

Lamentations: Confronting a national tragedy

“O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people!” (Jeremiah 9:1, NRSV) ¹

“Jesus wept.” (John 11:35, NIV)

“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10, NRSV)

In the five poems that comprise Lamentations the memory of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian troops in 587/86 B.C. is still quite vivid (2 Kings 25:8-21), and without the hope of imminent liberation typical of the prophetic texts at the end of the exile. Thus, it is common to date the poems early in the exile, in the decades just after the destruction (585-550 B.C.). Lamentations expresses the profound grief of the survivors in Palestine and attempts to explain the tragedy. It interprets the enemy oppressor's triumph as a divine and just punishment for the sins of Judah and Jerusalem, and insists that the supreme power of Yahweh was always operating behind the imperial power of Babylon, a conviction which provides a basis for the makings of a renewed hope (3:22-24; 4:22).

The first four of the five laments (Lam. 1-4) are acrostic poems (alphabetical), in which the letters that begin each strophe follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet (22 consonants).² The acrostic form imposes limits on the emotional expression, but also suggests a complete expression (from “A” to “Z”). Despite the title of some versions (“The Lamentations of Jeremiah”, KJV), no author is indicated in the Hebrew text (cf. 2 Chron. 35:25). The Septuagint (Greek) and the Vulgate (Latin) named Jeremiah as the author, but there are notable differences in style and theology between Jeremiah and Lamentations, and modern studies do not support the tradition of Jeremiah as the author.³

1. The poor and oppressed. The explicit and technical vocabulary for the poor does not occur in Lamentations; however, various expressions describe specific experiences of poverty. As David Pleins⁴ points out, the author (or the authors) of Lamentations didn't belong to the poor classes, but represents the exiled and repentant elite: “The elite, who once were the oppressors, becomes defined through this text as the oppressed”.⁵ Pleins describes the new situation of Jerusalem's elite thus: once prosperous (4:5), but impoverished by the fall of the city. As a result: they scourge for food (1:11, 19), they die of hunger with the infants (2:19) and the children beg for bread (2:20; 4:10), mothers eat their own children (2:20; 4:10), the women are raped and the youth are sent off as slaves (5:11-13).⁶ Pleins concludes:

In seeing the tradition literally renew itself, we have a profound example of the way in which the elite, the carriers of the old liturgical voice, became the standard-bearers of the prophetic voice in a new way. As with Second Isaiah, Lamentations allows the elite to own its exile experience not only as God's punishment of the "unjust" but also as God's ground for revitalizing the "just" who have been unjustly treated (3:31-37). In other words, by knowing affliction (3:1), the former oppressive elite becomes one, rhetorically and in human experience, with those who had been oppressed in former times. By its suffering, this chastened elite is readied to be the harbingers of God's hope.⁷

We can compare the attitudes – often unrepentant – of today's exiled elite (of Cuba and Nicaragua). In addition to the vivid specific descriptions of the impoverished elite, Lamentations abounds with a vocabulary that describes the oppression that caused their ruin:

- "Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude...her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress" (*metsarim*; 1:3);
- See oppressors (*tsar*) and enemies in 1:5, 5, 7, 7, 10, 16, 17, (20), 21; 2:2, 7, 16, 17, 22; 3:46 (cf. *qam*, enemy, 3:62); the violent ones that spill innocent blood (4:13), the "daughter of Edom" (4:21, 22);⁸
- See oppression (*'oni*) in 1:9; 3:1, 19; 3:33; 5:11.⁹

The last poem gives us various concrete examples of oppression: expropriated lands (5:2); exorbitant taxes (v. 4); slavery (v. 8); women raped (*'nh*, v. 11); violence (v. 12); servitude (v. 13). See the metaphor of the yoke in 5:5 and 1:14.

In 2:4 Yahweh, indignant with the nation's sinning, acts "as" enemy/oppressor. God is the source of good as well as of evil (3:38; that is, the punishment of sin), but the oppression (*'nh*) does not represent his desire or purpose, since it does not come from the "heart" (3:33) of God, who is all good.

As is common in the Bible, justice is understood, starting from the experiences of oppression (*daka'*), as a liberating justice (→ Matthew):

When all the prisoners of the land are crushed (*daka'*)¹⁰ under foot, when human rights (*mishpat*) are perverted in the presence of the Most High, when one's case (*rib*) is subverted – does not the Lord see it? (3:34-36)

You have seen the wrong done to me, O Lord;
take charge (*shaphat*) of my cause (*mishpat*)! You have seen all their malice, all their plots against me....
Pay them back for their deeds, O Lord, according to the work of their hands! (3:59-60, 64).

(See "The Lord is just [*tsadiq*]", 1:18; "shed the blood of the righteous [*tsadiqim*], 4:13.

2. Women. Given that women acted as leaders and officials during the period of grief in Israel, the poems in Lamentations 1–2 and 4–5 could include women among their authors, especially in the original oral forms (since it was mostly the men who knew how to write and who occupied the posts as scribes).¹¹ And especially in the second poem are there abundant metaphorical references to the capital city of Jerusalem as “daughter/maiden” (18 time in the book; similar expressions occur only 45 times in the Hebrew Bible;¹² many common translations do not reflect such references in the original Hebrew). Also similar are the two references to “daughter Edom” (4:21-22 NRSV). In this personification of the city (or nation) as Woman, the Hebrew phrase “daughter Zion/Jerusalem” refers to the entire city, not just to the women. However, 11 references (*) focus on the suffering of literal women of the city:

1:1 “Like a widow...she that was great...She that was a princess...has become a vassal.” (cf. 5:3)

*1:4 “her young girls”

1:6 “daughter Zion”

1:15 “the virgin daughter Judah”

*1:18 “young women”

2:1 “daughter Zion”

2:2 “daughter Judah”

2:4 “daughter Zion”

2:5 “daughter Judah”

2:8 “daughter Zion”

2:10a “daughter Zion”

2:10b “the young girls of Jerusalem”

2:11 “daughter of my people” (KJV)

*2:12 “mothers”

2:13a “daughter Jerusalem”

2:13b “virgin daughter Zion”

2:18 “daughter Zion”

*2:20 “women” (cannibalism)

*2:21 “young women”

[3:1. 27, 39; a “male (Hebrew, *geber*)” speaks in 3:1 -66]

3:48 “the daughter of my people” (KJV)

*3:51 “the young women in my city”

4:3 “the daughter of my people” (KJV)

4:6 “the daughter of my people” (KJV)

*4:10 “compassionate women”

4:10 “the daughter of my people” (KJV)

4:21 “the daughter Edom”

4:22 “daughter Zion”

4:22 “daughter Edom”

*5:3 “our mothers are like widows”

**5:11 “Women are raped (*’nh*) in Zion, virgins in the towns of Judah.”

In describing the city as a widow, Lamentations 1:1 awakens the sympathy of the reader:

How [Hebrew: *'ekah*; see 2:1; 4:1] lonely sits the city that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.

(The book's Hebrew title comes, as always in the Hebrew Bible, from the first word *'eikah*.)

Immediately, however, the first poem shows that all the city's (woman's) suffering is a just punishment for her adultery (disobedience) with her "lovers" (1:2, 5, 9, referring to the political alliances with pagan nations). The city (woman) is described as "filthy/dirty" (the image of a menstruating woman, *niddah*, 1:8 and 17; *tumea*, 1:9; ver Romans 1, → Romans).¹³

Lamentations literally describes the sexual violations the women of Jerusalem suffered under the invaders (5:11). Kathleen O'Connor concludes that when the woman (city) speaks in 1:12-27, the text describes Yahweh as also involved in the rapes and sexual violence (1:12-13, the image of Yahweh as the husband furious with his adulterous wife). According to O'Connor,

Daughter Zion blames herself for the excesses of her abuser and, like contemporary victims of domestic violence, appears to have no self-esteem left [citing 1:18]....To assign responsibility to humans, the poet of chap. 1 uses the metaphors of adulteress, menstruant woman, and abused woman. As a consequence, the poem symbolically blames women alone for the destruction of the city, and it teaches disdain for women and for their bodies. Most disturbing of all, chap 1 indirectly justifies abuse of women by portraying God as the abuser.¹⁴

Although we can question whether Lamentations goes to such extremes, without doubt other books of the Bible do. For an evaluation and reply to this criticism of the metaphors of sexual violation, see the excursus of the study by Corrine Patton on Ezekiel 23, → Ezekiel (cf. → Nahum).

In addition to referring to woman (city) as adulterous, menstruating and justly raped, two texts speak of the horrors during the final siege of Jerusalem, and describe compassionate women (literally) as being guilty of cannibalism, eating their own children (2:20; 4:10; see Deut. 28:52-57). O'Connor points out that in the theological core of Lamentations, when speaking in more positive terms of a hope based on the mercy, compassion, faithfulness and goodness of Yahweh (3:22-24), the person speaking is explicitly a male (Hebrew *geber*, 3:1, 26, 27, 39; KJV "man").¹⁵ On the other hand, if 1:12-13 speaks of Yahweh as a violator of women, then even more explicitly 3:1-18 describes God as a violator of men.

3. Sexual Minorities: “Boys must not cry?” If the old tradition were true that the bachelor Jeremiah wrote Lamentations, then the author’s status as a sexual minority would be undeniable (Jer. 16:1-2, → Jeremiah). At any rate, Lamentations 3, the only chapter explicitly written by a male (3:1, 26, 27, 39, KJV), has a very individual focus, with no evidence of concern whatsoever for family or “family values”. What is more, the preference of the book for the image of a “virgin” (1:4, 15, 18; 2:10, 13, 21, KJV; cf. 5:11 literal; seven times in total) suggests the perspective of an unmarried person. (See also the references to women “widows” in 1:1, 5:3; and the bachelor Paul in 1 Cor. 7, → 1 Corinthians.) Lamentations 1–2 and 4 could originate from an unmarried woman/virgin (see under **2. Women**), as also in chapter 5 in which the community speaks (“us”). However, in Lamentations 5 we find even more preoccupation over family situations (“our inheritance”, 5:2; “our mothers are like widows”, 5:3; “our ancestors sinned”, 5:7; “Women...virgins...old men...young men”, 5:11-14; see also 4:14).

Even though Kathleen O’Connor criticizes Lamentations for the negative attitudes toward women (see **2. Women**, above), in fact, by including males under the images of the city as woman, the book breaks with the rigid gender schemes (against the modern fundamentalist apologetics which insists in rigidly distinct roles for men and women). Above all, men can freely cry without being accused of being “queers” – a fundamental liberty for emotional health:

My eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of my people.
My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite (3:48-49).

(A man is speaking in this chapter, according to 3:1, 26, 27, 39, KJV.)

As O’Connor points out, the free expression of pain and grief is fundamental to then being able to express anger and just indignation.¹⁶ Lamentations makes a special point of Yahweh’s right to be angry against his nation unfaithful to the pact (1:12; 2:1-4, 6, 21-22; 3:1, 43, 66; 4:11; 5:22; cf. the time limit in 3:31).¹⁷ Such liberty to be indignant is fundamental to the expression of confidence in free and liberating divine love (3:22-26). The acts of remembering and recounting the injustice, oppression and violence of captivity were fundamental to the emotional health of the Jewish community. For sexual minorities it is of equal importance to remember and to recount with pain the violent history of homophobia,¹⁸ to then be able to express the just indignation and the determination to change the world.

4. Lamentations and AIDS. Eric Rofes, for many years a gay activist in the fight against AIDS, has compared the disease’s devastation with the Holocaust and with the dropping of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. Rofes explains: “The literature that speaks to me these days is the literature of natural disasters and human atrocities.”¹⁹ However, Ken Stone warns us against the use of texts such as Lamentations to promulgate the theory that AIDS is God’s punishment of homosexuals.²⁰ While some Christian martyrs glorified suffering, the Psalms of supplication in the Bible (→ Psalms) struggled against suffering and insisted that God and human beings should alleviate it. Stone and Mona West point out that throughout the Bible the supplications give voice to the resistance against a Deuteronimist theology of retributive justice that claims that suffering is always a divine punishment for some sin (→ Job).

Mona West concludes that the act of spilling tears, as Lamentations shows us, “is an essential part of bearing witness to the atrocity of AIDS, and they are an essential part of our healing.” In addition, in reference to Africa, Asia and Latin America, West affirms: “Our shed tears can become a gift we offer to a world grief-stricken over AIDS.”²¹ As one of the first communities afflicted with this disease, gays have expressed their pain, with lit candles at the ceremonies of the World AIDS Day and the memorial AIDS Quilt: “Queers in the United States have the unique opportunity to offer our gift of tears to the global community as wounded healers.”²² And that which West affirms in reference to the gay community in the US, we can affirm of any community in the world that has received the legacy of tears and is learning to experience the divine healing of its pain, since:

- 22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
[God’s] mercies never come to an end;
- 23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness!
- 23 “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in [God].” (Lam. 3:22-24)

Hymn: “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”. Lamentations 3:22-23.

Bibliography

Lamentations

- Abrego de Lacy, José and others (1994). *Lamentaciones. Cantar*. Estella: Verbo Divino, 1994.
- Albrektson, Berth (1963). *Studies in the Text and Theology of the Book of Lamentations*. Lund: Studia Theologica Lundensia 21.
- Berlin, Adele (2002). *Lamentations*. OTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Fernández, Victor Manuel (1999). “Lamentaciones”. *Comentario Bíblico Internacional*. William F. Farmer, ed. Estella (Navarra): Verbo Divino, 947-952.
- Gottwald, Norman K. (1962). *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*. Chicago: Alec R. Allenson.
- Hausl, María (1998/99). “Die Klagelieder: Zions Stimme in der Not.” *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, eds. Gütersloh: Chr Kaiser/Gütersloher, 270-277.
- Hanks, Thomas D. (1983). *God So Loved the Third World: The Biblical Vocabulary of Oppression*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983; reprinted Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000.
- Hillers, Delbert R. (1964/92). *Lamentations*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday.
- Hunter, Jannie. (1996). *Faces of a Lamenting City: The Development and Coherence of the Book of Lamentations*. BEATAJ 39. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- O’Connor, Kathleen (1992/98). “Lamentations”. In *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe, 187-191. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- (2001). “The Book of Lamentations”. In *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, 6:1011-1072. Nashville: Abingdon.
- (2002). *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Linafelt, Tod (2000). *Surviving Lamentations: Castrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Mayoral, Juan Antonio (1994). *Sufrimiento y esperanza. La crisis exílica en Lamentaciones*. Estella: Verbo Divino.
- Renkema, Johan (1998). *Lamentations*. Historical Commentary on the Old Testament. Leuven: Peeters.

Rofes, Eric (1996). *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men's Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic*. New York: Harrington Park.

Soelle, D. (1975). *Suffering*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Stone, Ken (1999). "Safer Text: Reading Biblical Laments in the Age of AIDS". In *Theology and Sexuality* 10: 16-27.

West, Mona (2001). "The Gift of Voice, the Gift of Tears: A Queer Reading of Lamentations in the Context of AIDS". In *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone. Cleveland: Pilgrim.

——— (1995). "Lamentations". In *The Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Watson Mills and Richard Wilson, 667-72. Macon, GA: Mercer University.

Westermann, Claus (1994). *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress. *Die Klageleider: Forschungsgeschichte und Auslegung*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener; (1990).

The City in the Bible

>>>Cox, Harvey (1965). *The Secular City*.

Ellul, Jacques (1970/75). *The Meaning of the City*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

——— (1969/80). *Contra los Violentos*. Madrid: S. M.

——— (1988/91). *Anarchie et Christianisme*. Lyon: Atelier de Creation Libertaire.

Gill, David W. (1979). "City, Biblical Theology of". In *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, 1: 713-715. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Note. Concerning the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, in addition to the biblical theology of the city and various texts in Lamentations, see the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9); the tower that fell (Luke 13:1-5).

End Notes

1. See Jeremiah 7:29; 8:18-9:1, 17-22
2. For other examples of acrostic poems, see Psalms 9-10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145; Prov. 31:10-31; cf. Nahum 1:2-8, → Nahum.
3. See NRSV, JB.
4. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2001), 439-443, 451
5. *Ibid.*, 441.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 442.
8. Thomas D. Hanks, *God So Loved the Third World: The Biblical Vocabulary of Oppression* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983; reprinted Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 20-22.
9. *Ibid.*, 15-17.
10. *Ibid.*, 14-15.
11. Kathleen O'Connor, "Lamentations", in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992/98), 187.
12. Delbert Hillers, *Lamentations*, AB7A (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 30-31.
13. O'Connor, 189; see William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 11-143.
14. O'Connor, 189.
15. *Ibid.*, 189-90.
16. *Ibid.*, 190-91.
17. For the vocabulary, see Thomas D. Hanks, "The Theology of Divine Anger in the Psalms of Lament", Th.D. thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO., 1972.
18. Byrne Fone, *Homophobia: A History* (New York: Metropolitan/Henry Holt, 2000).
19. Eric Rofes, *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men's Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (New York: Harrington Park, 1996), 36-37. Cited in Mona West, "The Gift of Voice, the Gift of Tears: A Queer Reading of Lamentations in the Context of AIDS", in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 140.
20. Ken Stone, "Safer Text: Reading Biblical Laments in the Age of AIDS", *Theology and Sexuality* 10 (1999): 16-27. Cited in Mona West (see preceding note 19), 142, 147. See Lam. 1:5, 8-9.
21. Mona West, "The Gift of Voice, the Gift of Tears: A Queer Reading of Lamentations in the Context of AIDS", in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 150.
22. *Ibid.*, 151.

ERRATA:

Missing information in the bib. (see >>>).
Add 2 paragraphs from Ezequiel answering O'Connor.