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“For there is still a vision:”
Metz’s Apocalyptic Eschatology and the Practice of Lament
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I. Introduction

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
 Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?
 Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?
 Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
 So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.
 The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

*...Then the Lord answered me and said:
 Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.
 For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
 it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
 If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
 it will surely come, it will not delay. (Hab 1:2-4, 2:2-3, NRSV)*

Many of us here today surely followed journalists’ accounts of Pope Francis’ recent trip to the Philippines. During a large public audience with youth in Manila, a 12-year-old homeless girl named Glyzelle Palomar broke down in tears as she recounted for the pope the way in which children in her country have borne in a disproportionate way the brunt of destruction and social sin. “Why is God allowing such things to happen, even if it is not the fault of the children? And why are there only very few people helping us?” she asked, sobbing. Pope Francis’ response to the jarring, clearly off-script moment: *cry*. “Glyzelle is the only one who has put a question to which there is no answer, and she wasn’t able to express it in words, only in tears,” Francis said. “Let us learn how to weep, as Glyzelle has shown us today.”¹

What does it mean to cry in the face of injustice? How is it that tears are, in some sense, the first right response to radical suffering? This paper will explore the place of hope in communal practices of lament through the lens of the apocalyptic eschatology of German political

theologian Johann Baptist Metz (b. 1928). After examining the role of hope in the practice of lament broadly speaking, I will argue that Metz's understanding of "suffering unto God," grounded in his notion of bounded time, provides a powerful lens through which we are able to ask the question which, in a world of suffering, continues to resound from the pages of Hebrew Scripture: "How long, O Lord?"

II. Practicing Lament, Envisioning Hope

In her study of aesthetics and ethics focusing on the Mural Arts Program in Philadelphia, Maureen O'Connell defines lament as an act of truth-telling that evokes social consciousness and moral responsibility and opens a public space for transformative compassion. Lament conveys "the *groaning and suffering* of a people, 'sometimes too deep for words' (Rom 8:23 and 26)."² It expresses both the conviction that suffering occasioned by injustice should not be and the demand that such circumstances be rectified. When lament is practiced communally, it subverts Western misconceptions of pain as an individual, private experience.³ When it is public, it has the capacity to disclose a prophetic and interruptive character. The act of naming, mourning, and ultimately transforming unjust realities becomes a critical source of moral agency and subjecthood, particularly for those dehumanized by injustice.⁴

At the intersection of lament as encountered scripturally, as in the book of Lamentations and the Psalms, and lament as practiced by persons and communities today, it is possible to identify three dimensions of such practices: *a) publically naming past and present injustices and speaking/performing words of truth against such injustices,*⁵ *b) envisioning hope at the site of this naming, and c) engaging in transformative moral action in service of a humanizing vision of life together.*⁶ In this paper, I focus on the second and perhaps least obvious of these three dimensions: envisioning hope. Popular images of social action often conceptualize it as the

natural overflow of indignation: “We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore!”

But lament invites us to recognize a critical middle space between mourning and action: the space of hope, perhaps even praise. Mourning occasions sustained presence to that which should not be – it allows us, perhaps even forces us, to be interrupted by reality.

One of the distinguishing features of the Psalms of lament is the movement from agony to hope.⁷ Psalm 22 serves as a clear illustration of this jump from cries of anguish to praise of God, a jump that at first appears puzzling:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.*

*Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. (NRSV 22:1-5).*

Neither the cries of distress nor the articulation of hope and praise can be understood apart from one another. The lament, which bespeaks both remembrance and expectation of God’s salvific intervention, gives cause and context to the words of praise.⁸ And yet the God portrayed, as Harvey Cox bluntly puts it, is “not the smiling superhelper who will lift us from our worries.”⁹ God is praised as the one in whom, despite apparent silence in the face of continued human suffering, God’s chosen ones choose to trust. In this way, praise is as much about memory as it is about hope-filled expectation: *it was you who took me from the womb; it was you who delivered our ancestors; it is you who heard my cries.*

It is in this space of hope that a community is re-membered to itself. Hope expressed in and awakened by praise entails a definitive affirmation of the community’s belovedness by God. The embodied, constructive work of praise, self-remembrance, and the naming of reasons for

hope must precede social action, or else such action emerges from a community still defined by, even if against, the words and categories of what Brueggemann calls the royal or dominant consciousness.¹⁰ One cannot move directly from “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” to action, or else the acts that flow from the initial expression of mourning will be acts of desperation and revenge. Where cycles of violence and injustice are transformed rather than perpetuated, it is hope that functions in this critical interruptive capacity.

III. Apocalyptic Hope and Suffering Unto God in the Theology of J.B. Metz

Hope is too often proffered either as a Pollyannaish panacea in the face of questions-without-answers, or as a distant intellectual inquiry into God’s presence and purposes. But as Glyzelle Palomar demonstrated to Pope Francis and the world, mourning demands not facile theological solutions or trite, rehearsed pastoral responses but rather reasons for continued hope in God’s promise of comfort for those who mourn (cf. Matt 5:4). Where do we encounter models of Christian hope that, to borrow the words of Jon Sobrino, help us to be honest with reality?

I want to suggest that Metz’s notion of “suffering unto God” and its connection to his understanding of apocalyptic hope provides us one such model. Writing in a post-Auschwitz context, Metz’s political theology came to be influenced by the trauma he experienced as a young soldier during the Second World War and the eventual, disturbing realization of profound Christian apathy during the Holocaust.¹¹ Suffering, for Metz, became “‘the’ eschatological question, the question in response to which theology responds not with answers that reconcile everything but rather with an incessant re such of God [*Rückfrage an Gott*].”¹² Metz calls this mystical stance “suffering unto God” (*Leiden an Gott*), “the mystical uneasiness of persistent questioning.”¹³ Metz goes even farther than Pope Francis. Where Francis encourages us to weep in solidarity with the victims of history, Metz emboldens us to *complain*. Suffering unto

God entails crying out and grumbling, and culminates not in pious satisfaction but in more questions – a “passionate questioning that arises out of suffering, a questioning of God, full of highly charged expectation.”¹⁴

Hope, for Metz, is located in the tension between time and the promise of salvation, “a relationship rendered precarious by the so-called delay of the Parousia: Why does he not come?”¹⁵ As an expression of “highly charged expectation,” hope reveals faith in the capacity of God to interrupt history on behalf of suffering people. Fundamental to this understanding of hope is Metz’s notion of bounded time. In order to lead to hope, memory of God’s faithfulness requires a recognition that the promise of God is a temporal promise and that “every biblical statement about being has a temporal mark.”¹⁶ For this reason, hope depends on history not being understood merely as “time without end,” for time-without-end leads inevitably to suffering-without-end and, ultimately, the grim realization of a God who makes promises of salvation that cannot possibly be kept. Hope in history, in this sense, *must* be apocalyptic.

Is such a vision realistic? Critics of Metz’s apocalyptic eschatology argue that such hope, far from catalyzing creative praxis in service of the Kingdom of God, has the opposite effect of being either a) utterly incoherent to modern/postmodern ears or b) apathy-inducing – If our hope is in the radically new that ultimately comes only from God, and if we eschew a vision of the future as the projection of human progress, does this force us to come to terms with our human incapacity to really do anything in service of this future, our inability to bring about (or participate in bringing about) this newness in any meaningful way? In either case, critics contend, Metz’s vision is not hopeful but rather paralyzing. Apocalyptic language and imagery has further evoked discomfort among contemporary theologians who critique its possible glorification of violence and reliance on dualistic thinking, as well as the basic scientific

implausibility of its temporal claims (that is, though we “know not the day nor the hour,” the laws of physics give us a high level of confidence that the world as we know it is probably not going to come to an end tomorrow).¹⁷

Without dismissing the validity of some of these critiques, I want to maintain that Metz’s vision offers tremendous promise for the way in which we conceptualize hope in the context of suffering and the practice of lament. Suffering unto God constitutes a posture of radical faith in the promise of God’s Kingdom. To ask of God, “How long?” betrays a belief – though perhaps a subconscious one – that time will not continue forever as it is. One does not ask “How long?” if one does not believe in a history marked by starts and stops – the kind of history prophesied in Hebrew scripture and proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospels. And yet, Metz argues, apocalyptic hope is not passive expectation. The world is not a “waiting room” in which Christians sit until at last “the door to God’s audience room is opened.”¹⁸ Rather, eschatological faith implies, not precludes, temporal commitment. It is for this reason that Metz emphasizes the creative and necessarily political dimension of this expectation: this kind of hope is a catalyst, not an opiate. It is a mystical disposition of discipleship that confronts human suffering with open eyes by insisting upon its own interruption by the victims of history, exculpating neither humanity nor God from responsibility while by refusing the false balm of easy answers. In this way, apocalyptic hope becomes an expression of resistance as it nurtures creative praxis in the midst of ongoing suffering and in solidarity with those who bear in a disproportionate and unjust way the brunt of social sin.

IV. Conclusion

The power of apocalyptic language throughout history, especially among the oppressed, is a testament to its resonance. African American spirituals that emerged out of the experience of

enslavement draw heavily on apocalyptic imagery. Recently, we have seen apocalyptic motifs arise in Christian reflection in response to police shootings of unarmed black men in Ferguson, Staten Island, and across the nation. Strange, jarring, disturbing, or fantastical though it may sound to unafflicted, bourgeois ears, the language of apocalyptic resonates where radical suffering occasioned by injustice compels us to ask, “O Lord, how long?” and where spiritual and even physical survival hinges on the reassurance that there is, as the writer of Habakkuk tells us, “still a vision for the appointed time.”

In the face of human suffering, tears do not replace action. When Pope Francis invited the world to learn to cry with the innocent young girl before him, he was insisting on the power of lament to transform reality. But for our tears to be transformative requires a vision of hope that sees clearly both “what is” without becoming overwhelmed by despair and “what should be” without dismissing, spiritualizing, or instrumentalizing the reality of past and present suffering. Metz’s notion of “suffering unto God” as an act of hope in the liberative and interruptive power of God offers us a valuable way in to thinking about the place of hope in transformative praxis on behalf of a vision of the Kingdom of God.

¹ “What Pope Francis learned from the homeless girl: ‘Cry with the suffering!’” *Catholic News Agency* (January 17, 2015). <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/what-pope-francis-learned-from-homeless-girl-cry-with-the-suffering-19592/>.

² Maureen O’Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 188.

³ It should be noted that this privatization and sanitization of pain is especially characteristic of white, middle class experience in the United States. Through this dominant lens, vocalized emotion and “messy” grief is suspect, especially when it comes from women and persons of color.

⁴ O’Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk*, 189

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000), 87.

⁶ Elaborating on each of these three dimensions lies beyond the scope of the present paper. I have done so in a paper presented at the 2014 Religious Education Association annual meeting, entitled “‘Mourn First:’ Interrupting and Unlearning Violence Through Community Practices of Lament.”

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986), 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58

⁹ Harvey Cox, in Cox and Stephanie Paulsell, *Lamentations and the Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁰ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire makes a similar point by distinguishing between subjects, “those who know and act,” from objects, “which are known and acted upon” (see translator’s note, Introduction to 30th Anniversary Edition, 2000, 36).

¹¹ Johann Baptist Metz, “Communicating a Dangerous Memory,” in *Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, edited by John K. Downey (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 141.

¹² Johann Baptist Metz, “Suffering unto God.” Translated by J. Matthew Ashley. *Critical Inquiry* 20:4 (1994), 613.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 622. See, too, J. Matthew Ashley’s translation note on p. 611.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 621

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 616

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 620

¹⁷ J. Matthew Ashley, “Apocalypticism in Political and Liberation Theology: Toward an Historical Docta Ignorantia,” *Horizons* 27:1 (2000), 24.

¹⁸ Johann Baptist Metz, “Creative Hope,” *Cross Currents* (Spring 1967), 176