

Lamentations and (Anti)Theodicy
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“Theodicy: *Ça se déconstruit*”

Those words were too much,
too little was said, understood, imagined.
Win your peace, vindicate your god,
it is pyrrhic, brittle.
I thumb the pages of that same old text,
and hope—quelled to bare velleity, dim
and frail—whimpers o’er another
field of fallen sparrows.
God the All-Powerful, All-Passive,
rendered now a vacant notion
shorn of love, full of strength:
God omni(im)potent!
There are many other such cairns;
these ersatz gods will have their reckoning.

By a curious twist of history, one of the fragments of Lamentations found among the Dead Sea Scrolls switches the order of a few lines. The poems of *'eikhah* (the official title comes from the first Hebrew word, evoking something like a desperate sigh) are arranged acrostically, so this particular difference simply means changing the sequence of two letters in the alphabet. Scholars quibble about why this happened, but basically it means that Lamentations 1:15-18 as it appears in our modern bibles *also* existed as Lamentations 1:15, then followed by verses 17, 16, and 18. Not unlike most of the Scrolls, this scrap is badly damaged and riddled with lacunae, but the last line is particularly interesting:

My children are desolate[because]the enemy prevailed;
the L[ord] is righteous, [because]...
(4QLam, col. III: frg. 3, line 10 = Lam 1:16c, 18a)

The line is meant to end, “The Lord is righteous, because I have rebelled against his word.” But what if we were to be openly tendentious in our reading? We might capitalize on this coincidence of history and decay: In the midst of slaughtered children, dare we whisper of a righteous deity? The very ink itself has been effaced, unwritten: “The L[ord] is righteous, [because]...” Because...why? The Scroll can only partially name this God and offers no reason, no justification, as though to do so has become an unspeakable act. Perhaps Irving Greenberg was right to exclaim, “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”¹

And yet...

The book of Lamentations has never enjoyed a prominent place in the religious thought of Judaism and Christianity. This is not to say the book was ignored or its canonicity questioned (it never was). Still, one gets the sense that we have never really known quite what to do with these poems. To this day, for example, Lamentations remains entirely absent from the liturgy of the

¹ Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” in Eva Fleischner, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, and Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1977), p. 23.

Orthodox Church. Robin Parry and Heath Thomas aptly observe that, "were it left to us, it may well not have had a place at the table *at all*. Rather, like the desolate character of Lady Jerusalem sitting alone as people pass by on the other side of the road (Lam 1), the book of Lamentations itself has been passed by, ignored by the other guests. [...] We often turn away from that text sitting alone in the corner weeping."² And yet its presence persists. Whatever the reason, this little book has survived—if not a little malnourished.

Historically, the tendency has been to focus on the central portion of Lamentations 3 as the heart of the book, constituting the core of its theological message: *hope in the midst of deserved suffering*. The character at the center of chapter 3—the *geber* (הגבר), "strongman"—is frequently presented as a model sufferer for both his present community and future readers. After a brief indulgence in complaint (3:1-20), the man is said to come to his senses (3:21), and through most of the remainder of the chapter eloquently recites the proper posture of God's people in the midst of the present calamity: Yahweh is good; he is in control of all that occurs; though this suffering is harsh, we deserve it and must respond with repentance and prayer. A large portion of Lamentations 3, then, seems to provide a classic theodicy *avant la lettre*.

If we step back and read the poem in its entirety, however, one is immediately struck with how out of character this portion of Lamentations 3 actually is. Raucous complaint and chilling descriptions of suffering continually assault the reader as we are propelled through the acrostic form and experience, as it were, the A to Z of despair (or, in this case, *aleph to taw*). "Look, Yhwh!" the poet pleads. "Consider! Whom have you ever afflicted like this? Should women eat their children, their own infants?" (Lam 2:20a). The *geber* of chapter 3 is no stranger to such extremes: "To me, God is like a bear lying in ambush, like a hidden lion stalking its prey. He has obstructed my paths and torn me to pieces; he has made me desolate. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrow" (Lam 3:10-12). And further on, after offering his theodicy: "You have smothered us in anger, pursued us; you slaughtered without mercy. You have wrapped yourself in a cloud so that no prayer can pass through" (3:43-44). Yet in the middle of this despair, the same poet counsels patience, and reflects on the wisdom and goodness of God's punishments (Lam 3:22-33). What are we to make of this stark contrast?

One of the most helpful avenues forward, I think, is to come to terms with the bible as a diverse set of literature *with a diverse set of opinions*. Put another way, the bible very often disagrees with itself. This is not the tired old game of bible contradictions, but instead the rather transparent observation that the bible was composed by multiple human authors. And, as humans are wont to do, they interpreted things in varying, sometimes contradictory, ways. Very often these are matters of little consequence. The name of Moses' father-in-law, for instance, seems to have been a source of confusion for biblical authors.³ Other times, however, the disagreements were rather more substantial: The author of 2 Samuel 21 recounts a disturbing vignette where Yahweh incites David to sin by taking a census of his military, resulting in Yahweh sending an angel that slaughtered "70,000 men from Dan to Beer Sheba" (2 Sam 21:15). The author of 1 Chronicles 21, on the other hand, writing several hundred years later, apparently found this theology objectionable and attributed David's temptation to Satan, *not* Yahweh. On an even larger scale, the bible's attitude toward the Moabites is far more complicated than it first seems. Born of incest from Lot (Gen 19), the Moabites were constantly in conflict with the Israelites and,

² Robin Parry and Heath Thomas, "Introduction," in Parry and Thomas, eds., *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture* (Eugene: Pickwick / Wipf & Stock, 2011), p. xiii.

³ There are five versions: Reuel (Exod 2:18); Jethro, priest of Midian (Exod 3:1, 18:1-2); the variant Jether (Exod 4:18); and Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite (Num 10:29; cf. Judg 4:11).

according to Deuteronomy 23 (cf. Neh 13:1), they were to be permanently excluded from the assembly of Yahweh “because they didn’t help you with food or water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired Balaam, Beor’s son, from Pethor or Mesopotamia to curse you” (23:4). The book of Ruth, however, flips the script and has the Judahite Boaz feeding the Moabitess Ruth. Yahweh’s only role in the story is to bless their sexual union with conception, and from that line would come David and, eventually, Jesus.

The theological contours of Lamentations 3 reflect this more severe disjunction. Scholars have long noted how the Babylonian exile (586 BCE)—comprising mass slaughter, destruction, and the forced migration of significant portions of the population—initiated not only a surge in creative literary production but a reimagination of Judahite theology. As a set of poems composed in the wake of this onslaught, these verses wrestle especially with the terrible question: Was it Yahweh’s meticulous providence that shepherded Babylon’s fierce wrath? Or was it instead merely Babylon’s lust for empire, operating in opposition to all of Yahweh’s hopes and dreams for Judah? Who was in fact responsible for this catastrophe?

And yet...

As the *geber* explores the cavernous expanse of his traditional theodicy, we can hear the echoes—always indeterminate, out of sight—of movement, fissure, instability. Yes, throughout 3:22-32 Yahweh is clearly defended as the causative agent enacting judgment for sin upon Jerusalem and the *geber*. In crucial places, though, the poet deftly separates the suffering caused by human sin from Yahweh’s agency and attributes *only* good, *not* evil to the deity. Consider the following retranslation of 3:31-39:

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- ³¹Surely the Lord will not reject
[us] forever.
- ³²Surely if he torments, then he will have compassion
in measure with his abundant loving-kindness.
- ³³Surely abusing and tormenting persons...
these are against his very nature!
- ³⁴To crush underfoot
all prisoners of the land...
- ³⁵To pervert a man’s rights
before the presence of the Most High...
- ³⁶To subvert a person’s just case...
the Master would not brook this.⁴
- ³⁷Who spoke that this should come to pass?
The Lord did not command it!
- ³⁸From the mouth of the Most High
does not come evil but good!
- ³⁹Why then should a survivor complain when
the Most High strengthens
those who have sinned?

[NIV]

- ³¹For no one is cast off
by the Lord forever.
- ³²Though he brings grief, he will show
compassion, so great is his unfailing love.
- ³³For he does not willingly bring affliction
or grief to anyone.
- ³⁴To crush underfoot
all prisoners in the land,
- ³⁵to deny people their rights
before the Most High,
- ³⁶to deprive them of justice—
would not the Lord see such things?
- ³⁷Who can speak and have it happen
if the Lord has not decreed it?
- ³⁸Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that both calamities and good things come?
- ³⁹Why should the living complain
when punished for their sins?

[Alternative 3:39]

- ³⁹Why then should a man complain against the Living One

⁴ This half-line is taken from Robert Alter’s translation.

when the yoke of his sin-fate overwhelms?

The rhetorical movement here is clear: Theodic reflections on divine goodness lead inexorably towards heightened conclusions about this deity's role in human suffering. From limiting duration (3:31-32), to positing inner conflict (3:33), to disapproval (3:34-36), and finally explicit denial that this deity has anything to do with evil (3:37-39; cf. Isaiah 45:7). The attentive reader, however, will note just how differently the NIV (and nearly every other major English translation) renders 3:31-39. The exact opposite point is made in these versions. There is a long tradition of reading in this fashion, and it squares nicely with a traditional theodicy of meticulous providence. However, notwithstanding the fact that these classic renderings mangle the original Hebrew, there is an even older approach dating back to Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 253 CE). He quotes this section of Lamentations several times throughout his oeuvre, but three in particular are worth noting. These represent the oldest known commentary on these poems:

It is true, certainly, that evils do not proceed from God; for according to Jeremiah, one of our prophets, it is certain that 'out of the mouth of the Most High proceedeth not evil but good.'" (*Contra Celsum* 4.66)

...and such people have truly 'set their mouth against the heaven,' when they say that some of the stars have a malevolent, and others a benevolent influence; since no star was formed by the God of the universe to work evil, according to Jeremiah as it is written in the Lamentations, 'Out of the mouth of the Lord shall come things noble and good.'" (*Commentary on Matthew* 13.6; *ANF* 9:478)

Origen also authored the first known commentary on Lamentations, though most of exists in fragments. After quoting Lam 3:37-39, he goes on to say:

The text says it is impossible for mutually opposed things—good *and* evil!—to come from the mouth of the Lord. For a good tree does not produce evil fruit, nor an evil tree good fruit. Therefore, the fact that people suffer injustice at the hands of evil is contrary to divine justice. But it is nonetheless those events which are watched over dearly by God, just as happened to the Israelites who, once they turned back to God, are delivered from the hands of their enemies. Therefore, it is necessary to seek out this repentance for those who have been handed over to this punishment. (*Lamentations Fragments* 79b)

What, then, should a survivor complain about (3:39)? Certainly not the Most High! After all, "The Master would not brook this" (3:36b), "The Lord did not command it" (3:37), and "From the mouth of the Most High does not come evil but good!" (3:38)—how then could God be responsible? The poet's meditation on divine goodness precludes the deity's culpability. *A fortiori*, Yahweh does not "afflict" and "torment" sinners (3:31-33), nor does he "command" evil upon people (3:34-38), but rather "strengthens" them so that they might repent (3:39-42a). The *geber's* theodicy reaches a new climax where the advised silence of 3:26 has been renegotiated: the man may indeed rage as he did in 3:1-21, *but not against Yahweh*. Yahweh's oppressive agency has been destabilized, and the traditional theodicy—one which looks upon unspeakable suffering and theological claims to omnipotent goodness, yet sees no conflict—is unmasked for the lie that it is.

Remarkably, the poet has appealed to God in order to repeal god, or as Meister Eckart famously said, "I pray God to rid me of God." We glimpse here the evolution of theodicy into *antitheodicy*. Our canons of plausibility change over time, especially under pressure from events of profound rupture. For instance, are the geopolitics of human history the primary arena of God's

revelation? This was essentially taken for granted in the world of the ancient Near East and animates the background of the entire Hebrew bible. But Lamentations, and the myriad laments and complaints from other cultures, witness to a sense of theological protest. These bold poems problematize the notion that God's will is consistently displayed by the political maneuverings of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, or Rome. Might it be that world events unfold in a way *contrary* to a deity's will? This is resistance theology predicated on a claim to God's essential goodness.

As a piece of religious literature produced in the midst of terrible suffering, Lamentations contains undeniable strains of both theodic and antitheodic reflection. All five poems display a vibrant dialogism that forces the text to remain open to interpretive possibilities. In other words, to employ a classic theodicy as found in Lam 3 is to attempt to justify the morally unjustifiable, to sanctify human sacrifice as a necessary means to assuage divine wrath, or exhaust the demands of divine justice. Right on the heels of his antitheodicy, though, the *geber's* work buckles under the weight of lived experience: "We have transgressed and rebelled...but you! You have not forgiven!" (3:42). The ensuing distress and ambivalence throughout the rest of the chapter, indeed the entire book, underscores the moral absurdity of such justifications. As one scholar puts it, the *geber* "does not disparage the ethical vision directly. He does not have to. In keeping with his paratactic style he merely needs to present an aspect of the ethical vision and then suffuse it with arresting and manifold images of human suffering to make the inability of the ethical vision to contain such suffering strikingly obvious. In other words, ultimately the events of 587/6 [BCE] explode and finally ironize the ethical vision."⁵

And yet...

"The L[ord] is righteous, [because]..." Because...why? The question remains. When it comes to theodicy, we're all sciologists. Simone Weil once wrote of "feeling ceaselessly and increasingly torn" by her inability to reconcile God's goodness and the affliction of humanity.⁶ Any attempt to loosen this knot, to master the technology of theodicy, is bound to founder. To my mind, there are two nonnegotiable axioms I have learned from the practice of lament: First, we must lend suffering the eloquence due its honest refrain, and allow that rhetoric to break our hearts.⁷ Second, we must maintain that "God is in all ways absolutely guiltless of evil."⁸ Both the horror of the first and the hope of the second must persist, and we dare not soil God's goodness by washing the blood off his hands. In truth, there is no need: God's hands need no cleansing. To attribute such wanton violence to God is one of the few theological gestures worthy of the opprobrium "blasphemy." The *geber* of Lamentations 3 glimpses this truth, if only for a moment.⁹

⁵ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology in the Book of Lamentations," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 74 (1997): 29-60 (47).

⁶ Simone Weil, "Lettre à Maurice Schumann," n.d. (prb Dec. 1942), in *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, Collection Espoir (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957), p. 213. French: J'éprouve un déchirement qui s'aggrave sans cesse..."

⁷ I learned this from the late German philosopher Theodor Adorno in his 1966 book, *Negative Dialectics*: "The need to lend a voice to suffering [literally: "to let suffering be eloquent"] is the condition of all truth."

⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.2.12. The Greek reads: κακίας πάντη πάντως ἀναίτιος ὁ Θεός.

⁹ For a more in-depth investigation of Lamentations 3, and a full defense of the offered re-translation, see Mark P. Stone, "Vindicating Yahweh: A Close Reading of Lamentations 3.21-42," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43.1 (2018): 83-108.