



Vindicating Yahweh: A Close Reading of Lamentations 3.21-42*

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on Lamentations has focused on the voice of Daughter Zion in chs. 1–2. Interpreters argue that the frank protests constitute an antitheodicy and have placed these poems in opposition to the voice of the man in Lamentations 3, specifically 3.21-42. This section utilizes Deuteronomistic and Wisdom material to offer a theodicy, counseling penitent acceptance of God’s righteous judgment. This article nuances previous analyses of Lam. 3.21-42, arguing in particular that vv. 33-39 subtly manipulate the expected theodic solution until Yahweh’s culpability as oppressive agent is *denied* rather than *justified*. It is argued that the poet glimpses a ‘secular’ theodicy. This is accomplished through close exegesis of Lam. 3.21-42, and by utilizing Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of ‘dialogism’ and ‘double-voicing’.

Keywords: Lamentations, Lamentations 3, theodicy, secular theodicy, Bakhtin, dialogism, double-voicing.

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1. Introduction

Throughout much of the twentieth century, a consensus existed in which Lam. 3.21-42 was read as the heuristic lens for the book of Lamentations as a whole. These early studies understood this section to constitute the core of the book's theological message: *hope in the midst of deserved suffering*. Norman Gottwald's landmark monograph asserts that Lamentations highlights the Deuteronomistic school's 'naïve theory of retribution and reward', but he contends that the good news of Lam. 3 ultimately overrides this conflict.¹ Similarly, Bertil Albrektson says that Lam. 3.21-42 transcends 'the immediate spectacle of tragedy'.² Renate Brandscheidt argues that 3.21-66 represents the final Deuteronomistic redactional layer and constitutes 'the focal point' (*der Kristallisationspunkt*) of the book's theology. The central character (the גִּבּוֹר) is a model sufferer, therefore complaint and lament are 'unbecoming for the truly pious'.³ Recently, Paul House has claimed that the main theological takeaway is to be found in Lamentations 3, namely, Yahweh's 'outrageous grace' to sinners.⁴ Lamentations 3, then, seems to provide a theodicy *par excellence*.⁵

1. Norman Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (London: SCM Press, 1954), pp. 50, 109.

2. Bertil Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology of the Book of Lamentations: With a Critical Edition of the Peshitta Text* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1963), p. 215; see pp. 219-30.

3. Renate Brandscheidt, *Gotteszorn und Menschenlied: Die Gerichtsklage des leidenden Gerichung in Klagelieder 3* (Trier: Paulinus, 1983), pp. 157, 36; see also pp. 66, 212, 202-35.

4. Paul House, *Lamentations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 329; *idem*, 'Outrageous Demonstrations of Grace: The Theology of Lamentations', in Robin Parry and Heath Thomas (eds.), *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick/Wipf & Stock, 2011), pp. 26-52.

5. C.W.E. Nægelsbach, *Die Klagelieder* (Bielefeld: Belhagen; Leipzig: Klasing, 1868), pp. vi-viii; Max Löhr, *Die Klagelieder des Jeremias* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1893); *idem*, 'Der Sprachgebrauch des Buches der Klagelieder', *ZAW* 14 (1894), pp. 42-50; *idem*, 'Threni III und die jeremianische Autorschaft des Buches der Klagelieder', *ZAW* 24 (1904), pp. 1-16; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Klagelieder* (Neukirchen: Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1956); Otto Plöger, *Die Klagelieder* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1969), pp. 128-29; Jeffery Tigay, 'Lamentations, Book of', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), X, pp. 1367-75; Alan Mintz, 'The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe', *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), pp. 1-17; *idem*, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 33; Bo Johnson, 'Form and Message in Lamentations', *ZAW* 97 (1985), pp. 58-73; Hans Jochen Boecker, *Klagelieder* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), pp. 15-17; M.D. Guinan, 'Lamentations', in R.E. Brown *et al.* (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical*

However, an increasing number of interpreters have begun to underscore the images of pain and suffering vis-à-vis theodicy.⁶ The recent surge of Lamentations studies reveals a fresh consensus that an undue emphasis upon Lamentations 3 leads to a misreading of the whole book, and these may be categorized under the heading of ‘antitheodicy’.⁷ Tod Linafelt critiques traditional appropriations both for their male and

Commentary (London: Chapman, 1990), pp. 558-62; Delbert Hillers, *Lamentations: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 5-6, 119-23; Homer Heater, ‘Structure and Meaning in Lamentations’, *BSac* 149 (1992), pp. 304-15; Jože Krašovec, ‘The Source of Hope in Lamentations’, *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 221-33; Magne Sæbø, ‘Who Is “the Man” in Lamentations 3? A Fresh Approach to the Interpretation of the Book of Lamentations’, in A.G. Auld (ed.), *Understanding Poets and Prophets* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 294-306; Knut Heim, ‘The Personification of Jerusalem and the Drama of Her Bereavement in the Book of Lamentations’, in Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham (eds.), *Zion, the City of Our God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 129-69; Daniel Berrigan, *Lamentations: From New York to Kabul and Beyond* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2002); Ulrich Berges, *Klagelieder* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002); Antje Labahn, ‘Trauern als Bewältigung der Vergangenheit zur Gestaltung der Zukunft. Bemerkungen zur anthropologischen Theologie der Klagelieder’, *VT* 52 (2002), pp. 513-27; Walter C. Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God: Christian Assurance and the Message of Lamentations* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2004); Tremper Longman III, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008). See C.W. Miller, ‘The Book of Lamentations in Recent Research’, *CBR* 1 (2002), pp. 9-29; Heath Thomas, ‘A Survey of Research on Lamentations (2002–2012)’, *CBR* 12 (2013), pp. 8-38.

6. Iain Provan, *Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994); Naomi Seidman, ‘Burning the Book of Lamentations’, in Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (eds.), *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1995), pp. 278-88; Deryn Guest, ‘Hiding Behind the Naked Women in Lamentations: A Recriminative Response’, *BibInt* 7 (1999), pp. 413-48; Alan Cooper, ‘The Message of Lamentations’, *JANES* 28 (2001), pp. 1-18; Johanna Stiebert, ‘Human Suffering and Divine Abuse of Power in Lamentations’, *Pacifica* 16 (2003), pp. 195-215; Archie Chi Chung Lee, ‘Mothers Bewailing: Reading Lamentations’, in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd C. Penner (eds.), *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), pp. 195-210; Christl M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 141-58; Kelly M. Wilson, ‘Daughter Zion Speaks in Auschwitz: A Post-Holocaust Reading of Lamentations’, *JSOT* 37 (2012), pp. 93-108; Robert Williamson Jr, ‘Taking Root in the Rubble: Trauma and Moral Subjectivity in the Book of Lamentations’, *JSOT* 40 (2015), pp. 7-23.

7. On antitheodicy, see Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, pp. 27-48.

Christian biases, as well as an emphasis on reconciliation rather than confrontation.⁸ He shifts the focus to the figure of Daughter Zion in Lamentations 1–2 and claims the book's priority lies in the expression of pain.⁹ Carleen Mandolfo argues that 'Lamentations insists that extreme suffering is never justified, and is properly raged against'.¹⁰ Zion's complaints entail 'the reassessment of both the logic and justness of God's actions'.¹¹ In Kathleen O'Connor's reading, she concludes that, according to the poems, 'God is cruel and violently abusive'.¹² And F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp argues that, though Lamentations 3 may express responsiveness and hope, these are only 'momentary stays against confusion'. So, 'to read Lamentations as theodicy is finally to misread Lamentations'.¹³ We also find a trend that emphasizes the tension between voices throughout the poems. These readers actively resist giving preference to one perspective over another, and most look to rehabilitate Lamentations 3 by underscoring the integrity of its theodic hope alongside complaint.¹⁴

8. Tod Linafelt, 'Zion's Cause: The Presentation of Pain in the Book of Lamentations', in Tod Linafelt (ed.), *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 267-90. See also Hugh Pyper, 'Reading Lamentations', *JSOT* 95 (2001), pp. 55-69.

9. Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 4-9. See also Michael S. Moore, 'Human Suffering in Lamentations', *RB* 90 (1983), pp. 535-55.

10. Carleen Mandolfo, 'Lamentations', in Gail R. O'Day and David L. Petersen (eds.), *Theological Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), pp. 237-39 (239).

11. Carleen Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 101.

12. Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations & The Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 110.

13. F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 27, 29; *idem*, 'Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology in the Book of Lamentations', *JSOT* 74 (1997), pp. 29-60; Dobbs-Allsopp and Tod Linafelt, 'The Rape of Zion in Thr 1:10', *ZAW* 113 (2001), pp. 77-81. See also Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 95-98; Jaco Gericke, 'Spectres of Yhwh: Some Hauntological Remarks on Lamentations 3', *Scriptura* 110 (2012), pp. 166-75; Walter C. Bouzard, 'Boxed by the Orthodox: The Function of Lamentations 3:22-39 in the Message of the Book', in LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda (eds.), *Why? ... How Long? Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2014), pp. 68-82.

14. E.R. Dalglish, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983); Paul Joyce, 'Lamentations and the Grief Process: A Psychological Reading', *BibInt* 1 (1993), pp. 304-20; Johan Renkema, *Lamentations* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998); David J. Reimer, 'Good

The present study will limit its focus to the rhetorical force of Lam. 3.22-42a, leaving aside the question of how this section fits into the chapter or book as a whole. The major claim of this article is that these verses present *a gradual distancing of Yahweh's agency* in the גבר's plight. The deity's culpability is problematized and culminates in the suggestion that the reason for Jerusalem's horror is *not* to be sought at God's hands. The גבר marshals Deuteronomistic and Wisdom material yet redefines the actual cause of suffering: initially, Yahweh is defended as the causative agent enacting judgment for sin upon Jerusalem and the גבר. Yet in 3.33-39 the poet deftly separates the suffering caused by human sin from Yahweh's agency and attributes *only* good, *not* evil, to the deity. In this study, then, I will advance a new and integrative thesis about the rhetorical contours of Lam. 3.21-42.

The foreground of my approach lies in the literary contributions of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work has been embraced in a number of ways in biblical studies,¹⁵ including recent offerings on Lamentations.¹⁶ Bakhtin's most well-known argument is that texts speak beautifully when they speak with many voices (polyphony) rather than with one voice (monologism). The interaction of the many, often divergent voices in a work

Grief? A Psychological Reading of Lamentations', *ZAW* 114 (2002), pp. 542-59; Benjamin Morse, 'The Lamentations Project: Biblical Mourning through Modern Montage', *JSOT* 28 (2003), pp. 113-27; Jill Middlemas, 'The Violent Storm in Lamentations', *JSOT* 29 (2004), pp. 81-97; Elizabeth Boase, *The Fulfilment of Doom? The Dialogic Interaction Between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early-Exilic Prophetic Literature* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006); *eadem*, 'Constructing Meaning in the Face of Suffering: Theodicy in Lamentations', *VT* 58 (2008), pp. 449-68; Robin Parry, *Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); R.B. Salters, *Lamentations* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010); Heath A. Thomas, *Poetry and Theology in the Book of Lamentations: The Aesthetics of an Open Text* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013); Miriam J. Bier, '*Perhaps There Is Hope*': *Reading Lamentations as a Polyphony of Pain, Penitence, and Protest* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2015).

15. See esp. Walter Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature According to Bakhtin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Carol A. Newsom, 'Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth', *JR* 76 (1996), pp. 290-306; *eadem*, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2000); Roland Boer, *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007).

16. See Boase, *Fulfilment of Doom?*; Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion*; Bier, '*Perhaps There Is Hope*'.

is ‘dialogism’. Less discussed has been his concept of ‘double-voicing’.¹⁷ In defining double-voiced discourse, Bakhtin argues that ‘language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents’.¹⁸ One may then ‘appropriate’ these discourses and ‘reaccentuate’ them, and he calls this ‘double-voicing’: a ventriloquism that is ‘directed both toward the referential object of speech...and toward *another’s discourse*, towards *someone else’s speech*’.¹⁹ That is, when an author makes use ‘of someone else’s discourse for his own purposes by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own’.²⁰ My contention is that the stereotypical theodic discourse in Lam. 3.22-42a constitutes double-voicing,²¹ where this ‘word of the other’ is put to new use.

As to what precisely is being double-voiced, we answer: Deuteronomistic and Wisdom theodicies. It has long been noted that Lamentations 3 draws on these traditions, and the specifics of each need not detain us.²² We may summarize briefly: (a) Deuteronomistic tradition advocates *retribution* theodicy. To the question, ‘Why has this happened?’, we hear the answer, ‘Yahweh is punishing us for our sin’, with either implicit or explicit rooting in the covenantal traditions of Israel. (b) Wisdom theodicy tends to embrace the retributive framework but adds an *educative* component: one should embrace divine reproof as an opportunity for self-examination and confession of sin.

17. Bakhtin discusses the various permutations of this phenomenon under the typologies of ‘represented speech’, ‘varieties of discourse’, and ‘reported speech’. See, e.g., Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (trans. C. Emerson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 184-202; *idem*, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), essays 2 and 4;

18. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 293.

19. Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 185 (his italics).

20. Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 189.

21. Bakhtin further distinguishes between *active* and *passive* double-voicing. C.W. Miller helpfully summarizes: ‘It is important to note that both types are directed towards another’s speech—that is what makes them double-voiced. They are distinguished, however, by whether or not the actual words of the other are reproduced—if they are not, it is active; if they are, it is passive’. See C.W. Miller, ‘Reading Voices: Personification, Dialogism and the Reader of Lamentations 1’, *BibInt* 9 (2001), pp. 393-408 (396).

22. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, pp. 51-52, 66-72; Albrektson, *Studies in the Text*, pp. 231-39; Kraus, *Klagelieder*, p. 58; Brandscheidt, *Gotteszorn*, p. 43. See especially James L. Crenshaw (ed.), *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); *idem*, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Daniel Castelo has observed that the *theos* of theodicy is often a moving target, compelling the reader to ponder precisely *which* God is currently being justified.²³ These competing, conflictual characterizations of deity remain unresolved in the Hebrew Bible. In this negotiated space texts constantly borrow discourses from other arenas to bolster, nuance, or subvert the message on offer. This essay will argue that the גבר of Lamentations 3 deftly reimagines the *theos* of his theodicy, and—using the theodic language from his religious tradition—moves (however briefly) toward a ‘secular’ theodicy:²⁴ a worldview in which people suffer real consequences for actions, but simultaneously denies God’s direct causality of that very suffering, attributing only blessing to the deity.²⁵ Thus, the poet double-voices the theodicies on offer, destabilizing them on their own terms.

2. Complaint to Resignation (3.19-21)

Before we begin our rhetorical analysis in earnest, we must determine precisely *where* the theodicy starts. Lamentations 3.1-21 begins, of course, with an extended complaint. The reader will have noticed that I have gone back and forth in citing both Lam. 3.21-42 and 3.22-42a.

23. Daniel Castelo, *Theological Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), p. 9 n. 14.

24. Admittedly, given the appropriation of the word ‘theodicy’ in other discourses, this phrase is not perfect. Max Weber, for instance, defines the term as *any* attempt to render suffering and evil intelligible in the light of normative ideals. See *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Bd. 1 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1920). A.J. Vidich and S.M. Lyman utilize the neologism ‘sociodicy’ as an equivalent to secular theodicy in *American Sociology: Worldly Rejections of Religion and Their Directions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Susan Neiman, in *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), notes that Hegel ‘was the first to give a secular formulation to the problem of evil’. We might also mention Marx and Engels’ dialectical materialism.

However, by emphasizing the movement *toward* (thus not *arriving at*) a ‘secular theodicy’, the phrase does effectively communicate the idea of a liminal space where *theos* and ‘secular’ persist side-by-side, unresolved. Given my particular argument, this seems the best way to situate things.

25. ‘Something entirely different had to be done to explain evil in the world, a theodicy without divine intervention. The new theodicy had to be a natural one, a “secular” one... Evil had to be explained as existing in the world apart from God’s intention or justification.’ See Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), p. 18.

This is intentional: traditionally, interpreters have seen the גבר shift from complaint to theodicy at 3.21. All note the interpretive awkwardness, as it is clearly unexpected and harsh. However, presently, I will argue the man's hopeful transition does not occur until 3.22.²⁶

The issue lies in the syntax of 3.21, specifically על-כן, 'therefore'. Normally it links with *previous* argumentation that gives grounds for a *present* conclusion. But what argument would lead the man to conclude, 'I will hope' (אוהיל), especially after twenty verses of bitter complaint? The man's lexical referent (זאת) finds its most natural antecedent in vv. 19-20 with his appeal for Yahweh's remembrance. Given the clearly negative material in 3.1-20, many conjecture that על-כן simply breaks convention and refers to the *following* strophe. Yet in order to make sense of this approach, one must resort to adding a disjunctive 'but' to mark the shift: 'But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope' (NRSV). *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*.

Commentators have read too much into the meaning of אוהיל (יחל). זאת refers most naturally to the preceding verses, so rather than signifying the point of hopeful change, 3.21 instead ends on a note of resignation.²⁷ The poet therefore wanly commits to endure in the face of overwhelming suffering. The verb יחל simply means 'wait', and the sense of expectancy is highly contextual. In many passages the sense of positive expectation is quite strong, and this is certainly the shift in 3.24, where the object of and rationale for 'waiting' has changed from affliction (3.19-20) to Yahweh's faithfulness. However, in 3.21 we have instead a sense of resignation, a soul so bowed down under oppression that nothing else seems possible. True, the poet likely has in mind a 'waiting for' God. But this must be tempered by the immediate context where he has just proclaimed that his future and 'hope' have perished (3.18). He waits for God, not due to confidence in divine goodness, but because there is no other option.²⁸ The interplay of יחל in 3.19 and 3.24 intensifies the ambiguity in the poet's mind: what is he waiting for, and why should he wait? Lamentations 3.21, then, closes the complaint section on an uncertain note.

26. So too Bouzard, 'Boxed by the Orthodox', p. 75.

27. Note the similar connotation in LXX Lam. 3.21b: διὰ τοῦτο ὑπομενῶ (also 3.24, 26).

28. See the similar use of יחל in Pss. 69.4; 119.81-82.

3. Transition to Theodicy (3.22-30)

We encounter the sharp adjustment to theodicy in 3.22-24. Rather than clarifying any shift toward hope from v. 21, this strophe signals an unexpected change in tone as the man describes God's covenant loyalty. The rare construct chain יהוה חסדי depicts divine action that demonstrates relational commitment to involved parties (Isa. 63.7; Pss. 89.2; 107.43). Though Yahweh punishes, even this is embraced within covenantal fidelity and should provide hope for eventual restoration. Only here is the sense of 'waiting' transformed: where in 3.21 the גבר resigns himself to wait, in 3.24b an object is supplied (לו) and יחל is rehabilitated in light of this newfound theodic fervor: 'Therefore I will wait *for him*'.

The ו-stanza begins by expanding on the notion of 'waiting' developed in 3.24, varying the lexical texture while more explicitly evoking connotations of 'hope' (תקוה). Further reasons are supplied as to why one should wait for Yahweh: the deity is 'good' to such people; it is 'good' to bear the 'yoke'. Whereas in Zion's case her על ('yoke') is meant to evoke pity (Lam. 1.14), the man's על is 'good'. The sufferer is instructed to wait 'in silence'. It is tempting to categorize the advice as 'fairly innocuous and conventionally pious',²⁹ but, importantly, the גבר is hardly silent up to this point (3.1-21). This harsh juxtaposition is one of our major clues that here the גבר is borrowing ('double-voicing') traditional theodic discourse.

A list of conventional acts of penitence is then introduced (3.26-30). The language is stereotypical, but this should in no way detract from the emotional intensity conveyed. There is continuity between the impassioned complaints of 3.1-21 and the (seemingly) calm paraenesis of 3.22-42a, for these words are ready-made, 'reutterable' caches of traditional consolation, easily drawn upon due to how little effort is needed to construct them.³⁰ We must not lose sight of the גבר's troubled disposition. Restoration in Lamentations 3 'is liminal at best':³¹ *Perhaps*

29. Parry, *Lamentations*, p. 103.

30. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 115; *idem*, 'Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology', pp. 51-52; Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), pp. 75-104

31. Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, p. 188. See also Bier, 'Perhaps There Is Hope', p. 125; Ulrich Berges, 'The Violence of God in the Book of Lamentations', in P. Chatelion Counet and Ulrich Berges (eds.), *One Text, a Thousand Methods: Studies in Memory of Sjef van Tilborg* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 41-42.

(אוֹלִי) there is hope' (3.29b).³² The confident rhetoric of 3.22-28 begins to unravel with this one small word and underscores a portrait of wavering conviction.

4. Yahweh's *Opus Alienum* (3.31-33)

כִּי לֹא יִזְנַח לְעוֹלָם אֲדֹנָי³¹
 כִּי אִם הוּגָה וּרְחַם כָּרַב חֲסָדוֹ³²
 כִּי לֹא עָנָה מַלְבּוֹ וַיִּגָּה בְּנֵי אִישׁ³³

The present strophe, especially 3.33, is often read as both structurally and theologically central for the whole of Lamentations.³³ Presently I will argue that traditional renderings of 3.33 ('He does not willingly...') are too tame, and that we in fact miss the fundamental *problematization* that occurs in this line. In other words, it is precisely at this point that the poet shifts his theodic imagination towards the 'secular' and destabilizes orthodox theodicy on its own terms.

Previous assertions in the poem are heavily qualified if not outrightly contradicted in this strophe: in 3.31 the man denies that Adonai will 'reject forever', yet earlier we read that 'Adonai rejected his altar' (Lam. 2.7a). Whereas in Lam. 1.5b and 12c Yahweh 'tormented' Zion for her transgressions, Lam. 3.32-33 claims that this 'torment' will end and be met with divine compassion, echoing the lack thereof in Lam. 1.2b, 7c, 9b, 16b, 17a, and 21a. Furthermore, 'Adonai has destroyed without mercy' (2.2a), 'demolished without pity' (2.17b), 'slaughtered without mercy' (2.21c), and soon we read he has 'killed without pity' (3.43).³⁴

In Lam. 3.33 we must decide how to understand the metaphor of God's 'heart' (לֵב). Most render the idiom לֹא מַלְבּוֹ as 'he does not willingly', noting that the Hebrew metaphor for 'heart' does not precisely correspond to English usage but rather refers to the seat of decision-making, 'the locus of the person's moral will'.³⁵ Presently the idea seems to deny divine caprice and imagines a situation where Yahweh is either internally conflicted or externally constrained. Ambrose of Milan interprets the

32. Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 177.

33. E.g., Parry, *Lamentations*, p. 105. The structural claim is puzzlingly common. As Bier points out, line-by-line the 'literal center' is in fact 2.22b-c, which provides a quite different theological vision ('*Perhaps There is Hope*', pp. 137-38).

34. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 121.

35. Carol A. Newsom, 'Models of the Moral Self: Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism', *JBL* 131 (2012), pp. 5-25 (10).

phrase as, ‘He does not bring down afflictions with His whole heart’, but rather ‘reserves the intention of forgiving’.³⁶ Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Kara gloss the phrase with מרצונו, ‘from his will’.³⁷ Modern interpreters follow suit. Gottwald, for example, says, ‘Begrudgingly, regretfully, if there is no other way toward his higher purposes, he may unleash the forces of evil, but “his heart” is not in it’.³⁸

There are of course a large variety of uses for the Hebrew ‘heart’. Though it certainly includes the idea of will/decisions, we should not reduce the metaphor only to this usage. By analogy with human beings, and especially when used with a personal suffix, לֵב often refers to the idea of character, that which is constitutive of a person’s entire nature.³⁹ Jeremiah offers imagery of the heart as the place from which covenant fidelity stems (31.33), and also puts into Yahweh’s mouth the striking claim that the horrors of child sacrifice did not come forth from God’s heart (Jer. 7.31; 19.5; 32.35).

The tendency to read Lam. 3.33 as merely referencing Yahweh’s ‘unwillingness’—as though he *is* in fact the oppressive agent, but only ‘begrudgingly’, as Gottwald suggests—dilutes the potent theology being offered. Indeed, the forthcoming strophes (particularly 3.38) mitigate the idea of Yahweh having a conflict of ‘will’ around commanding both good and evil; rather, there is a purity of moral agency (to be re-problematized in 3.42b-66). Presently, Lam. 3.33 results in a striking claim not simply about the deity’s willingness but *the moral agency of this God*. It is better to translate the idiom as expressing a contradiction: ‘Oppressing and abusing human beings are against his will/character’. Renkema is right to emphasize that עֲנָה II, with YHWH as subject, constitutes, in fact, a

36. *De paenitentia*, NPNF 2.10.333.

37. Menachem Cohen (ed.), *Miqra'ot Gedolot ha-Keter: Hameš Megillot* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012); Philip S. Alexander, *The Targum of Lamentations: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008); Jacob Neusner, *Lamentations Rabbah: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

38. Norman Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (London: SCM Press, 1954), p. 51. See also Fredrik Lindström, *God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1983), p. 222; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations* (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2010), pp. 421-22.

39. E.g., 1 Sam. 10.9; 16.7; 1 Kgs 8.23; Ps. 51.12; Qoh. 11.10; Sir. 10.12; see Lam. 3.65.

contradictio in terminis.⁴⁰ This realization primarily elicits not hope but *disillusionment*. Of course, the distancing of Yahweh from ‘abuse’ and ‘torment’ is a positive assertion. While on one level that is obviously the case, on another this claim so problematizes received theodicy that the theological justification for Jerusalem’s suffering becomes undermined: if we are sure Yahweh’s essential nature precludes such oppression, then what are we to make of the Babylonian onslaught?

Renegotiations of divine goodness and power necessarily follow the claim in 3.33, and this is precisely what occurs: we will see a subtle movement towards the ‘secular’ in 3.34-39 while still utilizing the traditional terminology of theodicy (double-voicing). Commentators are right to note that at this point the poet does not deny Yahweh’s agency, but few emphasize enough the fundamental problematization that occurs. The rhetorical function of Lam. 3.33 is that of *destabilization*, not *securement*: it disrupts any confidence in claims to Yahweh’s oppressive agency throughout Lamentations and imbues with tension the poet’s theodicy.

5. Problematizing Agency (3.34-36)

לדבא תחת רגליו כל אסירי ארץ³⁴
 להטות משפט גבר נגד פני עליון³⁵
 לעות אדם בריבו אדני לא ראה³⁶

Does this strophe *accuse* Yahweh of negligence, *deny* the deity’s oppressive agency, or *affirm* the Lord’s watchful agency? I will argue that these verses advance the implications of 3.33 by making a clear distinction between *human* and *divine* agency—that is, the גבר explicitly attributes injustice to humans and denies Yahweh’s present involvement.

The string of infinitive constructs has always been viewed as syntactically problematic. Usually the governing verb precedes, but if we read it as ראה (‘see’, 3.36b), the acrostic form easily explains the unconventional syntax.⁴¹ Furthermore, no other strophe in Lamentations is incomplete without the preceding strophe, something required in other approaches.⁴² But there remains the need to resolve how to interpret אדני לא ראה:

40. Renkema, *Lamentations*, p. 409.

41. Pace Hillers, *Lamentations*, pp. 111-17.

42. Parry, *Lamentations*, p. 109.

- (i) 'The Lord does not *see*...'
- (ii) 'The Lord does not *approve of*...'
- (iii) 'Does not the Lord *see*...?'

Option (i) would be highly critical of Yahweh for not paying attention to the suffering of Jerusalem, and Calvin even understands the passage as 'the impious words of those who complain that God is not moved by any compassion...that God has forgotten us, that he is either asleep or lies down inactive'.⁴³ Wilhelm Rudolph and Federico Villanueva similarly read vv. 34-36 as 'a Job-like objection'.⁴⁴ 'The God of Lamentations is a blind God', asserts O'Connor.⁴⁵

But what are we to make of this drastic shift to negativity, only to be followed by an impassioned *defense* of Yahweh in 3.37-39? Indeed, it makes little sense for 3.34-35a to happen 'in the presence of the Most High' (3.35b) and then declare God does not see it. We may of course allow for drastic shifts in mood, but option (i) cannot coherently account for the shifts *at this particular juncture*.

Option (iii), taking the clause as a rhetorical query, is understandable but requires the presence of an unmarked interrogative. We should instead favor option (ii), 'approve', that is, 'look on/at with approval'.⁴⁶ This fits better with the man's argumentative logic (see also Exod. 23.2; Job 34.10-13). Indeed, Origen, having argued early on that the main subject of the poems is the contemplative soul 'becoming subject to the devil or even his angels'⁴⁷—thereby allowing us to distinguish between 'the captivity and the one taking captive' (*Fr. Lam.* 2)—states that through this strophe we learn to *not* attribute oppressive agency to

43. Calvin, *Commentaries*, p. 424.

44. Wilhelm Rudolph, *Die Klagelieder* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1962), pp. 229, 241-43; Federico Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing': A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 230-33.

45. O'Connor, *Lamentations*, p. 52. See also Hans Gottlieb, *A Study on the Text of Lamentations* (Århus: Århus Universitet, 1978), p. 50.

46. NET, NEB, NASB, RSV; C.W.E. Nägelsbach, *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*, in J.P. Lange, *A Commentary on Holy Scripture* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1870), p. 120; Heinrich Ewald, *Die Dichter des alten Bundes: Die Psalmen und Die Klagelieder* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1866), p. 339; Gottwald, *Studies*, p. 14; Gordis, *Lamentations*, pp. 143, 181; Johnson, 'Form and Message', p. 66; Theophile Meek and William Merrill, 'The Book of Lamentations', in *IB*, VI, p. 27. Cf. NJPS: 'choose'.

47. See Erich Klostermann (ed.), revised by Pierre Nautin, *Origenes Werke III: Jeremiahomilien, Klageliederkommentar, Erklärung der Samuel—und Königsbücher* (GCS, 6.235-279; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983)—hereafter, *Fr. Lam.* All translations are mine. See Joseph Trigg, *Origen* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 73-85.

Yahweh.⁴⁸ Despite assertions to the contrary, there is ample biblical support to understand ראה in this way (see esp. Hab. 1.13 and, importantly, the polysemy in Lam. 1.7-12; 2.16).⁴⁹

So, in this strophe it is explicitly stated not only that others (viz., humans) are responsible for oppression, but that Yahweh is so far removed from causality that *of course* he does not approve of injustice in his own presence (3.34-36). This is not surprising, as such reprehensible acts are לא מלבו, ‘against his will/character’ (3.33). The גבר’s ‘turn’ to theodicy at 3.22 was originally constructed to defend Yahweh’s oppressive agency, but we now hear the poet deny that very claim and subtly twist the intention of his traditional theodicy, thus contributing to the larger effect of double-voicing in 3.22-42a.

6. Dissolution of Theodicy (3.37-39)

מי זה אמר ותהי אדני לא צוה³⁷
מפי עליזן לא תצא הרעות והטוב³⁸
מה יתאוונן אדם חי גבר על חטאו³⁹

This strophe is the heart of our investigation, for when one consults modern English translations a clear consensus emerges that flatly contradicts my proposed reading. Lamentations 3.37-39 seems to articulate a traditional Deuteronomistic theodicy where Yahweh’s meticulous providence is *affirmed*: the Lord commands (3.37) both good and evil (3.38) and punishes sinners (3.39), therefore one should not complain. I will argue instead that the entire strophe double-voices traditional theodicy so that Yahweh’s oppressive agency is *denied*.

a. Interpreting 3.37

First, we must address the ambiguity of 3.37b: אדני לא צוה. The clause has traditionally been read as a rhetorical question that affirms Yahweh’s agency: ‘Did not the Lord command [it]?’. However, one may translate the line in one of two other ways:

48. ‘Διὰ τούτων μανθάνομεν μὴ εἰρηκέναι τὸν κύριον κ.τ.λ.’ (Fr. Lam. 79). Rashi and Kara give similar interpretations. Cf. LXX 3.36b κύριος οὐκ εἶπεν.

49. Pace e.g., Gottlieb, *A Study*, p. 49; Renkema, *Lamentations*, p. 416. See Gen. 1.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25; 6.2; 2 Kgs 10.16; Isa. 28.4; 52.8; Hos. 9.10; Obad. 12; Pss. 22.18; 54.9; 106.5; Song 3.11; 6.11; Qoh. 2.1.

- (a) ‘Who then spoke that this should come to pass?
The Lord did not command it!’⁵⁰
- (b) ‘Who then spoke that this should come to pass
when the Lord did not command it?’⁵¹

Calvin views the line as a quotation of the impious: ‘The prophet, after having mentioned the blasphemy which prevailed everywhere at that time [viz., 3.34-36], strongly condemns so gross a stupidity. *Who is this?* he says. He checks such madness by a sharp rebuke—for the question implies an astonishment.’⁵² See too *Targum Lamentations*: ‘Who is the man who has spoken *and an evil thing was done in the world, unless because they did that which they were not commanded by the mouth of the Lord?*’⁵³ *Lamentations Rabbah* even places the command in the mouth of Haman.

Renkema points to Ps. 33.9, the only other place in the Old Testament where the frequently used verbs $\sqrt{\text{אמר}}$, $\sqrt{\text{היה}}$, and $\sqrt{\text{צוה}}$ occur in such close combination. That context is divine creation, and Renkema notes that Lam. 3.37-38 occurs with $\sqrt{\text{עליון}}$, a divine name associated with creation.⁵⁴ Yahweh’s cosmic, creative power is in view, and this stresses the question of aetiology: but the origin of what? Certainly the present Judahite crisis is the primary referent, but there is more. Importantly, 3.37 utilizes vocabulary traditionally reserved to describe the agency of Yahweh, but here such language is double-voiced: it initially provokes in the reader the expectation that we will encounter an *affirmation* of Yahweh’s sovereign, creative speech, yet we are surprised to find the opposite: *someone else* is the subject of $\sqrt{\text{אמר}}$ and $\sqrt{\text{צוה}}$, viz., the anti-Yahweh agents described in 3.34-36.

50. LXX Rahlfs places an interrogative after 3.37a. In LXX 3.36b, important witnesses read $\kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma \sigma\upsilon\kappa \epsilon\acute{\iota}\pi\epsilon\nu$, though some also read $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\delta\epsilon\nu$ (see Ziegler’s apparatus in the Göttingen LXX). One could insist this is merely a scribal error. However, if we read with the former witnesses here a powerful rhetorical elision occurs between 3.36b-37: ‘... $\kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma \sigma\upsilon\kappa \epsilon\acute{\iota}\pi\epsilon\nu$ / $\tau\acute{\iota}\varsigma \sigma\upsilon\tau\omega\varsigma \epsilon\acute{\iota}\pi\epsilon\nu \kappa\alpha\iota \epsilon\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\theta\eta$; $\kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma \sigma\upsilon\kappa \epsilon\nu\epsilon\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\alpha\tau\omicron$ ’.

51. The implied answer has already been provided in 3.34-36: unjust humans.

52. Calvin, *Commentaries*, p. 426.

53. Trans. Christian M.M. Brady, ‘Appendix 2: A Translation of Targum Lamentations’, in Parry and Thomas (eds.), *Great Is Thy Faithfulness?*, pp. 228-47.

54. Renkema, *Lamentations*, pp. 418-19. Also see Brandscheidt, *Gotteszorn*, p. 65; Shlomo Weissblueth, ‘*Mipī ‘elyôn lō’ tēšē hārā ‘ôt wehaṭṭōb* (Lam. 3.38)’, *Beth Mikra* 32 (1986-87), pp. 64-67 (in Hebrew).

b. Interpreting 3.38

The double-voicing continues in 3.38, and this line deserves especially close treatment: מפי עליון לא תצא הרעות והטוב. By and large the most popular option has been to take the line as a rhetorical query: 'Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?' (NRSV).⁵⁵ However, the most straightforward option is to take the line as a statement: 'From the mouth of the Most High evil things don't come but rather good!' (CEB).⁵⁶ Shlomo Weissblueth argues for a variation on this: 'From the mouth of the Most High does not come [the command to do] good or evil'.⁵⁷ An important question is whether the *waw* in והטוב functions with adversative force ('but good') or as a copulative-conjunctive ('and good'). So, in examining this line we must decide whether evil *does* or *does not* come from Yahweh. I will argue for the latter.

Interpreters have long disagreed on these points. Calvin again renders it as part of an 'impious' declaration: 'Who is this that says, "It comes to pass, when the Lord commanded it not"?' As though good and evil should not proceed from the mouth of God.'⁵⁸ *Targum Lamentations* shows clear traces of taking the phrase as a statement:

From the mouth of God Most High there does not issue evil, rather by the hint of a whisper, because of the violence with which the land is filled. But when he desires to decree good in the world it issues from the holy mouth.⁵⁹

There are three important quotations of Lam. 3.38 by Origen that have never been noted before in this discussion. The first is found in *Contra Celsum* 4.66:

55. E.g., Löhr, *Klagelieder*; Rudolph, *Klagelieder*; Kraus, *Klagelieder*; Plöger, *Klagelieder*; Brandscheidt, *Gotteszorn*; O. Kaiser, *Klagelieder*; Boecker, *Klagelieder*; Provan, *Lamentations*; Hillers, *Lamentations*; O'Connor, *Lamentations & the Tears*; Berlin, *Lamentations*; *Lamentations*; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*; Kaiser, *Grief and Pain*; Parry, *Lamentations*; House, *Lamentations*; Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*.

56. Renkema, *Lamentations*, pp. 420-23; A.B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel: Textkritisches, Sprachliches und Sachliches* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1914), VII, pp. 43-44; Gordis, *Lamentations*, pp. 181-83; Mitchell Dahood, 'New Readings in Lamentations', *Bib* 59 (1978), pp. 174-97.

57. Weissblueth, 'Mipi 'elyôn', pp. 64-67.

58. Calvin, *Commentaries*, p. 426. See also Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commentary on the Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremiah* (trans. Daniel Shute; Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002), p. 136.

59. Trans. Brady, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness?*, pp. 228-47.

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 proceeds not evil and/but good* (ἐκ στόματος κυρίου οὐκ ἐξελεύσεται τὰ κακά και τὸ ἀγαθόν)’.

Origen also quotes Lam. 3.38 in his commentary on Mt. 13.6:

...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 that which is good* (ἐκ στόματος κυρίου ἐξελεύσεται τὰ καλά και τὸ ἀγαθόν)’.

And finally a fragment from Origen’s commentary on Lamentations:

Οὐ γὰρ δύναται, φησί, τὰ ἐναντία ἐκ στόματος κυρίου ἐξεληλυθέναι, τὰ ἀγαθὰ και τὸ κακόν.⁶⁰ οὔτε γὰρ δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς πονηροῦς ποιεῖ, οὔτε δένδρον πονηρὸν καρποὺς ἀγαθοῦς. Τὸ οὖν ἀδικεῖσθαι ἄνδρας ὑπὸ πονηρῶν παρὰ θεῖαν κρίσιν ἐστί, γίνεται δὲ ὅμως ἐν περιορισμένοις ὑπὸ θεοῦ, καθὰ τοῖς Ἰσραηλίταις ὑπὸ τῶν πολεμίων συνέβη, και ἐν ἐπιστροφῇ θεοῦ λύεται. Διὸ χρῆ ταύτην ἀναζητεῖν ἐπὶ τιμωρίᾳ παραδοθέντας.

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 people 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. (*Fr. Lam. 79b*)

Weissblueth’s interpretation merits a closer look: ‘From the mouth of the Most High does not come [the command to do] good and evil’. This flows from his understanding of 3.37 as a statement, and he then reads 3.39 as emphasizing that punishment of sins aims at restoration: ‘A man is not commanded to do a good or evil deed, but through free will he does what he wants... It is God’s way of leadership in the world.’⁶¹ He makes a strong rhetorical case, but if Weissblueth is right we should expect different syntax.⁶² Indeed, he repeatedly resorts to this when glossing

60. Cf. Sir. 33.14-15: ‘Good is the opposite (ἀπέναντι) of evil, and life the opposite (ἀπέναντι) of death; so the sinner is the opposite (ἀπέναντι) of the godly. Look at all the works of the Most High; they come in pairs, one the opposite (κατέναντι) of the other’.

61. Weissblueth, ‘*Mipi ‘elyôn*’, p. 67.

62. E.g., מפּי עליון לא תצא הרעות או הטוב. Cf. the syntax of Zeph. 1.12, האמרים בלבבם, לא ייטיב יהוה ולא ירע (‘Those who say to themselves, “Yahweh won’t do good or evil”).

throughout his essay.⁶³ More importantly, he does not give enough weight to the terminology of divine creation and providence, and so shifts the focus from God to humanity without sufficient warrant.

The rhetorical query has been the most popular option. Arguments largely rely on the view that the גבר is waxing sapiential and supporting the common traditions that regard Yahweh as meticulously providential. A number of texts are repeatedly invoked that depict Yahweh as one who actively metes out both טוב and רע, the most relevant and common of which are Deut. 30.15 and Isa. 45.7. Both reflect a covenantal background where ‘good’ and ‘evil’ generally correspond to divine blessing (for obedience) and judgment (for disobedience). ‘Evil’ is therefore inherently a sign neither of Yahweh’s abandonment nor impotence; Deuteronomistic tradition, after all, envisions a return after destruction (Deut. 4.27-31; 30.1-4). But though eventual restoration is implicit in judgment, in Lamentations we encounter Judah in a state of liminal crisis, devoid of confidence in Yahweh’s covenantal fidelity. Yes, the גבר of Lamentations 3 attempts to awaken hope by reciting traditional formulae, but here he double-voices the theodicy: utilizing language typically reserved only for Yahweh, the poet uses the language of retributive theology but subtly shifts it so that it is put to new use: traditionally, both good and evil come from Yahweh. Double-voiced, the same terminology is used, but *only* good (*not* evil) comes from Yahweh.

Like Isa. 45.7, Lam. 3.38 connotes more than merely localized judgment, though of course it includes that. I make this judgment regarding Isaiah due to the parallelism of light/peace and darkness/evil, and creation vocabulary (עשה; ברא; יצר); and in Lamentations, due to the coupling of creation terminology in 3.37-38. The overtones here are too often diluted by (rightly) noting the localized reference. In Lamentations, the aetiology of הרעות והטוב are queried *in that dual context*.⁶⁴ Yes, the primary reference is to Jerusalem’s siege—a particular, historical event. However, when this God speaks, what he creates is טוב and only טוב, and the creational overtones serve to underscore the theodic tension. The intensity of the tragedy is so acute that the only way the poet can account

63. E.g., “‘From the mouth of the Most High does not come good and evil’, but every act that someone does, whether good or evil, comes only from himself” (Weissblueth, *Mipi’ ehyôn*, p. 65).

64. Cf. Renkema, *Lamentations*, pp. 422-23, who argues that הרעות refers to the words of the false prophets.

for it is to adopt the language of divine creativity. Anything less would dilute the severity and cosmological scope of Judah's demise. Extravagant hyperbole is at play. Yahweh has ostensibly turned in such fierce wrath that a breach of covenant seems a terrifying possibility. The scope of disaster is so vast that cosmological terminology is entirely proper. What is so striking, though, is the double-voiced nature of this discourse: originally drawn upon to reinforce Yahweh's sovereignty, the poet now uses the same language to claim that another agent (i.e., *not* Yahweh) is behind the present 'evil'.

Some earlier scholars opted for emendation of this line, for instance, Ehrlich (followed by Gordis): הִרְעָ אֶת הַטּוֹב, 'Out of the mouth of the Most High cannot come the command to inflict suffering on the righteous man [*den Frommen*]'.⁶⁵ This captures the rhetorical force quite well but is unnecessary. Coupled with the observations above regarding cosmological overtones in 3.37-38, there is a much simpler explanation for the text: תִּצַּחֵן הַרְעוֹת paired with the third person feminine singular תִּצַּחֵן: The text remains acceptable if we understand הַרְעוֹת as *pluralis intensivus*—'evil itself'⁶⁶—or better, 'evil events/disasters in general', or with reference to a specific set of 'wicked things/actions'.⁶⁷ So, while Lam. 3.38 alludes to the covenantal curses of Deuteronomy 28-30, it has equally in view Yahweh's providential relationship to 'evil itself', that is, the events of violent suffering that come upon this deity's people.

Much of the confusion surrounding 3.38 has centered on the lack of an interrogative particle and a difficulty squaring its clear denial of divine complicity with affirmations elsewhere. However, with our ears attuned to dialogism and double-voicing, it is simplest to read the Hebrew clause as a statement. Taken along with 3.37 as argued above, the proposed reading provides a smoother flow from 3.36b, allowing the Hebrew to stand in all three verses without tortured syntax, unwarranted glossing, or the insertion of unmarked interrogatives. We have already seen that Yahweh is not the sort of deity who torments or abuses (3.33), and such things are not approved in his presence (3.34-36). Not only this, but Yahweh would never command such things (3.37), for a purity of moral agency in this deity entails that only good comes from his mouth (3.38).

65. Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, pp. 43-44; Gordis, *Lamentations*, pp. 181-83.

66. E.g., Pss. 55.16; 88.4 (Eng. 3); Prov. 15.28.

67. E.g., 1 Sam. 10.19; Jer. 3.5; 44.9; Ezek. 6.9; 20.43; Hos. 7.1; Pss. 34.20; 40.13; 140.3 (Eng. 2); 141.5. See GKC §124a-e; Renkema, *Lamentations*, p. 422.

The stereotypical discourse of theodicy has therefore been heavily double-voiced, co-opted for a use different from its original intention.

c. Interpreting 3.39

Now we reach 3.39: *מה יתאוּן אדם חי גבר על חטאוּ*. Most take the line as one rhetorical question: ‘Why should any who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins?’ (NRSV). Others, such as Karl Budde, split the line: ‘What should the living man complain about? [Answer]: Each about his sins!’⁶⁸ At first glance this verse also threatens my proposed reading. However, I will argue for three other ways to read this line, each of which are compatible with the rhetorical progression described thus far.

First, we must deal with the precise connotation of *יתאוּן*, typically rendered ‘complain, grumble’. Elsewhere in biblical literature, *אָנָן* only occurs in Num. 11.1 where ‘complaining’ provokes divine anger, causing Moses to intercede for the people.⁶⁹ It is often argued that the logic behind Lam. 3.39 is synonymous with that of Num. 11.1: Thomas states that ‘Yhwh’s punishment was *justified* and *predicted*, as on display in Deut. 30.15’.⁷⁰ Yahweh laid out a path of life and a path of death; they chose the latter, so they should stop complaining about their own actions and accept their suffering as justly deserved. Given the rarity of *אָנָן*, Lam. 3.39 possibly exploits an allusion to this material, but the precise nature (or presence) of that allusion is unclear and should not be stressed. It is just as likely the word’s rarity is due to the paucity of extant documents. Whether or not connotations of direct punishment are meant here is inconclusive. There is simply not enough evidence to justify a strict parallel, and the interpretation offered below will not assume this supposed echo.

Next, the sequence *אדם חי גבר* has struck many as odd. Most understand *גבר* in parallelism with *אדם חי*, but the syntax is strained: *גבר* is

68. ‘Was soll der lebende Mensch betauern? [Antwort:] Jeder über seine Sünden!’. See Karl Budde, *Die Klagelieder*, in K. Budde et al., *Die fünf Megilloth* (Freiburg: Mohr Siebeck, 1898), p. 96; Rashi; Kara; *Lamentations Rabbah*; Martin Luther; Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 163; Rudolph, *Die Klagelieder*, p. 232; Gottlieb, *A Study*, p. 52; O. Kaiser, *Klagelieder*, in H. Ringgren et al., *Sprüche, Prediger, Das Hohe Lied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Esther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), p. 345; G.R. Driver, ‘Hebrew Notes on “Song of Songs” and “Lamentations”’, in W. Baumgartner et al. (eds.), *Festschrift Alfred Bertholet* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1950), p. 140.

69. See also Sir. 41.2 and 1QH^a 25.10.

70. Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, p. 193 (his italics).

quite pleonastic in such a reading and must play an exegetical role in most English translations ('a living man—that is, a man...'). Despite its popularity, the traditional approach is not satisfying and I propose the text should be emended. Dahood presents the least invasive route:⁷¹ he takes *חי* as the object of complaint, repoints to *עֵל גִּבֹר* and translates, 'Why does man complain about the Living God, if the malice of his sins runs its course?'⁷² Dahood reads *עֵל* as the contracted northern form of *עוּל*, 'malice, iniquity'; a plausible suggestion, but poetic wordplay leads me to prefer reading 'yoke of his sins'.⁷³ *גִּבֹר* then exploits effective wordplay with *גִּבֹר*, and *עֵל* echoes both 1.14 and 3.27.⁷⁴ Reading *חי* as the object of complaint has support in the constructions *אל חי* and *אלהים חי*,⁷⁵ and *באר לחי ראי*, 'Well of the Living One, Who Sees Me'.⁷⁶ Consider, too, Dan. 12.7: *וישבוע בחי העולם*, 'And he swore by the One Who Lives Forever'.⁷⁷

Still, most interpreters maintain that the MT remains intelligible as it stands if one allows *חי אדם* to mean, 'a living man', or, 'survivor'.⁷⁸ If so, I suggest we repoint the sequence *על חטאו גבר על* another way. With *עליון* in 3.38, we are invited to see in *על* the short form of the divine epithet *עֵלִי*, viz., *עֵל*.⁷⁹ Then, we may repoint the second half of the line as the protasis

71. See *BHS*; Driver, 'Hebrew Notes', p. 140; Rudolph, 'Der Text der Klagelieder', *ZAW* 56 (1938), pp. 101-22 (113); M. Haller, 'Die Klagelieder', in M. Haller and K. Galling (eds.), *Die fünf Megilloth* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1940), pp. 91-113 (104).

72. Dahood, 'New Readings', p. 187.

73. Dahood, 'New Readings', pp. 180-81, and Lam. 2.14. See also *Lam. Rab.* 3.38.

74. See *על* in Isa. 9.3 (Eng. 4); and *גבר* in Pss. 65.4; 103.11.

75. E.g., Josh. 3.10; 2 Kgs. 19.4; Isa. 37.4; Hos. 2.1; Pss. 42.3; 84.3.

76. Gen. 16.14; 24.62; 25.11.

77. See also 4Q419 1.10; 4Q504 8.12; 6Q18 2.5. We might also mention the name given to Ea in the Ebla Tablets, *Hayoum* ('the living'). See R.R. Stieglitz, 'Ebla and the Gods of Canaan', in C.H. Gordon and G.A. Rendsburg (eds.), *Eblaïtica: Essays on the Ebla Archives and Eblaïte Language* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), II, pp. 79-89.

78. Renkema, *Lamentations*, p. 423. LXX: *ἀνεθρῶπος ζῶν ἀνθρώπος*. An anonymous *piyyut* from Palestine during Byzantine rule (fourth–early seventh century CE) quotes Lam. 3.39a and adds the following: *אֶשְׁרֵי דָּוִד הוּא חַי* ('It should be enough for him that he is alive!'). See T. Carmi (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 87, 206-207.

79. *DCH* s.v. *על* III, *עֵלִי* II; and the theophoric element in the Hebrew inscriptional personal names *יהוועלי*, *יועלי*, *עליהו*, and *עליו*. See Nahman Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: Remnants of a Burnt Archive* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), pp. 45, 93-94. The epithet was often used of Baal in Ugaritic literature (e.g., *KTU* 1.16.iii.6, 8). It is also suggestive that the priest of Shiloh went by the name *עלי*. In

of an asyndetic circumstantial clause, גִּבַּר הִטָּאוּ עַל, producing: ‘Why then should a survivor complain when the Most High strengthens those who have sinned?’⁸⁰ This has the advantage of maintaining the deity as the primary subject throughout the entire strophe.

If we maintain the MT’s *Kethib* הִטָּאוּ, Renkema is right to insist that ‘the authors are not speaking here of the multitude of the people’s sins but of the single fate which is their consequence’.⁸¹ This is in contrast to personal sins, as in complaining against oneself in a penitential sense, which seems implied by the *Qere* הִטָּאוּ (viz., הִטָּאוּ; see *Targum Lamentations*, Peshitta). This is often adopted, but really makes little sense: How would one complain about one’s own sins? To whom? Oneself? God? In Num. 11.1, the object of complaint is unspecified, but it is certain the Israelites are not complaining about their own sins. אֲנִי is directed toward *another*, and in Lam. 3.39 the implied object of complaint is עֲלֵיָוִן, or more locally, הָיָי or עַל as a divine epithet. If one insists on adopting the MT, it is important to note that this will also fit within my particular argument if we simply translate, ‘What then should a survivor complain about? Each about his sin-fate!’

d. Interpreting 3.37-39 Together

At this point, we may bring together our analysis of 3.37-39 and offer the following retranslation of the entire *ḥ*-strophe:

Who then spoke that this should come to pass?
 The Lord did not command it!
 From the mouth of the Most High
 does not come evil but good!
 Why then should a survivor complain
 when the Most High strengthens those who have sinned?

[Alternative 3.39]

Why then should a man complain against the Living One
 when the malice/yoke of his sin-fate overwhelms?

Dahood’s Psalms commentaries, he argued the epithet should be read in Pss. 7.9, 11; 13.6; 16.6; 18.42; 32.4-5; 41.8; 55.23; 56.13; 57.3; 62.8; 68.30, 35; 86.13; 106.7; 119.105, 127-28, 136; 121.5; 128.6; 139.14; 141.3; 142.8; 146.5. Compare the sequence between יהוה and הָיָי in, e.g., Exod. 15.1-2.

80. Or, a bit more woodenly, ‘Why then should a survivor complain? The Most High strengthens; they sinned.’ Note the syntax in Zech. 10.6, 12 and Job 24.19. See GKC §155n.

81. Renkema, *Lamentations*, pp. 424-25.

The question immediately arises whether there can be *consequences for sin apart from divine punishment*, and here we approach what I have referred to as a ‘secular’ theodicy. Traditional interpretations have intuited divine punishment within the terminology of אָטָה and thus make the (ostensibly) implicit explicit. The few other occurrences in Lamentations support this (Lam. 1.8; 4.13; 5.7, 16).⁸² But I have in mind the possibility of both innocent suffering (suffering the consequences of *someone else’s* sin) and a ‘sin–consequence’ sequence free of divine intervention. If this sounds suspiciously anachronistic, it need not be: at least a nascent conception of non-retributive consequences for sin is present in Hebrew thought (e.g., Ps. 103.6-10; Ezra 9.11).⁸³ Still, it is key here to underscore the liminal nature of Judah’s theodic imagination. Traumatized as it was by the Babylonian onslaught, Jerusalem’s plight overran the porous boundaries of *Talionsdenken*, and in the proposed reading we witness the pathos of this liminality. So, אָטָה may very well refer to the fate of someone affected by the sins of others—and this is, of course, an appropriate thing about which to complain, where the strain between communal and individual guilt becomes intolerable. That such an unjust situation exists is clearly approached in at least three other places in Lamentations:

Your prophets have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes,
but have seen oracles for you
that are misleading. (Lam. 2.14)

It was for the sins of her prophets
and the iniquities of her priests,
who shed the blood of the righteous
in the midst of her. (Lam. 4.13)

Our ancestors sinned; they are no more,
and we bear their iniquities. (Lam. 5.7)

82. See also פֶּשַׁע and מִרָה in Lam. 1.5, 14, 18, 20, 22; 3.42.

83. See Klaus Koch, ‘Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?’, *ZTK* 52 (1955), pp. 1-42; Patrick D. Miller, *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A Stylistic and Theological Analysis* (Atlanta: SBL, 1982), esp. pp. 121-39. Origen explicitly entertains this idea in his Lamentations commentary: Ζητητέον μέντοι κατὰ τοὺς τῆς ἀναγωγῆς νόμους, εἰ δυνατὸν ἔν τινι τυγχάνειν ἀκαθαρσίαν οὐκ αἰτίῳ ταύτης ὄντι (*Fr. Lam.* 23). Also highly suggestive is Jer. 2.19: ‘Your wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you’.

The proposed emendations produce preferable readings and have the advantage of effective wordplay, rhetorical consistency with 3.37-38, and we avoid violating the consonantal text. So, what should a survivor complain about? Certainly not the Most High!⁸⁴ Though the man initially defended Yahweh's agency in his plight (3.22-32), he has double-voiced this traditional theodicy so that the deity's *oppressive agency is denied* and *goodness justified* (3.33-39).⁸⁵

7. Repentance and Anger (3.40-42)

The 1-strophe contains the climax of the man's attempt at theodicy, but also the abrupt shift to its ultimate demise, for 'despite the valiant attempt at theodicy, reason cannot conquer all'.⁸⁶ This strophe brings in the plural voice as the גבר speaks representatively for his community.

The opening links nicely with the logic of 3.33-39: Yahweh is not responsible for the present situation, though sin is undoubtedly the cause and (possible) object of complaint. But the precise nature of this sin remains unclear, an ambiguity that persists throughout Lamentations. This calls for self-examination: 'Let us examine and explore our ways, and let us return to Yahweh' (3.40). Note the polyphony of דרך, where previously the גבר complained that Yahweh had 'walled off' and 'forced me off my ways' (3.9a, 11.a), and 'drew his bow (דרך קשתו) and set me up for target practice' (3.12). This dialogism highlights the strain in theodic imagination, where the poet is able to conceive of 'examining and exploring our ways' in order to 'return to Yahweh' (3.40), right on the heels of a theodic discourse where the deity's agency has been seriously questioned. By 3.40, Yahweh is no longer the one who 'walled off' or 'forced me off my ways', but the one 'from whom no evil comes' and therefore an inappropriate object of complaint. That is, our own sinful actions were the cause of us perverting our 'ways', not Yahweh's oppressive agency. *We* cut ourselves off from God and must return. This is the conclusion reached in 3.40-42a, and 3.22-42a in particular constitutes an exceptional moment in Judah's theodic imagination:

84. Origen also understands 3.39-40 to deny divine culpability: Μάτην ἄρα γογγύζοντες ἐπὶ τὸν δημιουργὸν τὴν αἰτίαν ἀνάγομεν [...] Ὡς οὖν ἑτέραν αἰτίαν οὐκ ἔχοντες ἢ μόνους ἑαυτοῦς, τὰ παρ' ἑαυτῶν γενόμενα κρίναντες ἐπιστρέψωμεν (*Fr. Lam.* 80).

85. This is in explicit contrast to justifying the goodness of the deity's oppressive agency.

86. Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 95.

sin–act–consequence with a genuine need for repentance but devoid of divine retribution. We have glimpsed a ‘secular theodicy’. By 3.42a, the poet has followed his meditations on divine goodness to their logical conclusion, and this looks like a deity without any admixture of good and evil, a Yahweh who calls them back from the ways that led them into disaster.

Yet, as though in mid-thought, the entire theodic attempt is jarringly aborted: *אתה לא סלחת*. There is no coordination between the first and second halves of 3.42, and the force of the Hebrew parataxis should be emphasized: ‘We transgressed and were rebellious...but *you!* You have not forgiven! You covered yourself in anger and pursued us; you slaughtered without mercy...’ (3.42-43).

Some show unease at this point. Jerome and Luther, for instance, translate: ‘...therefore you have not forgiven’.⁸⁷ But others see an accusation. Consider Kara: ‘We have done what belongs to us...but you did not do what belongs to you’. Similarly, *Lamentations Rabbah*: ‘We have been disobedient and have rebelled, which is in accord with our nature. *You have not forgiven*. Is that in accord with your nature?’ The ancient assumption that repentance should bring about divine compassion and forgiveness was of course strong and widespread; we should not miss the force of disillusionment.

8. Conclusion

After theodicy, the reader is led back into venomous charges against Yahweh, some of the most disturbing in the poem (3.43-66).⁸⁸ The *גבר* ends as he began in 3.1-21: with bitter complaint, re-implicating Yahweh in the present evil. As Dobbs-Allsopp has argued, ‘ultimately the events of 587/86 explode and finally ironize the ethical vision’, such that the theodicy ‘must ultimately be read ironically’.⁸⁹ This position greatly destabilizes its hegemony and foregrounds the aporetic interaction between complaint and hope as they are ‘forced to quarrel’ with each

87. LXX: *καὶ οὐχ ἰλάσθης*.

88. For the sake of argument, I assume a preference for the precative *qatal* in Lam. 3.52-66. The classic defense is Iain Provan, ‘Past, Present and Future in Lamentations III 52-66: The Case for a Precative Perfect Re-examined’, *VT* 41 (1991), pp. 164-75. For a recent argument, see Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, pp. 198-203.

89. Dobbs-Allsopp, ‘Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology’, pp. 47, 50.

other.⁹⁰ This results in a threefold movement: (a) 3.1-21, *Complaint*; (b) 3.22-42a, *Theodicy*; (c) 3.42b-66, *Complaint/Petition*.⁹¹ The acrostic structure propels the reader *through* Lamentations 3 and on to sorrow as we are confronted again with the suffering of Lamentations 4–5.⁹²

However, before this dissolution the reader witnesses in 3.22-42a a double-voiced theodicy, and it has been the goal of this study to describe the rhetorical contours of this section. Initially, Yahweh is defended in 3.22-32 as the causative agent enacting judgment for sin upon Jerusalem and the גבר. Yet in 3.33-39 the poet deftly separates the suffering caused by human sin from Yahweh's agency and attributes *only* good, *not* evil to the deity. What, then, should a survivor complain about (3.39)? Certainly not the Most High! After all, 'The Lord does not approve' (3.36b), 'He did not command this' (3.37), and 'from his mouth does not come evil but good' (3.38)—how then could he be responsible? The 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).⁹³ The גבר's paraenesis 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*. If one insists on maintaining MT against the proposed conjectural emendations, the poet should instead rage על-הטאו, 'against his sin-fate', viz., against the communal sins which led Judah into such disaster. Yahweh's oppressive agency has been destabilized, and the traditional theodicy heavily double-voiced. Lamentations 3.22-42a can therefore be read as glimpsing a new, 'secular' theodicy grounded in divine goodness.

90. Dobbs-Allsopp, 'Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology', pp. 48-49; see Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 91.

91. Ps. 74 (c. 582 BCE) has a similar structure.

92. Thomas, *Poetry and Theology*, pp. 80-83.

93. *Pace* Dobbs-Allsopp's sequence in *Lamentations*, p. 147.