

Lamentations—A Language to Present Our Speechless Suffering

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Suffering, Pain, Grief—all such words are not unfamiliar to human beings. Everyone will be faced with this mystery sooner or later. As we go through pain, we find ourselves in a situation similar to what the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch portrayed in his famous picture, *The Scream* (1895).¹ The character in the picture is screaming, eyes wide and mouth open, yet struggles to produce a voice. As the Scottish theologian, John Swinton noted, “the silent scream reflects the voiceless imposed by suffering, a silent, disorienting entrapment that defies language...”² In the aftermath of personal and communal disasters, though there is a desire to scream aloud, the sufferer struggles to find the right vocabulary to present the unimaginable pain. This hidden quest to communicate the inarticulate emotions of pain and grief often drives individuals or communities to silence. However, as Leslie C. Allen points out, “a release, rather than bottling up of our inarticulate emotion can be a valuable first aid to be applied over to the raw wounds of grief.”³



Edvard Munch: *The Scream* (1895)
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The book of Lamentations reveals such release in its *presentation* of pain.

Through the poems in Lamentations, we see a way to articulate grief with defining clarity of speech. The inarticulate emotions are reduced to words, words that still hurt, but (one hopes) to reduce pain to a slightly lower level on the pain scale. In what follows, through a brief analysis of the book of Lamentations, I shall try to show how the book as a whole is a

¹ The online reference of this specific copy of the painting is: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1305> (Accessed on September 23rd, 2018). Permission granted to the author by the Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York to use the painting in this article.

² John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*, (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 95.

³ Leslie C. Allen, *A Liturgy of Grief*. (Michigan: Baker Books, 2011), 2.

“presentation” and not an “interpretation” of Israel’s pain. As a result, the book provides a unique theological language for the 21st-century believer to express and to communicate their pain or even the remorse or rage at God, in their quest to find meaning, hope, and life.

Historical Context: Aftermath of a Catastrophic Event:

The context for the book of Lamentations is the historical circumstances resulting from the devastating effects of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B. C. E. This moment is without a doubt considered the most cataclysmic event in the Jewish history. Hence as Old Testament Theologian J. Daniel Hays observed, the book is read “on the ninth of Ab, a date that commemorates major disasters in Jewish history (especially the fall of Jerusalem).”⁴

The book of Lamentations is composed of five poems. The earliest tradition, up until the eighteenth century regarded these poems to have been composed by one author, i.e. the prophet Jeremiah. Since the eighteenth century, numbers of scholars have contested the authorship of Jeremiah based on the sighting of the missing heading in the Hebrew Bible.⁵ This led some scholars to hold a sceptical view about the authorship of Lamentations. Nevertheless, this led others to make various attempts to claim multiple authors from different times due to the diverse voices and patterns portrayed in the five poems.⁶ However these attempts to attribute multiple authors to Lamentations lack evidence and run the risk of separating the poems from the traumatic experience of 586 B. C. E. Although there is no consensus on the authorship of the book of Lamentations, almost everyone agrees that these poems emerged “from a time relatively soon after the 586 B. C. E destruction of Jerusalem, and are likely the product of the community of Judeans who remained in the land.”⁷ The poems convey the main concerns over the fate of the community that remained after the destruction. It should also be noted that the poetry of Lamentations does not provide a detailed historical portray of the tragedy. Nevertheless, the purpose of these poems is to reflect the “emotional, social, and spiritual impact of the disaster.”⁸

⁴ J. Daniel Hays, *Jeremiah, and Lamentations*. (Michigan: Baker Books, 2016), 326.

⁵ In the Septuagint’s Greek translation, Lamentations had a heading that read; “and it came to pass after Israel had gone into captivity and Jerusalem was laid to waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament over Jerusalem and said...” Quoted in Robin A. Parry, *Lamentations*. (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 3-4. Through recent scholarships, it came to light that this heading was missing from the Hebrew Bible.

⁶ Robin A. Parry noted the similarity in ‘linguistic, thematic and intertextual connections’ (Parry, *Lamentations*. 4 footnotes 8). between Chapters 1, 2 and 4 could indicate a single author for these three chapters, whereas chapters 3 and 5 each stands separately in terms of style and content pointing towards the hypothesis of two different authors. In making this observation, Jeremiah becomes one among the three authors who composed these five poems. (Parry, *Lamentations*. 4) However, keeping Jeremiah out of the equation, there is also another view that postulates that ‘Lamentations embodies (only) two divergent voices in the text: first perspective embodied by Lamentations 1, 2, 4 and 5,’ and the other in Lamentations 3. All these scholarly attempts have been moving away from authenticating the pre-modern view that Jeremiah is the author of Lamentations. (Heath A. Thomas, ‘Holy Scripture and Hermeneutics: Lamentations in Critical and Theological Reflection.’ In Robin A. Perry and Heath A. Thomas, ed., *Great Is Thy Faithfulness?* (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 4.)

⁷ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 4.

⁸Parry, *Lamentations*, 7.

Literary analysis: Lamentation is a Presentation of Grief than Interpretation

A lament is defined as “a sad, agony-filled cry of mourning, usually in poetic form.”⁹ The five poems that constitute the book of Lamentations fit well into this definition. However, these poems draw on a variety of genres and traditions. One such genre is from the ancient Mesopotamian “city-lament genre.”¹⁰ As the term denotes, it stands for a communal lament. Often in the ancient Mesopotamian culture, these laments were performed as part of cultic ceremonies “to appease gods anger over the destruction of their temples and to ward off future catastrophe.”¹¹ However, as opposed to the Mesopotamian city-laments where destruction is often attributed to the capricious decision of the gods, Lamentations acknowledges Israel's sin as being responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem. But the focus is neither on the sin nor in any way trying to appease the God of Israel. Instead, these laments are primarily to reflect and present the pain as opposed to arriving at any rationale of this suffering. This can be understood well as we consider three aspects: a) Lamentations as ‘lyric poetry’¹², b) its anti-climatic ending, and c) its use of intimate language.

a) *Lamentations as Lyric Poetry*

Unlike other forms of poetics, lyric poems “construct meaning through the manipulation of language,”¹³ without having a plot, argumentative structure of fictional characters to help construct meaning. In arguing for Lamentations as lyric poetry, Dobbs-Allsopp points out that the poems in Lamentations lack plot or argumentative structure. He continues, “neither are there any fully realized and compelling characters ...to stimulate interest in the part of the audience, but only speaking voices or personae.”¹⁴ Meaning of the poetry is derived from the careful use of words by various voices. Therefore, in its style of lyricism, Lamentations discloses its purpose to *present* the pain and grief that occurred as a result of the disaster rather than to *interpret* the pain. Though the poems tell a story of an overarching disaster of 586 B.C.E, there is no particular plot that they follow or any arguments they make in order to interpret the cause of pain. Instead, we have the *presentation* of pain through various fragmented voices in the poems, “gesturing effectively towards the fragmented reality of post-destruction Jerusalem.”¹⁵ In sum, Lamentations conveys an intellectually and emotionally charged awareness of the aftermath of the disaster. Hence, grief, guilt, forgiveness, anger, compassion, hope, despair and shame are some obvious emotions that are voiced in the pages of Lamentations.¹⁶

⁹ Hays, *Jeremiah, and Lamentations*, 325.

¹⁰ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 7.

¹² *Ibid*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

b) *An Anti-Climatic Ending*

In Lamentations 5 we are presented with the shortest poem as a communal lament or prayer that serves as a climax. However, this climax doesn't conclude with a happy ending. Instead, it ends on a "minor key" as Soong- Chan Rah puts it. He further explains that the "musical pieces that end in a minor key often signal that issues have not quite been resolved."¹⁷ The poem leaves the reader hanging as it presents the reader with the suffering that is on-going. In other words, this minor-key ending shows a lack of affirmation of God's future deliverance. As Linafelt points out, this ending leads the reader "into the emptiness of God's nonresponse"¹⁸ and "the poetry's refusal to move beyond lament."¹⁹ Therefore, it does not allow one to move on. The reader is left with the unknown in the midst of great suffering.

Perhaps this is one of the differences between laments in the book of Lamentations and the laments in the book of Psalms. There are many laments in the book of Psalms, either an individual or the community cries out to God in pain and suffering. However, as Daniel Hays observes;

in Psalms, the laments almost always end with a strong affirmation that God will indeed provide deliverance or with a vow of praise to God because of his great deliverance. The book of Lamentations, by contrast, has statements of hope, but these are somewhat tentative and faint. In the lament psalms, the affirmations of faith in God's deliverance are central, while in the laments of Lamentations the cry of pain and suffering is central.²⁰

Lamentations, unlike any other laments, in presenting pain and suffering, refuses to give a quick solution. Through various voices—the narrator, Zion, man, community and the speaker of the prophetic voice—the grief is given words and is presented with its emotional bearings. The poems convey the grief story through various voices, because they have to, for survival's sake. It is when the survivors start giving words to the pain and suffering, they embark on the journey of healing traumatic memories. In other words, "every time you say something, you're getting a little more of the poison out of your system by verbalizing that horrendous thought."²¹

c) *Use of Intimate language.*

The book of Lamentations presupposes the story of God's covenantal relationship with Israel. Even though there is no direct mention of the term covenant, the concept of covenant underlies the poems. In this covenantal relationship, while God chose Israel to demonstrate His special care and goodness in front of other nations, obedience, and loyalty to God was also expected

¹⁷ Soon-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament*. (Illinois: IVP Books, 2015), 190.

¹⁸ Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 60.

¹⁹ Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 60.

²⁰ Hays, *Jeremiah, and Lamentations*, 325

²¹ Barkin, Carol, et al. 2004, *Beyond Tears*. 35. Quoted in Leslie C. Allen, *A Liturgy of Grief*. (Michigan: Baker Books, 2011), 3.

from Israel. It was known to Israel that disobedience towards the covenant would lead to divine punishment. This is one of the main reasons why we do not see any voices in the poems trying to “protest the innocence of the people.”²² Instead all the voices—the narrator (1:5, 8-9; 4:13), Zion (1:14, 18, 22), the man (3:39), the speaker of the prophetic voice (4:22) and the community (3:45; 5:7, 16)²³—admit that the sin of Jerusalem led to her destruction. It is known to all those who suffer that sin is the cause behind this disaster. Therefore if at all any question of *why* is implicitly raised in the poems, it is not of *why has this happened to us?* Rather it is the question of *why punish so severely?* and *how long?* It is within the covenantal relationship, Israel is lamenting and presenting the severity of suffering to God.

It is Israel’s covenantal relationship with God that led them to make God the primary assailant in the poems of Lamentations and not the Babylonians.²⁴ Even when God is depicted as the warrior who is against and non-responsive, Lamentations doesn’t convey the end of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God. Instead, Israel makes her appeal to the same God. As Parry puts it, “implicit in Lamentations is the appreciation that the fire of divine punishment falls within a covenant relationship and does not mean the end of that relationship.”²⁵ Therefore through Lamentations, within this covenantal relationship, a petition has been made, hoping for God’s gracious intervention to bring life. In this sense, the primary aim of presenting the story of pain in Lamentations is a quest for life.

It is within this context of the covenantal relationship between Israel and God we can see the language of Lamentations: “language of personal intimacy and relationship,”²⁶ as Eugene Peterson terms it. The poems in Lamentations are prayers to God at a personal and emotional level. “The language is personal, direct and desperate.”²⁷ The poems refuse to brush away the complexities of life and refuse to be content with soothing clichés in prayers. Instead, they express rage towards God for the pain that has come upon them. Informing God that the pain and suffering is too much to bear.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, for the 21st century reader, Lamentations may at first sound like it’s full of mourning that doesn’t make much sense. However upon reflecting through the poems with the knowledge of its historical context, one can map its relevance for today. Personal and communal tragedies similar to that of 586 B.C.E still haunts us today. In the aftermath of painful tragedies, we often long for a language that is adequate enough to portray our emotions and feelings. Often our rational mind runs with our culturally given language to justify or interpret our pain. However,

²² Parry, *Lamentations*, 29.

²³ *Ibid*, 29.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

²⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 37.

²⁷ Peterson, *Answering God*, 35.

when tragedy hits we are in need of a language that is capable of just *presenting* the pain before attempting to interpret the cause of suffering. It is to such situation we find the lyrical nature poetry in Lamentations adequate. The anti-climactic ending of Lamentations also provides a theological outlook towards not having to coerce joy or hope at all situations, but it is acceptable to remain in suffering and pain and bring our troubles to God in its severity. Finally, in its covenantal presupposition, Lamentations also provides an example of approaching God in intimacy, not even hesitant to call upon God to convey that his judgments are hurtful.

About the Author

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