

Hope Makes a Difference: Reading for Dominant Themes, Argument, and Theology in Lamentations

The five poems of Lamentations are some of the most graphic and evocative passages in the Old Testament, which seem to raise more questions than they answer. Who wrote it? When? Why? Even these are disputed, although it is commonly agreed that the event described is the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586BCE.¹ Beyond these are deeper questions: How can such suffering be tolerated? How can a just God allow it? These are the real issues at stake in a book that is not only about the fall of a city, but about the privileges and consequences of a covenantal relationship with YHWH God.

Poems about suffering

In his commentary, Provan asserts, "Perhaps the most immediately noticeable feature of the poems in the book of Lamentations ... is their alphabetic nature."² However, surely the most immediately noticeable feature is the pain.³ Written as laments,⁴ they are filled with suffering of every kind: grief, despair, abandonment, guilt, desolation, anger. The descriptions of torment and starvation are horrifyingly vivid, and the need to explain what has happened leaps off the page. Nevertheless, Provan is correct in the sense that the first step towards understanding these laments is to examine their acrostic composition.

¹ For example, see Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: First Yale University Press, 2009), 9-10; or David M. Carr, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts of the Hebrew Bible* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 171. One notable exception is Iain Provan, who insists that insufficient information exists to form any conclusion. Iain Provan, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 11-15.

² Provan, *Lamentations*, 4.

³ Provan's assertion specifically refers to readers of the Hebrew text, but the same point stands.

⁴ Tremper Longman III and Raymond B Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 345.

It has been suggested that this was employed as an aid to communal use.⁵ It seems likely that Lamentations was recited to commemorate the destruction of the temple from early on,⁶ so the alphabetic structure would make it easier to remember. However, the inconsistency of the acrostics, including two different letter orders through ch.1-4, and no acrostic at all in ch.5 (albeit still in 22 verses), would seem to contradict this theory. Perhaps more plausible is that it offers a sense of completeness,⁷ a comprehensive A-Z of the subject matter,⁸ or "giving voice to Jerusalem's experience of suffering."⁹ However, this too seems to underestimate the significance of the inconsistencies in the poetic form.¹⁰

Of course, these might be explained by multiple authors,¹¹ but I agree with Brug that the overall coherence of Lamentations points to a single author, or at least, an editor collating the book for a single purpose.¹² The question is, what was this purpose - to hold us in a place of suffering, or take us on a journey through it?

Poems about hope

The notable presence of hope amid the horror (Lam 3:21-42) would seem the most likely indicator. Some argue that any hope is only temporary and defaults to

⁵ See for example Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 23-25; Eli Assis, "The Alphabetic Acrostics in the Book of Lamentations," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 69 (2007): 710-724, p. 712.

⁶ Robert Davidson, *Jeremiah volume 2 and Lamentations* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 167; Hillers, *Lamentations*, 6-7.

⁷ Philippe Guillaume, "Lamentations 5: The Seventh Acrostic," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2009): 1-6, p. 2; Johan Renkema, "The Meaning of the Parallel Acrostics in Lamentations," *Vetus testamentum* 45 (1995): 379-83, p. 379.

⁸ See for example John F. Brug, "Near Eastern Acrostics and Biblical Acrostics: Biblical Acrostics and their Relationship to Other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics," *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library*, 1997 4, <<http://www.wlsessays.net/files/BrugAcrostics.pdf>>; J. Andrew Dearman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 428.

⁹ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Interpretation: Lamentations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 33. See also Hillers, *Lamentations*, 27 and David Pawson, *Unlocking the Bible: A Unique Overview of the Whole Bible* (London: Collins, 2003), 591-93.

¹⁰ Elie Assis argues a similar point, although coming to different conclusions. Assis, "The Alphabetic Acrostics in the Book of Lamentations," 715-719.

¹¹ See for example Cornelius B. Houk, "Multiple Poets in Lamentations," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30 (2005); Max Löhr, *Die Klagelieder des Jeremias* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), xiv-xv.

¹² Brug, "Near Eastern Acrostics and Biblical Acrostics," 2; see also Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 5; Elie Assis, "The Unity of the Book of Lamentations," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 306-329, pp. 306-10.

suffering,¹³ thereby accentuating the inescapability of it and holding the reader in the place of pain. This would be consistent with its use as a community lament, but is insufficient to address the emphasis of that hope: that God will restore His people, (Lam 3:31). This hope, reaffirmed in the concluding sentiments of the book (Lam 5:21), insists upon a journey towards renewal.

Others maintain that positioning hope at the heart of Lamentations suggests a centrality of theme, what Renkema calls its "concentric structure."¹⁴ Such a structure would seem to elevate hope as the principle theme in Lamentations: in the midst of suffering, hope may be found to offer an escape.¹⁵ However, although the evidence for concentricity is compelling,¹⁶ it is undermined by the natural progression of the poems themselves, and so they cannot be only concentric. Lamentations was, after all, composed to be heard as much as read, experienced as much as studied, so that the journey from start to finish is unavoidable, and takes us back into suffering that cannot be escaped.

To resolve this, we must return to the inconsistency of the poetic form. The shifting acrostic nature of Lamentations, from 3-line strophes in ch.1-2,¹⁷ building to 3-verse strophes in ch.3, before fading away to 2-line strophes in ch.4 and finally 1-line, non-acrostic strophes in ch.5, is well documented;¹⁸ something Dobbs-Allsopp describes as adding "a trajectory and a sense of dynamism."¹⁹ So, the form itself indicates a direction, a sub-plot to the foreground misery, in which hope is not the

¹³ Provan, *Lamentations*, 22-23; Pamela Jean Owens, "Personification and Suffering in Lamentations 3," *Austin Seminary Bulletin* 105 (1990): 75-90, pp.83-86.

¹⁴ Johan Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations," in *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry* (ed. Willem van der Meer and Johannes C. de Moor; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 294-396, p. 297.

¹⁵ Guillaume makes the same point, although his suggestion of a hidden acrostic message of praise to support this seems far-fetched. Guillaume, "Lamentations 5: The Seventh Acrostic," 3-5; see also Jože Krašovec, "The Source of Hope in the Book of Lamentations," *Vetus testamentum* 42 (1992); William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 295-97; Jill Middlemas, "The Violent Storm in Lamentations," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (2004), 81-97.

¹⁶ Elie Assis, "The Unity in the Book of Lamentations," 310-328.

¹⁷ Freedman identifies two exceptions to this otherwise consistent pattern in 1:7 and 2:19: David Noel Freedman, "Acrostics and Metrics in Hebrew Poetry," *Harvard Theological Review* 65 (1972): 367-92, pp. 378-81.

¹⁸ See for example Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 46; Davidson, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 168-69; Hillers, *Lamentations*, 24-25; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 17.

¹⁹ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 18.

climax but the turning point, altering the trajectory of God's people. What starts as a contained literary discipline begins to unravel with the impact of hope.²⁰

This is reinforced when we examine the content either side of 3:21-42. The suffering does not diminish, but the tone used to describe it changes. There are sixty-seven accusations made against God between 1:1-3:20, plus six acknowledgements of Israel's own sin, as blame and guilt form the lens through which their suffering is viewed.²¹ Whereas, only six accusations are made between 3:43-4:22 (none at all in ch.5) and only three references to Israel's guilt. Instead, we find an emphasis on seeking God for justice (e.g. 3:58-66) and restoration (e.g. 4:22, 5:19-22).

What stands in the middle is a personal reflection on God's nature, which gives rise to hope, not that the suffering can be escaped but that within it, God's faithfulness may be found (Lam 2:17, 3:23-24, 26, 31), and with it, His continued love for Israel (Lam 3:22, 32). This hope does not extinguish the pain, but it influences the poet's attitude towards it and towards God, as he calls Israel to repentance (Lam 3:40-41).

Poems about covenant

Immediately following this comes a second appeal, this time to God, for justice (Lam 3:42-66). Presented as a legal proceeding,²² in which evidence is given (v42-54), a plea submitted (v55-63), and a sentence demanded (v64-66), it rises from the hope of God's faithfulness. It is notable how closely Jerusalem's desolation is described in relation to Deut 28,²³ as are its former glories remembered.²⁴ These are the

²⁰ There is not space here to consider the alternating *'ayin/pe* order, nor the sporadic *qinah* meter, but clearly both are also deliberate and, I believe, indicative of the same literary intent.

²¹ Krašovec, "The Source of Hope in the Book of Lamentations," 224-28.

²² Dobbs-Allsopp and Dearman refer to this only in relation to v58-60 but I suggest it characterises the entire appeal. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 127; Dearman, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 460.

²³ Cf. Deut 28:16 with Lam 1:1; Deut 28:18a with Lam 1:16c or 2:12; Deut 28:25a with Lam 4:16; Deut 28:25b, 37 with Lam 3:14, 45; Deut 28:30 with Lam 5:11; Deut 28:33b-34 with Lam 1:20; Deut 28:36 with Lam 2:6, 9; Deut 28:41 with Lam 1:5; Deut 28:43 with Lam 5:8; Deut 28:44 with Lam 5:6; Deut 28:48a with Lam 2:12, 19; Deut 28:48b with Lam 1:14; Deut 28:49 with Lam 4:19; Deut 28:49-50 with Lam 2:21; Deut 28:53 with Lam 2:20, 4:10; Deut 28:54 with Lam 4:4; Deut 28:65 with Lam 1:16, 20, 2:11, 4:17, 5:17; Deut 28:68 with Lam 5:6; Deut 29:23 with Lam 4:6. We could draw similar comparisons with Lev 26:14-39.

blessings and the curses of the covenant.²⁵ And so, when hope is found, it is naturally God's promise to restore the covenant (Deut 30:1-10) that is called upon,²⁶ as the poet dares to assert that it is not his responsibility to escape the suffering, but God's responsibility to set him free (Lam 3:58-59, 64-66).

At its heart, then, Lamentations is about the covenant relationship between God and Israel.²⁷ It forms the backdrop behind the poet's every thought. It shows what should have been, identifies what went wrong, and offers a path back to God's side. Indeed, it is the covenant that permits Israel to lament against God in the first place!²⁸ I suggested above that the big questions of Lamentations are how such suffering can be tolerated, and how a just God can allow it. The answer to both, says Lamentations, lies in a full understanding of the covenant. Or rather, such an understanding reveals these to be the wrong questions. In a covenant relationship it is not a question of how God can allow it, but how could he not, given His faithfulness to His promises (Lam 2:17). On the other hand, nor is it a question of tolerating the suffering, but of finding God within it, allowing Him to bring hope, and walking with Him towards restoration (Lam 3:22-26, 31-33, 40-41).²⁹

Poems for today

It would be easy to disregard Lamentations merely as a record of past troubles. Indeed, Brueggemann has argued that this has happened, to the detriment of all.³⁰ In particular, he has identified two dangers from the loss of lament as a legitimate expression of faith. The first is "the loss of genuine covenant interaction." That is to

²⁴ Cf. Deut 28:10 with Lam 1:1, 4:12; Deut 28:11 with Lam 1:7, 4:1; Deut 28:13 with Lam 1:1, 2:15. Again, we could run a similar comparison with Lev 26:1-13, especially noting Lev 26:11-12 cf. Lam 2:1, 6-7.

²⁵ See also Delbert R. Hillers, "History and Poetry in Lamentations," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10 (1983): 155-161, pp.156-160.

²⁶ Cf. Deut 30:1-4 with Lam 3:31-32, 40-42; Deut 30:7 with Lam 3:64-66, 4:21-22; Deut 30:9 with Lam 5:21.

²⁷ Longman III and Dillard, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 352-53.

²⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986): 57-71, p. 59.

²⁹ Perhaps also hinted at in ch.5 by the use of an extra stress in every cola to include the name of YHWH: David Noel Freedman, "Acrostic Poems in the Hebrew Bible: Alphabetic and Otherwise," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986): 408-431, p. 423.

³⁰ Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 59-60.

say, the open dialogue between God and His people is stunted by their inequality.³¹ The second is "the stifling of the question of theodicy," characterised by a diminished capacity to pursue justice.³²

These aspects are fundamental to the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34), drawing criticism from Jesus when they are disregarded (Matt 23:23), and so the example of Lamentations stands as a model for a healthy covenant relationship with God, especially in the midst of struggle. Provan's claim that "it is only in the sense that Lamentations is a book about suffering that it can have contemporary meaning"³³ is, however, too limited in scope, for it underestimates the message of hope.

The simple message of Lamentations is that even in the greatest darkness, hope may be found, and hope can make a difference. It gives strength in the face of fear,³⁴ understanding in confusion, comfort in despair, because the hope on offer is not that you will get out, but that God will come in.³⁵ Finally, we must remember that it is a personal encounter that gives rise to this hope. When we start with "The Lord is good" (Lam 3:25), then His compassion and love (3:32) are bound to follow.

³¹ Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 60-61.

³² Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 61-64.

³³ Provan, *Lamentations*, 24.

³⁴ Hillers, *Lamentations*, 4.

³⁵ Cf. Claus Westerman, "The Complaint Against God," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 233-41, p. 236.

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