 20, 22). The injustice of what she
has experienced provides the foundation for the pathos.

Lamentations is a theological paradox. Israel has sinned and abandoned her
God. She has pursued false and deceptive visions and worshiped foreign gods. And
Yahweh, with fierce indignation, has humiliated her and multiplied mourning and
lamentation. Yahweh has turned on the elect people and destroyed the temple. Hu-
man suffering is epic. Israel experiences exile, starvation, humiliation, loss of life, a
complete breakdown of those structures and conventions that support human af-
fection and give life meaning. Yahweh is the sole source and agent of the destruc-
tion.

Does the book of Lamentations provide justification for male violence to-
ward women? Is Yahweh the archetypical abusive parent or husband? Is Yahweh
a wife or child beater—the one who is always right, whose strength is unparal-
leled and whose authority cannot be opposed without grave consequences?
Shamefully, some models of and expectations for pastoral care are based upon
this patriarchal understanding. I once received a call from a husband who had
been referred to me. His opening question was, Do you use the Bible in your

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12Ibid, 351.
counseling? His follow-up question was, Do you believe that the wife should submit to her husband? He also wanted to know if I subscribed to the literature of Promise Keepers. He was apparently looking for a particular model of pastoral care that would underscore the unassailable authority of the husband/father and the submissive role of the wife or daughter. Is Yahweh the manifestation of an absolute enemy? If this is the case, then can daughter Zion be redeemed as a metaphor for pastoral theology and care?

Daughter Zion is humiliated, made insignificant, and powerless before an infinitely superior force. But she is not alone. There is someone watching her. An observer is describing her, feeling with her and for her. The observer looks upon her distress, gives a detailed description, heightens our awareness of her pain and offers an interpretation of what is happening to her. This observer or witness plays a crucial role in the story. The observer who watches and names the distress gives it voice so that the reality of the grieving woman can be known.

But that is not all. The observer encourages daughter Zion to cry out, to lament:

Cry aloud to the Lord!
O wall of Daughter Zion!
Let your tears stream down like a torrent
day and night!
Give yourself no rest,
your eyes no respite. (2:18)

The prophet and the caregiver are called to name the harsh realities of life. With the encouragement of this observer/witness/advocate, daughter Zion speaks. She speaks to Yahweh, and she speaks against Yahweh.

Look, O LORD, and see
how worthless I have become. (1:11c)

See, O LORD, how distressed I am;
my stomach churns,
my heart is wrung within me
because I have been very rebellious.
In the street the sword bereaves;
in the house it is like death.

They heard how I was groaning,
with no one to comfort me. (1:20-21a)

There is no response from Yahweh, the sole agent of her pain. Yahweh remains unyielding and silent.

This experience of immeasurable human suffering, of betrayal and trauma in the primal relationship between Yahweh and people, will be shared over the generations. How can healing occur after such immeasurable suffering and trauma? How will daughter Zion reinvest in the joy of new life? How will her life be re-
deemed and she regain a passion for life? These questions are not dealt with in the book of Lamentations. But there is grief work to be done, grief work for the entire nation. In order to do this work, daughter Zion needs to find voice, allow the truth of her situation to be heard, raise confronting questions, rescue her experience from the horror of her perceived adversary, restore or replenish the will to live. In order to reclaim her birthright, daughter Zion needs to find redemption from the trauma that comes from Yahweh.

Daughter Zion is the systemic metaphor for the suffering community. Her voice expresses the grief of the nation as she weeps bitterly and confronts the murderer of her children. If Yahweh is the abusive partner, the manifestation of an absolute enemy, then daughter Zion’s protest and confrontation would have been pointless. It would have been answered with more repression and violence. Violence would have had the final say. But this is not the case. Yahweh is not an immutable, inhumane adversary, incapable of empathy and reconciliation. There is redemption.

In the Old Testament, the word redeemer refers to a person’s brother, uncle, cousin, or some other kinsman who is responsible for standing up and maintaining the person’s rights. If, for instance, someone sells a house or a piece of property to pay a debt, there is a right of redemption, and the nearest relative is bound to buy back that which was sold and restore it to the family. That person is the redeemer. Boaz is the redeemer of Naomi and Ruth. Jeremiah redeems his uncle. If an Israelite sold himself to a foreigner as a slave, he could be redeemed by his relative. Every disruption of the unity of the clan is regarded as intolerable and as something that must be repaired or restored. How these secular meanings and their nuances from the legal and social realm influenced the theological understanding of redeemer in the Old Testament is not entirely clear, but we do know that Yahweh is the redeemer of the fatherless and the widow and pleads their cause (Prov 23:11; Jer 50:34). Yahweh took up the cause of a worshiper and redeemed his life (Lam 3:58). In the Old Testament people are redeemed from evil, violence, oppression, debt slavery, the hand of the enemy (the hand of those who are too strong), distress, dangers in travel, imprisonment, illness, death, and sin.

In the exodus, God promises to bring the people out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, to redeem them with outstretched arm.

We are interested here in the understanding of the redeemer in Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah is thick with references to the God who redeems and the people who are experiencing redemption. Second Isaiah uses the language and

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17“There is a considerable link between the lament language of Lamentations and the lament and ‘counter-lament’ language of second Isaiah”; private e-mail communication from Norman K. Gottwald, 10 September 2000. Also see Carol Newsom, “Response to Norman K. Gottwald, ‘Social Class and Ideology in Isaiah 40-55,’” *Semeia* 59 (1992) 76.
motifs of Lamentations, the metaphor of the female Zion, and uses it as the backdrop, the foundation for the new words of hope and comfort, the words of redemption that must be spoken. The words of Lamentations are, in their new context, revised. We might say they are reversed or diminished, minimized or distilled, absorbed or transformed. But the relationship between the two, Lamentations and Second Isaiah, is tight; thematically and linguistically the two are bound together.18 One of the tasks of Second Isaiah is to overthrow the pain-filled language of Lamentations. Remember the daughter Zion of Lamentations who could find no comforter? The first words of Second Isaiah ring out loudly:

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God. 
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the LORD’s hand  
double for all her sins. (Isa 40:1-2)

Yahweh is clearly labeled the redeemer in the Zion songs of Second Isaiah that are clustered in chapters 49-54. But it is the onlooker of Lamentations who observes, names the despair, and invites daughter Zion to speak who ushers in redemption. Reiterating words from Lamentations, the female Zion in Second Isaiah speaks: “But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me”” (49:14). With the sound of her voice, the oppression she has experienced begins to unravel. There is, in the sound of her voice, the beginning of wrong made right. Something new is being drawn forth. The woman is redeemed from the hand that has oppressed her. The female accused of unspecified grievous sin, of being unfaithful, now calls Yahweh to account for the destruction she has experienced.

Yet, there is unresolved tension. The ambiguities are not clarified. The thorny and troubling theological questions are not answered. In Lamentations, God is named the enemy, the murderer of Zion’s children. In Second Isaiah, God is the redeemer, the הָנָה, the repairer and restorer of broken covenant. We live with a paradox and with both images of God. God as redeemer stands at the heart of Second Isaiah’s understanding of the divine-human relationship. God the redeemer is the one who chastises, who is angry. But not forever. God is the helper and the avenger in times of trouble, the one who satisfies parched thirst with water, who is silent for a while, but answers the lament, who does not abandon forever.

This reading suggests that the contradictions in life do not have the final say. The suffering that leads to inconsolable despair can elicit acts of care, some of them from unexpected places. Even in the midst of unimaginable human suffering and widespread devastation there is still something to call to mind and give hope. It is

this something, a spiritual power that daughter Zion finds within herself, that redeems her from isolation and the experience of God as enemy.

I have been arguing that daughter Zion is an important yet complex metaphor for pastoral theology and care. Daughter Zion is a metaphor for immeasurable human suffering. There has always been human suffering. There always will be immeasurable human suffering as long as the human race exists. Hence, this is an important metaphor because it captures an aspect of human experience that we prefer to suppress. But come, “Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.” Daughter Zion would be an unredeemed metaphor if it stood only for everlasting suffering—suffering without meaning and without end. This metaphor may call to mind other historical examples of immeasurable human suffering—such as the Atlantic slave trade and middle passage, the Armenian holocaust, the Jewish holocaust, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, the massacre at My Lai, Native American suffering in North America, the former Soviet Union, ethnic suffering in Uganda, starvation in the Sudan, the divided societies of Korea and Ireland, Tiananmen Square, present-day Palestine, Burma, and so on. The point is that immeasurable and unexplainable human suffering is terrifyingly normal. No time or place is immune.

The observer begins the process that redeems daughter Zion. An observer approaches, sees, and names what is happening. The observer is an eyewitness and an advocate who can tell the truth and call forth redemptive action. Telling the truth is the first step toward ending the suffering. It opens up the possibility for something new to be drawn out of it. Moral courage is drawn out from the community, which makes it possible to resist those forces that make immeasurable human suffering inevitable. Having experienced humiliation as she did, it is important for daughter Zion to say, “Stop the violence against humanity!” Hers is a voice for humanity and a voice to end inhuman treatment. It is a protest against monstrous crimes and immeasurable human suffering. It is a cry for redemption and for a redeemed humanity.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND CARE

We live in a fragmented world, and one that attempts to celebrate diversity and difference. In such a world, what metaphors does contemporary pastoral theology and care employ to address collective and/or immeasurable human suffering? Which metaphors do we access to enable connections between one kind of suffering and another? How do we account for complexity in ourselves and in the divine experience? This essay discussed immeasurable human suffering and how two biblical metaphors might help pastoral theology and pastoral caregivers talk about it.

On the one hand, a pastoral theology ought to avoid an unwarranted optimism that posits that God is good all of the time. Such a theology is impotent in the face of unimaginable human suffering; it has nowhere to go except to blame the victims for their suffering or to search out the underlying defect or psychopathology that caused the suffering. On the other hand, pastoral care may not want to adopt a death-of-God theology and say there is no divine redeemer who works
through tragedy to buy back or restore us to a right relationship. We may not want to say that we are alone in the universe, with nothing beyond our human friends to bring us comfort. I do not want to end up there either. Neither position seems satisfactory. Instead, I would rather opt for the idea that our relationship to the divine is complex and that we are never free from the struggle of making sense of suffering and finding meaning in our experiences, especially the most contradictory. We “are highly susceptible to some call of the spirit while wondering whether it is divinity, the diabolical or madness” that summons creative responses from the community and through bitter suffering.19 We are called forth to be human agents, co-creators, and are compelled to a vocation that may cost us everything. And it is there at the boundary or limit of our powers that we have our deepest experience of redemption.

I began by talking about the intentional use of metaphor in pastoral theology and care. Metaphor is a way of seeing and knowing and explaining the world that surrounds us. It always has the character of “yet” and “not yet,” that is, it may describe a certain dimension of experience but not the whole of it. Hence, the relationship among seeing, knowing, and believing is never settled. Metaphors are language devices that arise from lived experience. They can call attention to gaps in awareness, the deep structures of experience, and the multiple layers of relationship. Some metaphors are simple, others complex. Some metaphors are about positive experiences, while others are about negative ones. Some metaphors that describe negative experiences such as immeasurable human suffering may or may not be redeemed in a way that will help people to move forward with their lives. But it is important to struggle with such metaphors, to deconstruct them for the meanings they hold and so that novel possibilities can arise. Some metaphors may be lost to us because they come from a different historical period and from a different world of human experience. Yet, when we uncover them, they may hold power for us in ways that we had not imagined. Recovered metaphors may enable us to envision and talk about realities in a language that had been buried in time or long forgotten. This is what I have attempted here. By looking at two systemic, biblical metaphors, daughter Zion and redeemer, we have accessed language from the ancient world that may enable us to explore the dimension of unimaginable and systemic human suffering in the context of the human-divine relationship—a dimension that appears to be in eclipse or lost to secular society and to mainstream American pastoral theology and care. When do we, like the female Zion, call into question the injustice of text, tradition, experience, or the activity of God so that new life-giving possibilities can abound? This question is important for a pastoral theology and care that understands itself as a witness in a world of unimaginable human suffering. ☩

19Pitzele, Our Fathers’ Wells, xix.