How Lonely Sits the Text:
Lamentations 1-2 and Evangelical Appropriation
of Postmodern Biblical Studies

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Introduction

Several years ago Brian Toews gave a lecture at this University entitled, “Postmodernism is Dead.”¹ In his presentation, Dr. Toews evaluated academic and cultural trends, looking for evidence of the continuing influence and relevance of postmodernism. His sense from the literature on the subject was that postmodernism, in academia and in certain pockets of culture, is “on life-support,” if not completely dead.²

At the risk of opposing my own teacher (who, as chief academic officer of this University, is now technically my boss), I would like to take issue today with some of Dr. Toews’ assessments. Much of the literature he cited in his presentation relates to philosophy and literary theory. I contend that postmodernism is still a significant force in contemporary biblical studies, as evidenced by the numerous recent (non-evangelical) publications that either address postmodernism or take an essentially postmodern approach to biblical literature. Evangelicals should be and are engaging contemporary biblical studies.

My assessment is that postmodernism, alive and well in biblical studies, offers faithful readers of Scripture some helpful tools as well as some significant stumbling blocks. My goal in this presentation is to demonstrate certain aspects of both, moving from a general overview of the current situation into a specific example: postmodern readings of Lamentations 1-2.³

Evangelicalism and Biblical Studies

Evangelical engagement with postmodernism has been conducted quite vigorously in the fields of dogmatics and ethics. In these areas, evangelicals have taken a broad spectrum of approaches to engagement. On the one end of the spectrum (e.g., the so-called Emerging Church

² Brian G. Toews, “Postmodernism is Dead” (Public lecture given to the Student Theological Society of Philadelphia Biblical University, March 2007).

³ This project is partly inspired by the tendencies I have found in my own interpretation of Scripture. Perhaps this reflects a spiritual or academic blind spot for me, but quite frankly I as an evangelical have found historical-critical and postmodern readings to be more helpful to me than traditional or evangelical views in my own initial study of a text. Put simply, I would rather have the New Oxford Annotated Bible than the ESV Study Bible; I want to know what “liberals” think, because I trust my training to be able to discern a “conservative evangelical” reading.
movement), postmodernism is rosy, bright, liberating and inclusive. At the other end of the spectrum, (mostly) conservative evangelicals have been quite critical of postmodernism’s tendency toward moral relativism and its attitude of suspicion toward religious confession.

The world of biblical studies, in contrast to systematic theology and ethics, is much more of a free-for-all. The manner in which biblical studies is generally conducted in the Western academy permits scholars from diverse perspectives to unite over a single object—the text—in a way that theologians, philosophers and ethicists from different perspectives find difficult. (A trio of scholars, for example, explore with bewilderment the tense but surprisingly functional relationship of postmodern and historical-critical scholars within biblical studies—more discussion below.) I realize that this observation about biblical studies reflects in itself a concession to an ideology: the Enlightenment ideal of critical scholarship. But this ideal has yielded some very fruitful results for our understanding of Scripture and the world, such as the contributions of literary and historical studies to our understanding of biblical literature. Put simply, even the most hardened atheist can help us understand the Bible and know God better.

Of course, this means that many of the important questions about the nature and purpose of the biblical text have been side-stepped. The conflict of worldviews cannot long be avoided, however.

Postmodernism, Modernism and Biblical Studies

To start out, we must have a working definition of postmodernism. The task of defining such a diverse movement, especially a movement that resists categorization, is quite difficult. But there are several characteristics that most postmodern readings have in common.

In his book, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, John J. Collins surveys and assesses the contributions of postmodernism to biblical studies and archeology.

Collins considers postmodernism the inevitable consequence of modern historical criticism, which dominated the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historical criticism is based on three key principles: first, that the historian is an autonomous interpreter of the textual and archeological data; second, that there is significant analogy between ancient and modern situations; third, that criticism is ongoing and provisional in nature. Many biblical scholars sought to reconcile the observations of historical criticism with traditional faith, with varying degrees of success. Historical criticism allowed scholars of diverse backgrounds to work together on narrowed fields, searching for localized “truths.”

Postmodern criticism, Collins explains, follows to its logical conclusion the principle of interpretive autonomy. This entails the rejection of objectivity, the distinction between the subjective and the objective, and univocal, unambiguous meaning.

Two common strategies of postmodern biblical criticism are *deconstruction* and *ideological criticism*. Deconstruction undermines the truth claims of the biblical text by questioning the premises, hierarchies and binaries implicit in the text or imported to the text. This opens the text up to readings supposedly suppressed by the power structures within and surrounding the text. Some deconstruct the text itself and thus undermine its authority.

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5 Ibid., 4-10.
6 Ibid., 11-17.
altogether; others read the text in such a way as to deconstruct traditional interpretations. Feminism, liberationism and queer theory are some common deconstructive approaches.

Ideological criticism, as its name suggests, examines the ideologies motivating a text. Royal ideology and culturally embedded morality are common objects of biblical ideological criticism; for example, it is noted that the Decalogue serves the interests of married, male Israelite property-owners.

For his part, Collins acknowledges his modernist sympathies but finds some postmodern approaches to be helpful insofar as they encourage a close reading of the biblical texts and expose the tensions and contradictions within the texts. He argues that ideological critics take historical criticism one step further than some historical critics did.

Another significant consequence of modernism is postmodernism’s suspicion of all history as fiction written by the winners/oppressors. There is a range of attitudes within postmodernism concern the extent to which historical context is determinative, and whether the text sets its own limits on valid interpretation.

In an essay entitled, “Rethinking Historical Criticism,” F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp assesses the current state of biblical historical studies and some of the broad trends of the last two centuries. The problem he addresses is the wedge that has been driven between historical criticism and ahistoricist literary criticism, i.e., those who read literature just to get to history behind it and those who read literature with little regard for historical context. He states that his goal is “to provide a programmatic introduction to some of the major themes of historicist literary study and to explore how this body of work may help biblical scholars rethink historical criticism as a specifically literary method of study and reading.”

Dobbs-Allsopp argues that knowledge is both constructed and textual. If the critic cannot bracket herself out of the process of interpretation, she must realize that “meaning is ultimately not found but made.” This fact becomes even more plain once she realizes that meaning is expressed in language, which is inevitably culturally (contextually) dependant. “There are no brute facts unmediated by some interpretive process.”

Dobbs-Allsopp distinguishes between critical historicism and “radical historicism.” Radical historicism has no hope that the blurred context of the author and the blurring context of the interpreter can be cleared to reveal anything meaningful. Radical historicism, then, is the rejection of the Cartesian eagerness for certainty, taken to its logical conclusion: “subjectivist free-play and nihilism.” Dobbs-Allsopp counters that the radical historicist denial of history fails to provide a paradigm for those things that human beings know are historically real. Dobbs-Allsopp offers a critical historicism as the via media between the foundationalist position and radical historicism:

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7 Ibid., The Bible After Babel, 161.
9 Ibid., 238.
10 Ibid., 245.
11 Ibid., 247.
12 Ibid., 248.
13 Ibid., 262-63.
14 Ibid., 251.
Critical historicism wants to ally a poststructuralist reading strategy with the historicist respect for the other and belief that the cultural and social milieu in which past literary works originated is likely to be relevant for understanding those works.\textsuperscript{15}

The dangers on either side of this “middle way” are the tendency to give too much credence to the ancient context (objectivist determinism) and the tendency to discount the ancient context altogether (radical historicism). Critical historicism situates the reader as an equal, respectful dialogue partner with the text, rather than worshiping or trashing the past.

Dobbs-Allsopp tries to offer a constructive way to do biblical studies in the wake of the postmodern critique of modernism.\textsuperscript{16}However, it is difficult to find any solace in his assertion that the only certainty that can be reached about the past is through a consensus of “experts”:

A critical historicism…makes no claims for correct meaning. Valid interpretations are those which prove politically efficacious in that they are able to persuade the larger interpretive community of their validity. There is nothing which necessitates a single correct interpretation.\textsuperscript{17}

In a recent essay published in \textit{JBL},\textsuperscript{18}three self-described postmodern biblical scholars examine the strange situation that exists in current biblical studies. They attempt to explain the puzzling reality: how is it that postmodernists and modern historical critics work together fruitfully in biblical studies, even though the two approaches are so fundamentally different?

These three colleagues affirm that postmodernism is the consequence and correction of the modernist assumptions of historical criticism. Indeed, “Postmodernism cannot exist apart from modernism.”\textsuperscript{19}The main difference is that postmodernism undermines the Romanticist notion of essential Truth, the myth of much historical critical work. Postmodernism’s competing myth is suspicion of all attempts at metanarrative. According to this trio, the main point of agreement between postmodernism and historical criticism is that each mythology stands in opposition to the traditional Christian mythology.

\textbf{Assessment}

It is both impossible and unfair to reduce either modernism or postmodernism to a single set of simple tenets. It is necessary, however, to make some very general observations on the two movements.

First, there is general agreement that postmodernism is the offspring of modernism—rebellious, patricidal offspring, but offspring nonetheless. Confessional evangelical engagement with postmodernism will discover many of the same strengths and weaknesses found in modern historical criticism.

Second, the postmodern emphasis on literary studies, a feature of the philosophical “linguistic turn” of the twentieth century, allowed scholars of many different ideological and religious stripes to engage texts together in productive ways.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 252.

\textsuperscript{16}Dobbs-Allsopp’s own body of work on Lamentations exemplifies a valiant attempt at this balance between literary studies such as his essay, “R(az/a)ising Zion in Lamentations 2” (see below), and historical studies such as his dissertation, published as \textit{Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible} (\textit{BibOr} 44; Rome: Editrice Pontifico Istituto Biblico, 1993).

\textsuperscript{17}Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking Historical Criticism,” 260.


\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 397.
Finally, the largely successful postmodern critique of history has left the historical critical camp(s) without consensus. Aichele et al. observe that historical critics are divided all over the place, along broadly methodological lines, into German- and English-speaking communities, and into minimalists and maximalists. Any attempt to establish historicity of a certain event boils down to subjective assessment of probabilities.

Consensus is helpful; a careful scholarly community protects the pendulum from swinging too quickly. But is this sufficient ground for our knowledge of the past? It may not be as insecure as “a constant shifting of the factual sands beneath our feet,” but it may be loose gravel. Perhaps it is the best we can do in a diverse community that includes many different worldviews and presuppositions. Those who claim an historical faith such as Christianity will find both modernism and postmodernism to be very shaky foundations on which to do history and hermeneutics.

Postmodernism undermines any attempt to anchor a text in an objective historical context. However, this is not entirely a weakness. Faithful readings of Scripture will attempt to understand the subjective implications of text—trying to answer the question/challenge that the text poses for us today. A reading strategy that emphasizes the reader’s/hearer’s experience of the text has value—as Christians, we presuppose that these texts were intended to be experienced and have ongoing influence in the church and society.

In the next section, we will see how deconstructive and ideological-critical reading strategies have been applied in recent readings of Lamentations 1-2. It is my contention that these readings reveal genuine ideological and rhetorical features of the text that have been previously neglected or underemphasized.

Postmodern Readings of Lamentations 1-2

Pre-modern Christian and Jewish interpretations generally took a rather simple, penitential approach to Lamentations, viewing the book as reflection on YHWH’s punishment for sin and humble request for mercy. Lamentations received little attention from most form-critical scholars such as Gunkel, who held the alphabetic acrostic technique in disdain.

However, in the latter half of the twentieth century—a century that witnessed death and human suffering on a scale previously unknown—Lamentations has been the object of renewed interest for its ability to plumb the depths of human suffering and the problem of evil.

We will explore some representative examples of deconstructionist and specifically feminist approaches to Lamentations, which essentially follow two strategies. First, they tend to read the Daughter Zion poems (Lam 1, 2 and 4) in contrast with the third chapter of Lamentations, which is supposedly more “traditional” in its perspective. Second, they focus on Daughter Zion’s protest against YHWH in Lamentations 1-2 for going too far in the destruction of Jerusalem.

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20 Ibid., 387.
23 This is a new incarnation of an old notion. In The Rabbinic Targum of Lamentations: Vindicating God (Boston: Brill, 2003), Christian M.M. Brady shows how the Rabbis perceived and “corrected” the problem of the book of Lamentations’ charge against God.
In *Surviving Lamentations*, Tod Linafelt writes that Lamentations 1-2 “is more about the expression of suffering than the meaning behind it, more about the vicissitudes of survival than the abstractions of sin and guilt, and more about protest as a religious posture than capitulation or confession.”

Several factors propel Linafelt’s work. First, Linafelt feels that too much emphasis in Lamentations studies has been placed on Lamentations 3 and on the singular, masculine “[Every]man who has seen affliction,” and not enough on the Daughter of Zion in Lamentations 1-2. Second, Linafelt finds that readings of Lamentations that portray suffering as penitence for sin are increasingly difficult to fit into a postmodern framework. Suffering might not have any purpose, other than someone’s will to power.

In a short note entitled, “The Rape of Zion in Thr 1,10,” Dobbs-Allsopp and Linafelt expound “a network of mutually reinforcing images of rape” in Lamentations 1-2, in support of the idea of a posture of protest in these chapters.

The first portion of this essay gives biblical and extrabiblical evidence for the rape imagery, which some interpreters had previously noted or alluded to but never substantiated. The image involves the following correspondences: body-temple, vagina-sanctuary, “sexuality”-“precious things/treasures” (מְקוּمشاهיר), These two authors explain that the technique of Zion’s personification “freights the leading terms in this verse (מש, מקדש, ברה, מוחר) with double [sexual] meaning.” Careful readers of the Hebrew Bible will be able to recall instances of these words with sexual connotations, especially מְקוּمشاهיר (“to go in”).

Dobbs-Allsopp and Linafelt give an example of a balag (a variety of Mesopotamian city-lament) entitled a-še-er gi-ta (“Sighs in the Night”), which, like Lamentations 1-2, “portrays the temple and its treasures as being looted and represents this defilement as an attack on a woman”:

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The treasure was...in the prow of the boat
I, the queen, was riding in the stern of the boat
That enemy entered my dwelling-place wearing his shoes
That enemy laid his unwashed hands on me
He laid his hands on me, he frightened me
That enemy laid his hands on me, he killed me with fright
I was terrified, he was not afraid of me
He tore my garments off me, he dressed his wife in them
That enemy cut off my lapis lazuli, he hung it on his daughter
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The similarity to Lamentations 1:8-10 is compelling. The imagery of a-še-er gi-ta is perhaps starker than that of Lamentations 1-2, since a cult statue lends itself more easily to figuration as a human being. In Lamentations 1-2, the imagery is applied to the personified city as a whole and the temple in particular.

While they acknowledge that some verses in chapters 1-2 (e.g., 1:8) place some of the blame for Zion’s violation on Zion herself, these two scholars find the message to be one of

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25 Ibid., 4 (emphasis original).
27 Ibid., 77.
protest against YHWH’s abuse of Zion: “Judah as a community may have been guilty of sin, but the fact of that sin alone cannot justify the punishment that Yhwh inflicts upon the country.”

Dobbs-Allsopp develops further the idea of protest in his more recent essay, “R(az/ais)ing Zion in Lamentations 2.”30 He argues that one of the goals of the Lamentations poet is to perpetuate the Zion tradition, one of the strongest traditions in Israel’s history, even in the wake of the Zion’s destruction. In Lamentations 2, the poet attempts this preservation in two steps. First, he offers a stark account of the complete razing of “the city, its temple, and supporting mythologies” by YHWH himself (2:1-8). Next, through “vocativity” (2:13-19) and “defiant vocality” (2:20-22), the poet raises Zion into the position of ongoing protest.31 The ongoing fact of Zion’s humiliation now cries out against YHWH, thus preserving a more “portable” Zion tradition in the exile/Diaspora:

The Zion at the outset of Lamentations 2 (material Zion, the Zion of temple and cult, the place of divine habitation memorialized in the songs of Zion) is razed and demolished and at poem’s end replaced by a different kind of Zion—a Zion of the mind and text who nevertheless through impersonation maintains a site for divinity, whose speaking voice tokens survival and preserves and sustains the ever-fragile trace of her formal architectural self until such a time in the future as geography and architecture can once again channel divinity.32

In her recent book, Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations, Carleen Mandolfo gives a feminist reading of the image of the Daughter of Zion in the Latter Prophets and Lamentations 1-2.33 As the title suggests, Mandolfo sets Lamentations as an equal dialogue partner with Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Mandolfo’s project is self-avowedly deconstructionist. She states the goal of her “dialogic reading strategy” toward sacred text:

Such a reading practice would hopefully, over time, reconfigure our theological (and ultimately moral) sensibilities in a more emancipatory direction….Imagine a world in which people are willing to believe that God is in process. If such thinking were to become a part of a new, deeply embedded ‘master narrative,’ human self-righteousness might not disappear, but it would lose its divine mandate.34

Her hope is that by deconstructing the portrayals of deity in scripture, interpreters will become less dogmatic, which will result in the loosening of oppressive structures built upon dogma.

The biblical metaphor through which Mandolfo sets the biblical texts in tension is the marriage metaphor—specifically as it takes shape in Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2-3 and 13, and Ezekiel 16 and 23. The portrayal of Daughter Zion as an adulterous wife to YHWH, she argues:

…was an effective device for communicating to the prophet’s elite male audience because it played on two issues that mattered to them: (1) a woman who had sexual intercourse outside of her

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29 Dobbs-Allsopp and Linafelt, “The Rape of Zion,” 80. The authors conclude, “We are compelled to compassion by these images of victimization, and in so far as Yhwh is envisioned as the perpetrator of this crime (Thr 1,12b.13c.22b) we are led by the poet to question the ethics of Yhwh’s actions” (81).
31 Ibid., 21.
32 Ibid., 67.
34 Ibid., 23.
marriage threatened the patrilineal and patriarchal imperatives of unambiguous ancestral lines; and (2) an adulterous wife brought social dishonor to her husband and flouted his inability to control and guard the sexual impulses of the female members of his house, something honorable men were expected to do. Thus, the marriage metaphor tapped into Israelite men’s deepest anxieties.

The contention that Zion had been unfaithful to YHWH by worshiping other gods put the male leadership of the nation in a dilemma:

[They are] compelled to embrace fully their chastisement if they want to maintain their position of power in the status quo. If they protest that their treatment is unjust, then they open the door to those lower on the hierarchical ladder to do the same.  

Mandolfo observes several consequences of the prophets’ use of this metaphor. First, the metaphor perpetuates the Hebrew Bible’s master narrative: “patriarchy and covenantal exclusivity.” Second, the outworking of the metaphor (particularly in the relationship of Hosea and Gomer) has “theological consequences,” namely, “that the divine is rendered male, while the female is aligned with sin, specifically sinful humanity.”

Third, in the marriage metaphor the adulterous wife’s perspective contains an implicit indictment of YHWH’s performance as a faithful husband. In Hosea 2:5-9, the wife perceives that she will get a better deal from her “lovers,” who provide her not only with luxuries but with necessities she has apparently not received from her husband:

For their mother has played the whore;  
she who conceived them has acted shamefully.  
For she said,  
'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water,  
my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.'

The husband responds by fencing her in, so that she is forced to return to him or starve:

Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns,  
and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths.  
She shall pursue her lovers but not overtake them,  
and she shall seek them but shall not find them.  
Then she shall say,  
'I will go and return to my first husband,  
for it was better for me then than now.'

The husband defends his honor by alleging that it was indeed he and not the lovers who provided for the wife:

And she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and who lavished on her silver and gold,  
which they used for Baal.  
Therefore I will take back my grain in its time,  
and my wine in its season,  
and I will take away my wool and my flax,

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36 Ibid., 30.  
37 Ibid., 32.  
38 Ibid., 34-35.
which were to cover her nakedness.

This indictment of YHWH as husband emerges in Mandolfo’s interpretation of Lamentations. In Lamentations, Mandolfo contends, Daughter Zion constructs a counterstory that will reshape and respond to God’s story.39

She observes that Lamentations 1-2 draws us to read empathetically with the feminine perspective of the text: “We are induced to read with Daughter Zion and toward God/male as object, thus automatically restoring the woman to a subject position, rather than the object position.”40

Summary

These postmodern understandings of Lamentations 1-2 and the marriage metaphor have some merits. Mandolfo’s analysis of the prophets’ rhetoric against the male ruling class of Judah/Israel brings out the full force of the prophets’ message. Inasmuch as the prophets repeatedly condemned the ruling classes’ abuse of the poor, an approach that deconstructs illegitimate “power narratives” is consistent with this purpose of the biblical texts (if we can reconstruct any grand purpose in the text—and I believe that we can).

Dobbs-Allsopp and Linafelt are not the first to expound the nuances of the feminine imagery of Lamentations, but their work does break some new ground. Mandolfo cautions that the marriage metaphor in the Prophets and Lamentations has bearing not only on the understanding of the relationship between YHWH and Israel, but also on contemporary relationships between men and women. A feminist reading of Lamentations provides a corrective for men presuming the role of the divine in their marriages.

These readings successfully illuminate the tensions between certain texts of the Hebrew Bible, described in terms of an unfaithful but victimized wife and a wronged but abusive husband.

However, metaphors are only helpful to a point. These readings become unacceptable to faithful readers of Scripture when they fail to conclude by acknowledging the distinction between the human signifier and the divine signified. YHWH is not a human husband. He is the sovereign creator of marriage, of husbands and wives, of right and wrong, of Zion and the nations, of Jerusalem and its temple.

The tension in the metaphor between husband and wife is analogous to the tension between God’s justice in punishing sin and God’s covenant faithfulness to his people. We may legitimize Zion’s protest against YHWH in Lamentations 1-2 on the basis of YHWH’s previous promises to his people, as we find elsewhere in Lamentations (3:21-24, 5:19-22). But this requires stepping outside of a metaphor in which married human beings are held to an objective standard of responsible behavior.

The postmodern readings we have examined are content to let the tensions within the text stand, without bringing the interpretive process to any resolution. The exposition of competing themes is helpful, but only if it allows the reader to take the next interpretive step: assessing the intent of the author/editor in letting the contradictions stand. Postmodern readings resist interpretation, delighting in the endless deferral of meaning.

Observations on Lamentations 1-2

39 Ibid., 80-81.
40 Ibid., 83.
These deconstructive readings will no doubt seem counterproductive to some who seek fruitful, faithful readings of Scripture. De-construction is not always unfruitful, however. Some constructions imposed upon the text of Scripture should be dismantled. Furthermore, deconstruction of a sacred text need not end with the components scattered about the floor. Once the text is broken into its constituent parts, faithful readers can more fully appreciate the work of the human and divine authors of Scripture in bringing the text to its current form.

My assessment is that the sexual metaphor in Lamentations 1-2 is in fact a helpful lens through which to assess the situation of Zion after the destruction of Jerusalem. My own interpretation of Lamentations 1-2 is re-constructive, utilizing the insights of these deconstructive interpreters but bringing the pieces together into a complete metaphor that is, I hope, faithful to the whole of Scripture. In this interpretation I have deliberately postponed stepping outside of the marriage metaphor or appealing to the more “orthodox” perspectives of Lamentations 3 or 5.

The Marriage Narrative

The sexual history of Zion, YHWH and the nations provides the lens through which to understand the moral judgments upon and by Zion in Lamentations 1-2.41 YHWH is the husband, Daughter Zion is the wife of whoredom, and the nations are either her lovers or YHWH’s agents. The narrative backdrop of Lamentations 1-2—the history of this nuclear family—is based on the image of Hosea and Gomer in Hosea 1-3.

YHWH marries a wife, Zion. YHWH knows in advance of the marriage that Zion is likely to be unfaithful (Hos 1:2), and she probably already has a sexual history.42 YHWH and Zion have children in their household—the people of Israel—but the paternity of the children is in question (Hos 1:9, 2:2-4). Because of her unfaithfulness, YHWH permits Zion to sell herself into sexual slavery (2:5, 3:1-2), and her children are taken away from her (Lam 1:5, 16). YHWH’s goal is to push his wife to the point of desperation under her abuse (Hos 2:6-7).

The Sexual History of Zion

Lamentations 1:1-6 is primarily descriptive of the current status of Zion and her nuclear family: YHWH and her children. The nations (and presumably their gods) are the “lovers” with whom Zion has been unfaithful.

Zion becomes like a widow, effectively without husband or go’el (1:1b). She has become a slave—perhaps like a prostitute owned by a pimp (1:1c). She has many lovers (יִבְיָהוֹ), but none provide her with comfort (עִנָּה) (1:2b). Rather than living securely with her husband, she lives without rest (יָסָד) among her foreign lovers (1:3b). Zion is paralleled in 1:4 with “her virgins,” who have been raped; she suffers the same collective fate as her vulnerable young women.

1:7-11b provides some measure of reflection upon the reasons for Zion’s situation. Zion remembers the “precious things” she used to have, which are now in the hands of the foe (1:7). The repeated mention of “her precious things” in 1:10 places them formerly in her sanctuary.

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41 Some dispute the claim that the marriage metaphor is an important feature of the Zion motif in Lamentations 1-2; see Elisabeth Boase’s review of Mandolfo’s Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets (RBL 5 [2008]: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/6146_6563.pdf).

42 It is unlikely that Hosea would have been privy to any of Gomer’s inward desires that would indicate a tendency toward unfaithfulness. More likely, she was known to be sexually active, or was already a prostitute.
which the unclean nations have now defiled. Here, “precious things” represent her sexual
dignity: her virginity and sexuality reserved for her husband. It is unclear whether the defilement
in 1:10 is a voluntary act of whoredom or of the consequent sexual slavery—but the former has
certainly led to the latter.

1:8-9 describes Zion’s whoredom. She “sinned grievously” and “therefore” (יהלך בך) became filthy. The nations had uncovered her nakedness, a great shame (1:9). Her “uncleanness
in her skirts,” the forensic evidence of her sexual encounters with the nations, was the result of
her voluntary unfaithfulness.

The Paternity of Zion’s Children

In my reading, Lamentations never directly addresses the paternity of Zion’s children.
With the backdrop of Hosea 1-3, however, it is fascinating that YHWH is never mentioned as the
father of Zion’s children. One would think that YHWH’s compassion for his own children
would be a key point of appeal, and yet there is none. The presence of the
marriage/unfaithfulness metaphor in Lamentations 1-2 leads to the inference that Zion’s children
are children of whoredom.

Additionally, Lamentations contains several possible allusions to the test of
unfaithfulness in Num 5. At her punishment Zion’s “stomach churns” (1:20, 2:11) and her “bile
is poured out” on the ground (2:11). In 3:15 the (apparently masculine) speaker remarks that
YHWH has “filled me with bitterness.” The punishment for unfaithfulness in Numbers 5 seems
to be the miscarriage of an illegitimate child as well as barrenness.33 The death and abuse of
Zion’s children is a prominent punishment (and basis for Zion’s complaint) in Lamentations (1:5,
15, 16, 18; 2:11, 19-21; 4:2, 4, 10; 5:11-13). If “precious things” (车牌לא vraiment) is analogous to
“vagina” in chapter 1, its occurrence in 2:4 may also indicate a punishment of barrenness or
miscarriage:

שנהר כל מחמדיה
באמלה יたくさん פי י קם חנידה
2:4b He has killed everything “precious-to-sight;”
2:4c In the “tent” of Daughter Zion he poured out
his fury like fire.

These factors—the lack of evidence that YHWH is the father of Zion’s children, and the
allusions to the test of unfaithfulness—indicate that Zion’s children are in fact children of
whoredom, the illegitimate children of Zion’s lovers.

YHWH’s Agency

YHWH himself has afflicted Zion (1:5). Her children have been taken away from her,
which is a terrible emotional and socioeconomic blow. It is unclear in this verse whether
YHWH himself is responsible for this removal, but it becomes clear in 1:12 that YHWH has
done it. YHWH himself strikes Zion (1:12-13a), then binds her (1:13b-14b) so that she can
receive more abuse from others (1:14c-15, 17).

Chapter 2 begins with a barrage of activity by YHWH. 2:1-8 focuses almost exclusively
on YHWH’s actions against Zion, her children and her holy place. Out of the twenty-four poetic

33 Dennis Olson, Numbers (Interpretation Commentary Series; Louisville: John Knox, 1996), 36-37.
lines in these eight verses, all but one (7c) contain verbal actions (twenty-nine in total) of which YHWH is the subject. The objects of YHWH’s destructive and permissive acts range from the glory of the nation, the nation as collective, the strongholds and walls of the cities, and then particularly the temple and Holy of Holies. Interestingly, the references to the temple characterize it as belonging to YHWH rather than to Zion (1a, 6a-b, 7a, 7c).

By contrast, Zion’s children are hers alone. In 2:20-22 Zion brings charges against YHWH, appealing for the sake of “my young women and my young men” in 21b and “those whom I held and raised” in 22c.

Both chapters of Lamentations place in Zion’s mouth an acknowledgement that YHWH has acted justly. Zion has “transgressed” (1:14, 22), and been “rebellious” (1:18, 20) and “iniquitous” (2:14). YHWH’s response is “righteous” (דְּרֵי הָגֹדֶל) and in accordance with what he “announced/purposed long ago” (1:21, 2:17).

Zion’s Appeal

Zion’s eagerness to appeal her abused status breaks across the macrosyntactic constraints of Lamentations 1. The rigid acrostic form—22 verses of three lines each (excepting the addition in 1:7b)—points to a natural division in the poem: between verses 11 and 12.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-8</td>
<td>…</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; therefore her fall is terrible; she has no comforter.</td>
<td>Observer</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;O LORD, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!&quot;</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>…</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength.</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Look, O LORD, and see, for I am despised!&quot;</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-16</td>
<td>&quot;Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow…&quot;</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>…</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-22</td>
<td>…</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 &quot;Look, O LORD, for I am in distress…”</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Verses 1-11 are spoken by a third-person omniscient voice concerning Zion, and verses 12-22 are mostly spoken by Zion to YHWH and others. But Zion twice “bursts out” against YHWH with the accusatory רָכָּב (1:9c) and תִּסְגַּר (1:11c). If we could imagine the acrostic as creating a poetic space for a courtroom-style testimony, Zion’s turn to accuse as the pathetic victim is supposed to come at verse 20—the 7 line is the proper place for תִּסְגַּר—but she cannot restrain herself and speaks out of turn.

“Appeal” is a more fitting word than “protest,” since Zion admits she has no legitimate basis for protest. The substance of the appeal is twofold: 1) have compassion on your wife and
her children, even though they are not your children; and 2) punish the nations who have abused your wife (1:10, 21-22; 2:15-18, 22).

Zion’s gruesome portrait of her own desolation is the very point of desperation to which her husband hoped to drive her. She is “stripped naked” and “parched with thirst” (Hos 2:3, 11), deprived of her children (Hos 2:4), and “heded in with thorns” (Hos 2:6); her festivals have been canceled (Lam 1:4; Hos 2:11). She has no other choice but to return to her husband, whom she now recognizes as the true source of her prosperity.

Summary: Re-Construction
In this reading of Lamentations 1-2 I have pursued the marriage metaphor in a manner similar to those of the various postmodern scholars we have considered. Yet I chose to re-construct the metaphor in such a way as to leave Zion standing in appeal rather than in protest. In this interpretive process, I followed several steps in order to appropriate the observations of the deconstructive readings.

First, I tried to suspend my “orthodox” presuppositions about Lamentations—i.e., that Zion’s suffering is the just punishment for her sin, and that the Christian response to suffering is to “wait patiently for YHWH” (3:25-26). This allows me to withhold my judgment of the text until the metaphor is permitted to speak for itself.

Next, I applied the deconstructive reading strategies we have already seen in order to let the voice of Zion speak fully. Zion does in fact “talk back to the prophets” in Lamentations 1-2, testifying that all the horrible threats have been carried out.

Finally, I extended the marriage metaphor to its conclusion: Zion appeals to YHWH’s compassion for her illegitimate children. The full course of the metaphor, in my estimation, requires us to account for the children. The deconstructive readings make the children’s suffering part of the basis for Zion’s complaint, but they fail to see that the illegitimate standing of the children deconstructs Zion’s own complaint.

This process then permits me to resume an orthodox perspective on Lamentations, but with a fuller understanding of the book’s message. An individual, penitential reading of Lamentations 3 is now deeper and more profound when contrasted with the protest of collective Zion in chapters 1-2.

Conclusions and Ideas for Further Study
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the noted feminist New Testament scholar, describes a hermeneutic of suspicion as one that “places on all texts the label: ‘Caution—could be dangerous to your health and survival.’” Surely some evangelicals would like to place such a warning label on the writings of Schüssler Fiorenza and other postmodernists.

Caution is certainly warranted. The key elements of postmodernism, taken to an extreme, are directly opposed to historic Christian orthodoxy: the asserted impossibility of knowing reality, suspicion of “canon” as a hierarchical construction, disregard for the historicity of the resurrection, and ultimate human autonomy (the inheritance of modernism).

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44 I try to think of “orthodox” this way: how would one preach Lamentations in a single sermon in such a way as to edify God’s people?
45 Furthermore, Zion does not have the last word. The marriage/sexual metaphor in the Prophets and Lamentations continues in Isaiah 49-54; see Patricia Tull Willey, Remember the Former Things: The Recollection of Previous Texts in Second Isaiah (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).
The “baby” with the postmodern “bathwater,” though, is worth preserving. Postmodern critics are often very astute in their literary assessments of biblical texts. Postmodernism challenges traditional assumptions about Scripture and elevates overlooked readings. Postmodern readings illumine tensions within the text of Scripture. Diversity of perspectives within a single biblical text is not something we need fear, even in a text that addresses God’s sovereignty. One example is the theodicy of Job, which features at least seven different perspectives, those of Job, Job’s wife, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu, as well as that of the narrator in the mouth of YHWH. This example, like that of Lamentations, is not a problem for a doctrine of inspiration that accounts for the progressivity and contextuality of revelation.

I hope to develop further the method of critical suspension of orthodox presuppositions in engaging unorthodox readings of Scripture, particularly the limits of such a method. Though I have only recently been acquainted with his work, I believe there may be some similarity to the hermeneutic of Paul Ricoeur, the French Protestant philosopher. Ricoeur’s three-step hermeneutic begins with a period of naïve reflection, followed by a critical detour, and finally a return to a faith perspective. As a prominent Christian academic in the midst of French postmodernism of the second half of the last century, Ricoeur is important figure for Christians engaging postmodernism.47

In this essay I have focused on postmodern readings of Lamentations but only alluded to the contributions of historical studies to our understanding of these poems. A comparison to the ANE city laments could further illumine Lamentations’ personification of Zion and use of the marriage metaphor.48

We evangelicals are quick to defend Scripture against challenges brought by critics. I contend that Scripture is quite capable of defending itself when read faithfully. As committed readers of biblical literature, we are obligated to appropriate carefully and critically the best literary tools that scholarship has to offer.

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