Lamentations: A Book for Today

Christopher J. H. Wright

Lamentations is a book for today. And yet, in a world where the tide of human suffering threatens to overwhelm whatever dikes we put in place to contain it, is there any book of the Bible more neglected?

This neglect of Lamentations is a grievous loss. First, it disregards the voice of those whose suffering the book so poignantly commemorates. Part of the horror of human suffering is to be unheard, forgotten, and nameless. Lamentations is a summons to remember. Second, though lament is not confined to the book of Lamentations, such neglect deprives the contemporary church of the language of lament.

Third, never to read Lamentations is to miss the challenge and reward of wrestling with the massive theological issues that permeate its poetry. How can the ultimate extremes of suffering be endured alongside faith in the living God, whom we have learned from the Scriptures and in experience to be all-loving and good? Indeed, hope is found right in the structural center of the book (3:21–24). But that affirmation of hope is surrounded on both sides with an unrelenting litany of unresolved suffering.

Lamentations in Its Own World

The circumstances that gave rise to this remarkable book were almost certainly the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C.² Of the city and the nation and the house that all bore God’s name, nothing remained except for a small exiled community in Babylon. This was unquestionably the most traumatic moment in the whole history of the Old Testament. Along with the massive human suffering at every level of physical and emotional experience went the devastating undermining of all that they had thought was theologically guaranteed—the Davidic monarchy, the city of Zion, and the very temple of their omnipotent God (or was he?). All were gone. It is out of that unspeakable pain that Lamentations speaks, doing so in poetry of astonishing beauty and intricacy, though soaked in tears.

The Poet. Who is the author? Whose voice speaks in these pain-filled poems? The plain answer is that we do not know, since the book is anonymous, without any name claimed by the author or inserted by an editor in the Hebrew text. Tradition that reaches all the way back to the Septuagint Greek translation (from late second century B.C.) ascribes the book to Jeremiah. There is nothing in the book that could not have been written by Jeremiah. And there is much in the book that certainly sounds like Jeremiah, or has been made to sound like him. But that, of course, is not to claim that it was written by Jeremiah. In the end we have to come back to where we started: whoever wrote this book has chosen not to disclose his or her name, and we need to respect that fact, treating it as possibly intentional. For that reason, I have chosen to refer to the author simply as the Poet.

The poetry. It is well known that great art, great music, and great literature can emerge out of great pain. This does not lessen the reality of the suffering of the artist, composer, or writer, but it points to something creative and redemptive in the human person, made in the image of God, that can bring forth a thing of beauty in the midst of surrounding ugliness, brutality, and evil. Nowhere is this more true than in the book of Lamentations.

Several formal features of the poetry of Lamentations are important to understand. Chapters 1–4 are all acrostic (the verses follow in alphabetic sequence), which keeps us moving on inexorably, unable to pause for too long on any of the scenes. This is a journey through grief, not wallowing in it. Second, the poems share features of both dirges (i.e., funeral songs for the dead, or in response to some terrible calamity) and laments (i.e., songs that appeal to God in the midst of suffering, persecution, or inexplicable violence, with a sense of protest and sometimes with hope and renewed praise). Often such poems use a meter known as qinah. Most Hebrew poetry used a form of meter that tends to balance out the number of stressed syllables in both halves of the lines of poetry (often 3 + 3). Qinah meter shortens the second half, so that it is typically 3 + 2 stresses, creating a kind of limping or moaning effect. This meter is used predominantly throughout Lamentations.

Third, the Poet heightens the dramatic tension of his portrayal of Jerusalem’s suffering by speaking through different “characters,” whose voices interact with each other. There is one voice, however, that we never hear. God does not speak in the whole book of Lamentations.³ Heaven is silent, which does not necessarily mean that heaven is deaf or blind.

The artistic structure of Lamentations suggests that chapter 3 might be the central focus of the message of the book as a whole. That impression is strengthened by the intensification of the acrostic pattern in that chapter. Right at the center of that chapter—that is, at the apparent center of the book as a whole—come the strongest words of positive hope and theological affirmation that the book can muster (3:31–33, preceded by the famous lines of 3:22–24).

And yet, and yet . . . it is not quite the perfect center, for the Poet has so structured chapters 4 and 5 that they bring the book to a waning, limping end, rather like the qinah meter that dominates the poetry itself. Chapter 4 is acrostic, but it has two-line stanzas, while chapter 5 has twenty-two one-line verses. This gradual shortening of the chapters and stanzas makes the book slowly ebb away, like the lives of those who suffer in its pages.

Lamentations and Suffering

When real suffering happens to whole communities, it should not merely pass unnoticed into historical amnesia (or, even worse, deliberate denial). That remains true even if the suffering comes to an end or achieves some good purpose or is simply replaced by better times.⁴

A voice. A war memorial of stone is a silent witness. It is in the poetry of the First World War that we hear the living voice of
those who served in that conflict, now dead every single one. Likewise the poetry of Lamentations gives voice to those who were rendered voiceless in the vortex of violence. “What can I say for you?” asks the Poet (2:13). His whole book is the answer. Lamentations makes us listen to the voices of the sufferers—in the profusion and confusion of their pain, the bitterness of their protest, their shafts of self-condemnation, their brief flashes of hope and long night of despair, and their plaintive pleading with God just to look and see. If in the midst of these voices there is accusation against God, Lamentations lets us hear that too. This book forces us to listen to every mood that the deepest suffering causes, whether we approve or not. We are called not to judge, but to witness. Not to speak, but to listen.

Confession. Among those moods there is confession of sin. The people of Jerusalem acknowledge that their own rebellion and folly has brought upon them the wrath of God through the agency of their human enemies. Words to that effect are a theological thread running through the book (1:5, 8, 14, 18; 2:1, 14, 17; 3:39, 42; 4:6, 11, 13; 5:16). It is (and we must emphasize this) a confession that is very particular. It connects the specific events of 587 B.C. to the equally specific record of sin and rebellion against YHWH, the covenant God of Israel, that stretched back across the centuries. It is not a theology of suffering and sin to be applied in general to any and all situations where people suffer. On the contrary, it is a theology of judgment governed by the covenant relationship between God and Old Testament Israel.

Two responses to this theological thread in the book seem to take us in wrong directions. One is to dismiss or minimize the idea that the suffering of Jerusalem was God’s punishment for their sin, by calling it, for example, “the conventional explanation of the events.” Kathleen O’Connor considers the Poet to be so shocked by Jerusalem’s suffering that he turns from being accuser (in chapter 1) to being advocate, accusing God instead. God, not Judah, is the real culprit. So the book as a whole then becomes an anti-theodicy—that is, not defending the justice of God’s ways, but accusing God of blatant injustice.

True, there is protest and even accusation against God in Lamentations, but advocates of the view just mentioned seem not to have read Jeremiah or Ezekiel or the story of the late monarchy in Israel and Judah in 2 Kings. That is, do they take seriously the account of the depth and depravity of the nation’s religious apostasy, social disintegration, economic oppression, judicial corruption, criminal violence and bloodshed, and political faction and folly? Every conceivable form of moral and spiritual wickedness was flourishing in a nation that claimed a covenant relationship with the living God and knowledge of his ethical standards.

And do those who see Lamentations as one great accusation of God for acting as if “mad, out of control, swirling about in unbridled destruction” reflect at all on the patience of God? The destruction of 587 B.C. did not happen out of the blue. There had been warning after warning, appeal after appeal—all with the longing on God’s part that the judgment need not fall. In the end, all the warnings were unheeded, and so the disaster happened.

But the other inadequate response to the confession of sin in Lamentations is, at the opposite extreme, to claim that God’s judgment completely explains everything—as though we can read the horrific accounts of all the violence, destruction, and suffering and simply say, “It was all God’s punishment for their sin; they got what they deserved.” But that, surely, is to fail to listen to the agonized voices in the book or to consider what today would be called the “proportionality” of the suffering inflicted on them by Babylon in the “day of God’s anger.” Robin Parry puts the point well:

The implicit complaint against God in the book is that the punishment seems to exceed the crime. It is too deep, cutting the nation to the heart. It is too wide, taking in innocent children. It lasts too long. . . . It is clear that it is an imperfect justice. The righteous suffer alongside the guilty (Ezek. 21:3-4). . . . No adequate theodicy is given in this book or anywhere else in the Bible.

A protest. The “Why” will not go away, and when it is raised up to God, it emerges as protest. This is a note that we also find in some of the psalms of lament and in the books of Jeremiah and Job. When people with faith in God experience or witness the realities of injustice, oppression, violence, lying, and all the attendant suffering, they cry out to God in protest. Why do such things happen?

It is important to recognize that such protest is not in itself blaming God for doing wrong. Nor, in my view, is it intrinsically sinful. It is faith seeking understanding. If God rules the world, and if God is the God of justice and compassion (as we affirm that he does and is), why does he permit such evil to persist? Such protest, in other words, is not a denial of God’s sovereignty, but rather an acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty. Rather it assumes the sovereignty and goodness of God and, on that foundation, is bold to hold up before God the realities of our lives that seem to contradict and undermine that very foundation. Protest to God is also protest for God—that is, it emerges from a passionate concern for God’s name to be vindicated in the midst of all that slanders it. The voice of protest firmly believes that “the Judge of all the earth [will] do right” (Gen. 18:25) but longs for reassurance that ultimately he will indeed do so, unmistakably and visibly.

In the meantime, the struggle goes on, and the protesting questions remain. Lamentations accepts both the sovereignty of God and the righteous wrath of God, which is his justified reaction to persistent, unrepented sin. It recognizes, however, that God’s judgment can operate through the agency of human beings who, in executing God’s judgment at the “street level” of history, are themselves guilty of the most appalling wickedness and cruelty. In the catastrophe of 587 B.C., all of these elements clash together in the conflagration. God is sovereign; God is judge. But even so, “Why, Lord? How long, O Lord?” Significantly, the book ends by putting these things together in adjacent verses. The voice of faith proclaims God’s sovereignty,

You, LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures from generation to generation (5:19).

And then the voice of protest immediately follows, as if to say, “That being so . . .”

Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long (5:20).

God emerges as the ultimately faithful and compassionate one, who, even when he afflicts people in judgment, does not do so “from his heart.” God is the one to whom you bring your penitence and prayer. And God is the one in whom alone your hope can be ultimately secure, however long it is delayed.

A home and a bottle. There is a very great deal of suffering in our world. Most of it cannot and should not be interpreted in the way Lamentations interprets 587 B.C. Nevertheless, Lamentations can provide a valid response. If the book voices the pain of those who knowingly suffered under the judgment of God,
how much more does it speak for those who suffer for all kinds of other reasons—in inexplicable disasters, as refugees and “collateral damage” in the endless wars of humanity, under persecution for the name of Christ, and many more causes. The book is an authentic portrayal of realities that many in our world today still endure.

Lamentations provides, in Kathleen O’Connor’s apt phrase, “a house for sorrow and a school for compassion.” It provides the safe space, the rooms, in which grief can be expressed to its limits, over and over again, without interruption or denial, even if without comfort as yet.

And tears, we know, are precious to God. God sees and hears those who weep (whether he answers them immediately or not), and he does not forget their tears. There are tears of repentance (5:15–17), tears of loneliness (1:16), tears of sympathy (2:11), tears of supplication (2:18–19). All have their own validity. “We need to acknowledge when the tears of lament are tears of pain, frustration, and anger rather than tears of pious repentance. And we need to recognize the legitimacy of such tears,” for God does.

The book of Lamentations is like a bottle for the tears of the exiles, and by extension for the tears of the world. We know from Jeremiah that God weeps with his people and his prophet. We know from Isaiah that “in all their affliction he was afflicted” (Isa. 63:9 ESV). Because we have read the rest of the Bible, we know the certainty of God’s own promise that he will “wipe away the tears from all faces,” that “sorrow and sighing will flee away,” that “the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard... no more,” because “he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Lamentations and the Bible

We have indeed read the rest of the Bible, and we must read Lamentations within the embrace of the canon—both the canon of the Old Testament Scriptures, to which it belongs, and the canon of the whole Bible as God’s word. The Bible speaks today just as surely through Lamentations as through any other book in the canon.

From God’s silence to God’s word. God remains silent throughout the book. He allows the other voices to speak till they have said all they want to or can. He does not interrupt, whether to comfort or correct, to explain or excuse. This silence should surely be interpreted positively, not as divine deafness but as divine restraint.

Yet we receive the book as part of the canon of Scripture. God not only allows, but ensures, that this torrential outpouring of human words with all their pain, anger, grief, and questioning should be included within the scrolls of his own word. The irony is that we hear the voice of the voiceless God precisely in and through listening to all the other voices in the book and attending to all they say in the light of all we know. God lets their words become his word within the grand auditorium of Scripture as a whole. That is what it means, doctrinally, to say the book is inspired.

Scripture answers Scripture. God’s silence in the book needs to be understood in such terms, and not as if God had nothing to say. Other Scriptures minister the comfort Israel craved—even if they could not hear it yet. Long ago, Deuteronomy 29–32 had foreseen that beyond judgment lay the promise of future restoration. Above all, in the soaring words of Isaiah 40–55 we hear the clearest answer to Lamentations. At point after point, the grief of Lamentations is comforted and its questions answered.

We know the grief of Lamentations is comforted and its questions answered. At point after point, the clearest answer to Lamentations. Above all, in the soaring words of Isaiah 40–55 we hear the answer that I have brought upon you” (NRSV), referring precisely to the devastation of 587 B.C. Rico Villanueva comments that the “sorry” ought not to be understood “in an apologetic sense but in sympathetic sense... God shares with the experience of those who go through disasters and feels what they feel. For us Christians, we know... that in Christ the contradiction in God’s saving and judging his people is embraced.”

The most intriguing link between Lamentations and Isaiah 40–55 (which is also a link between Lamentations and Christ) is the extensive verbal parallels between the experience and discourse of “the Man” in Lamentations 3 and the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah, especially in Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12. Both figures suffer terribly, and both suffer explicitly at the hands of God. The difference is that the suffering of the Servant, in contrast to that of “the Man,” is finally seen as innocent (not being punished by God for his own sin), vicarious (bearing the sins of his people), and victorious. For that reason, Christians have readily seen Jesus Christ as the Servant figure (following the lead of Christ himself and the New Testament as they do so). He was “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities,” because “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Who was “the Man,” and who was “the Servant”? In the poetry of Lamentations 3, the Man is the personified people of Judah. He speaks for them, though he also speaks to them. The suffering of the whole people is concentrated, as it were, in the poetic persona of this witness and advocate. In the prophetic texts of Isaiah, the Servant is also the personified people of Israel as a whole. That
is his identity when first introduced (Isa. 41:8). And even though it seems unavoidable (indeed imperative, in the light of the New Testament) to see the later characterization of the Servant as portraying an individual who will accomplish God’s purpose for Israel, the Servant never loses that corporate identity as Israel. He stands in their place and bears their suffering, giving his life as a sacrifice for their sin.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. The mystery of the incarnation is that not only did Jesus, as Messiah-King, embody Israel’s Servant identity, but that he also, as Lord, embodied YHWH, Israel’s God. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19 NLT). In Christ, therefore, and supremely at the cross, God entered into the reality of the suffering of the world. But he did so not only as an act of empathy or sympathy, but also redemptively, taking upon himself the whole burden of sin and evil, human and satanic, that underlies that suffering. At the cross, God bore in himself, in the person of his Son, the reality of God’s own judgment against sin.

When we connect the death of Christ to the Old Testament, as Paul tells us we should do (for example, in 1 Cor. 15:3), we can see the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. as a portent of the cross (both of them acts of human wickedness that were simultaneously the outpouring of God’s judgment), and the return from exile as a portent of the resurrection (and ultimately, in longer prophetic vision, of the new creation). As we read Lamentations again in the light of that connection, the experiences of Lady Zion (especially in Lam. 1) and the Man (in 3:1–18) find multiple echoes in the passion of Christ. When Jesus uttered that awful cry of dereliction wrenched from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, at that moment too—as in Lamentations—God refrained from answering. On that occasion, the silence of God spoke the redemption of creation.

Reading Lamentations in the light of Christ does not mean that we simply jump straight to Jesus and make it all speak about the cross, or hastily make it all right in the end because of the resurrection. We must not short-circuit the book like that. We must let it speak for itself, and for those whose voices the Poet brings to our ears. But it does mean that in the sufferings of Jerusalem—both in the sense that they were deserved and to the extent that they were not—we see a glimpse in advance of the sufferings of the One who took on himself not only the identity of Israel but also the sins of the world.

And here, then, is another way in which the silent God of the book is actually speaking within it as part of his word. For in the voices of Lamentations we hear not only the voice of suffering Israel, not only by extension the voice of a suffering world, but also the voice of the suffering divine Son of God, whose death and resurrection bring salvation to both.

Lamentations and the Church

Finally, what message can Lamentations have for the Christian church? We might begin to answer that question by asking where we see ourselves in the book. The traditional and impulsive answer is to identify ourselves with the victims, the people of God suffering at the hands of violent enemies. But we must start from a more uncomfortable perspective.

“To the Jew first.” Lamentations spoke first for the suffering of Old Testament Israel at the hands of their enemies. For that reason, it has been read and used liturgically by Jewish people all down the centuries as a response to the long history of such suffering—not only at the hands of the Babylonians and Romans, but tragically also at the hands of people and powers claiming to be Christian. The story of Christian anti-Semitism is one of the darkest stains on the face of the church, and because of the suffering it has caused, it should not be forgotten, any more than Lamentations lets us forget 587 B.C. This perspective makes us read Lamentations and see ourselves among those enemies who inflicted such humiliation and pain on Israel.23

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” And if acknowledging the church’s role as a violent “enemy” rings true to the history of anti-Semitism, Lamentations speaks no less powerfully to all other contexts in which the Christian church has aligned itself, in reality or in its rhetoric, with imperial power, military aggression, colonial greed, and sometimes genocidal violence—from the post-Constantinian Roman Empire, through the Crusades, the conquistadores, slavery, the church’s preaching in support of the First World War (on both sides), and even the rhetoric of some churches around the invasion of Iraq.24 The story of Christian complicity in wars, violence, and bloodshed is another of the scandalous blemishes on the bride of Christ, which only his return will wash away.

It would be hard to claim that Lamentations on its own demands radical pacifism as an ethical ideology,25 but it certainly reinforces Christ’s call to (and blessing upon) peacemaking as a missional responsibility. Anything that Christians, individually or collectively, can do in ministries of reconciliation and conflict resolution to prevent such diabolical barbarity and atrocity surely carries the endorsement of the Prince of Peace.

Lamentations also stands as a critique of the kind of imperial violence represented by Babylon. There is a prophetic stance for the church in perceiving this biblical theme and bearing costly witness to it, including within the political sphere. This too is part of our missional response to the book.26

“Weep with those who weep.” But we must attend to the primary voices of the book—the suffering victims who cry out in their desolation for God. Who will look and see? Who will come alongside to comfort? The book is a direct address to the reader to fulfill that role or be condemned as a passer-by worse than the priest and Levite in Jesus’ parable.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look around and see.
Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me? (1:12)

So the book assigns to us, as Christian readers, the missional task of hearing the voice of the oppressed and persecuted, bearing witness to their suffering, and advocating on their behalf—which is part of the purpose and power of lament. This we must do, as the New Testament instructs us, first of all on behalf of sisters and brothers in Christ who suffer for his name. The catalog of places where such suffering is rampant is too long to fully list here, but it certainly includes Christians in Syria and Iraq, North Africa, Nigeria, Sudan, North Korea, some Central Asian states, and Sri Lanka.

But weeping with those who weep is surely not confined to shedding and sharing tears for Christians who are suffering. Lamentations gives us tears for the world, a world weeping over the millions of deaths by disease—HIV/AIDS, Ebola, malaria, and preventable childhood diseases. A world of grinding poverty and hunger, now even afflicting rich nations because of gross and obscene inequality. A world of mothers grieving over the death
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of sons and husbands in the wake of rockets and suicide bombs in Israel, or reprisal shelling in Gaza. A world of insane and endemic tribal and ethnic slaughter in South Sudan, D.R. Congo, and even parts of Europe and Eurasia. A world of accelerating creational damage and climate change that threatens the poorest and weakest most. A world in which 2014 was deemed by several agencies to be the worst year ever for children—abused, abducted, raped, mutilated, enslaved, forced into child armies, murdered, and traumatized in mass shootings in schools, from the United States to Nigeria to Pakistan, and driven by war or hunger from their homes in their thousands to wretched refugee camps.

Lamentations not only gives us the language for lament in such a world. Surely it also demands that we use it. For lament appeals beyond the world and its tragic falleness to the One about whom even Lamentations can say,

You, O LORD, reign forever,
Your throne endures from generation to generation. (5:19)

Lament is missional because it keeps the world before God, and it draws God into the world—with the longing that God should act, and the faith that he ultimately will.

"Therefore I have hope" (Lam. 3:21). We may have sung "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" without any awareness of the surrounding darkness and desolation of the Lamentations text from which it is drawn. But knowing that context, there is no reason not to go on singing it! For its truth is also a truth embedded in Lamentations. There is hope in this book, not just because it is set within the whole Bible story with its redemptive heart and glorious climax, but because the book is saturated with prayer. Even when it is angry, pain-soaked, protesting, grieving, questioning prayer, it is still prayer. And it is prayer addressed to the Lord—the God whose faithfulness, love, and compassion are eternal, and whose anger, though real and terrible, will not last forever.

And in that God, the Poet places his hope while still in the midst of his pain, and calls us to do the same.

Notes

1. This article is excerpted and adapted from The Message of Lamentations by Christopher J. H. Wright. Copyright © 2015 by Christopher J. H. Wright. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515, USA. www.ivpress.com. See www.ivpress.com/cgi-i-vpress/book.pl/code=2441 (U.S. readers) or www.amazon.com/2441 (readers outside the United States).

2. Some scholars regard the book’s date as indeterminate, perhaps composed much later in the exile, even if the event described in the book was the fall of Jerusalem. See, e.g., Jain W. Provan, Lamentations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 11–15.

3. Except for the reported words of God in 3:57, these have been spoken to the Poet during some previous experience, not directly into the situation portrayed in Lamentations itself. It is also possible that 4:21–22 is intended as a prophetic word from God, shining a brief ray of hope into the darkness.


5. Unless indicated otherwise, Bible quotations throughout are taken from the 2011 edition of the New International Version (NIV).


10. Parry, Lamentations, 202–3 (emphasis original). This takes us to the vexed issue of the nature and origin of evil as such, and whether the Bible ever provides an answer to the question Where and how did evil originate within God’s good creation? I have wrestled with that issue and have come to the conclusion that it does not; see Christopher J. H. Wright, The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

11. Other than in the broadest possible sense that suffering in this fallen world is primarily the result of human sin and collusion with satanic evil in general. We all share in the sin and guilt of our fallen condition and suffer consequences at many levels. But this is very different from alleging that specific suffering constitutes God’s judgment on specific sins, in individuals or communities. Such simplistic equations are denied by the book of Job and the words of Jesus (Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–3).

12. O’Connor, Lamentations, 86.


14. O’Connor, Lamentations, 130, referring to Psalm 56, captures the power of tears in a most moving way.

15. Isa. 25:8; 35:10; 65:19; Rev. 21:4.

16. O’Connor, Lamentations, 85–86, captures this divine restraint most sensitively.

17. See Parry’s commentary (Lamentations, 162–68) for a full textual and theological discussion of the relationship between Lamentations and Isaiah 40–55, with supporting bibliography.

18. This raises the thorny question of the date and authorship of Isaiah 40–55. Clearly, if the number of links between Lamentations and Isaiah’s text is taken to require textual dependence of the latter on the former, then the writer of Isaiah 40–55 must have had the book of Lamentations in hand, and so be historically located in the exilic period. Or one has to assume that, by God’s inspiration, the eighth-century prophet Isaiah was enabled to deliver (and perhaps seal up, Isa. 8:16–17) a word for the people living in a future that he foretold and to address the complaints they would make. That is the assumption of the Jewish Midrash on Lamentations: “All the severe prophecies that Jeremiah prophesied against Israel were anticipated and healed by Isaiah” (Lam. Rab. XXVI:ii), as quoted by Parry, Lamentations, 162; my italics.

19. “The coming of YHWH to comfort does have implications for how we hear the pain of Lady Zion, for we now know what she did not” (Parry, Lamentations, 168; his emphasis).

20. The precise meaning of niham is difficult to express here. The text is not saying that God regrets what he did in judgment (as if the verse were an apology) or that he “relented” about it (NIV, ESV) in the sense of changing his mind, for he had not—it had happened. Rather, it likely expresses the grief of God, along with the fact that, now that the worst had happened, God could indeed begin to deal with them differently.


22. These are fully outlined and discussed by Parry, Lamentations, 166–68. They include, for example, walking in darkness (Lam. 3:2; Isa. 50:10); offering to be struck on the cheek (Lam. 3:30; Isa. 50:6); remaining silent (Lam. 3:28; Isa. 53:7); being stricken, pierced, afflicted, and crushed (Lam. 3:1, 13, 19, 33–34; Isa. 53:4–5); being cut off and “buried” (Lam. 3:53–54; Isa. 53:8–9).

23. See Parry, Lamentations, 175–76.


25. Though Daniel Berrigan certainly turns Lamentations into a powerful antitrust tract in his searing exposition of it in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent bombing of Afghanistan.