When YHWH Becomes an Enemy:
A Canonical Reading of Lamentations

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Introduction

Why study Lamentations? That question arises whenever I have the chance to teach Lamentations, whether in a church context or in my academic work. When I tell folks at church that I write on Lamentations, they say, “Oh”—and then move on to some other topic. They don’t say it, but I know they’re thinking: “Why in the world would you study such a depressing book?” When I discuss Lamentations in academic contexts, I get the sense that many of my colleagues believe that the only reason to write on Lamentations would be to pad your résumé.

But for students and scholars who embrace the Bible as the Word of God that has authority in our lives, Lamentations poses several problems. This book is certainly not as well-known or beloved in the church as are the Psalter, Isaiah, the Gospels, and the Epistles. The most familiar verses of Lamentations are primarily known through the words of the hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness”—yet this hymn betrays little of the rest of the book, which contains some of the most shocking and difficult material in all of scripture. Pastorally, it is difficult to see how dwelling on such human suffering and emotion can contribute to the spiritual health of an individual or a congregation.

I have three goals in this presentation. First, I’m going to demonstrate to you that the difficulties that the book of Lamentations presents to a high view of scripture are, in fact, significant. Second, I’m going to offer some ways that I believe those difficulties can be addressed, and that our high view of scripture can be even stronger through engagement with those difficulties. Finally, I think that the process of working through these difficulties will recommend Lamentations to you as pastors, church leaders, and students of scripture. We’ll consider three key implications of the book of Lamentations for theological understanding, apologetic endeavors, and pastoral care. My hope is that you will gain a greater appreciation for this book and all that God has to teach us through it.

Initial Thoughts

One way to think about the meaning and purpose of a biblical book is to ask, “What would be missing in God’s revelation if this book were not part of Holy Scripture?” I hope we’ll find something of an answer to this question by the end, but initially, let’s turn the question on its head, and ask: what aspects of Lamentations make the book appear—at least, in our human estimation—to be an unlikely choice for inclusion in the Old Testament canon?

* Blue Bell, PA.
First of all, no author of the book is named, and—unlike the Psalter, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes—no prophetic figure is linked with the book until long after its recognition as part of the canon. Lamentations came to be associated with Jeremiah only because Jeremiah is considered “the weeping prophet”—but no textual or historical evidence indicates that Jeremiah was the author.

Second, Lamentations is a book that describes a particular moment in Israel’s history that was eventually reversed. The destruction of the first temple in 587 BC is the catastrophic inspiration for Lamentations’ five poems, but we know that Judah’s captivity ended in 539 with Cyrus’ decree, and that the second temple was built between 515 and 500. So, why would a set of shocking laments over catastrophe have been preserved and revered after the tragedy had been in large measure reversed?

Third, four of the five poems in Lamentations are alphabetic acrostics—that is, each verse or poetic phrase begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are eight psalms that follow this pattern, as does the poem of “The Excellent Woman” in Proverbs 31. Lamentations 3 is a triple-acrostic: three aleph lines, followed by three bet lines, etc. This acrostic form fundamentally connotes completeness or wholeness. But to the modern reader, the use of such a contrived artificial form in sacred poetry about suffering and death seems somewhat sacrilegious.

And finally, Lamentations contains some material that is not easy to reconcile theologically with other books in the Hebrew Bible. We will explore this further in a moment. But my point is that these four factors—the lack of connection to a known prophet, the time-bound nature of the events described, the acrostic form, and the apparent theological difficulties—make the book an unlikely candidate for inclusion in the Bible. I think this means that God, in his sovereignty, had very important reasons for including the book in scripture—reasons which we’ll explore today.

Proposition 1

What might be some of those ideas that make Lamentations difficult to reconcile theologically with other parts of scripture? My first proposition is that Lamentations is not primarily a book of confession, but a protest against the perceived injustice of God. In considering this notion, we will look briefly at a few secondary texts, and then make some observations about the book itself.

Tod Linafelt titled one of his books Surviving Lamentations because many interpretive approaches to the book have struggled to endure the weight of suffering and horror. Yet that process of enduring the horror is itself part of the intended effect of the book. Linafelt writes that Lamentations—chapters 1 and 2 in particular—“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.”

Linafelt feels that too much emphasis in Lamentations studies has been placed on Lamentations 3 and on the singular, masculine “[strong]man who has seen affliction,” and not enough on the Daughter of Zion in Lamentations 1-2. Linafelt also argues that readings of

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3 Ibid., 4 (emphasis original).
Lamentations that portray suffering merely as punishment for sin are insufficient, given the book’s emphasis on the suffering of innocents.

Kathleen O’Connor has written what I feel to be the best commentary on Lamentations from an exegetical and applicational standpoint. In *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, O’Connor recommends Lamentations as an instrument of personal and communal healing. Lamentations’ “theology of witnessing” is for her a theological antidote to blind praise amid suffering, as well as a way of validating pain and protesting suffering in the world. One of the strengths of O’Connor’s work is her recognition of poetic form and its relevance to interpretation. The use of acrostic form, multiple perspectives/voices, the personification of Jerusalem as a woman—these are all tools used deliberately and sharply by the poet(s) to communicate pain and protest with cool, horrific calculation rather than dismissible hysteria.

O’Connor astutely notes the lack of resolution in Lamentations. Chapter 4 is an abbreviated acrostic that communicates the catastrophe that befell Jerusalem with more urgency and shock-value than the first three chapters, which are longer. Chapter 5 is even further abbreviated, and breaks with the acrostic form. Lamentations concludes without hope—hope that is present in Lamentations 3 but that the book cannot sustain. “To [sustain that hope] would be to lie, to cover over, to deny the reality of the survivor’s longing for God’s missing voice.”

O’Connor also addresses the silence of God in Lamentations. If a hypothetical “Lamentations 6” had been composed with an answer, “no matter what God said, Lamentations would come to premature resolution, and the book’s capacity to house sorrow would dissipate.” Lamentations in this way “honors truth-telling and denies ‘denial’”—denial that most of the world lives in relative poverty and insecurity, denial of family tragedies, and denial of pain. Lamentations mirrors human sorrow and permits it to stand unmitigated and unanswered—“It calls us to see.”

These scholars and many others argue—and this will be a theme in our discussion today—that Lamentations is focused on the fact of suffering rather than on any satisfying explanation of that suffering. This is not to say that no explanation is possible, but that that explanation is found elsewhere in scripture. That a book of scripture is devoted exclusively to the fact of suffering is theologically significant.

The scholars that I have cited thus far are critical scholars who would not be considered “evangelical” in any sense. Frankly, evangelicals have not, in my estimation, placed enough emphasis on Lamentations’ message of protest. Part of this has to do with the structure of many commentary series, which functionally treat Lamentations as a shorter supplement to some of the lament sections of Jeremiah, rather than as a literary work in its own right. But I think the deeper reason is that many evangelicals don’t really know what to do with a difficult text like Lamentations, which, like some of the psalms of lament and imprecation does not provide a satisfying theological resolution.

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5 Ibid., 85.
6 Ibid., 86.
7 Ibid., 94-95.
9 See, for example, Philip G. Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001).
Herein lies the problem with most Lamentations scholarship: many critical scholars have good readings of Lamentations, but in service of unorthodox theology. Evangelical scholars, on the other hand, have good theology, but often they import their valid theological conclusions into a book that, on its face, resists theological conclusions. In other words, they have the right message, but the wrong text.

Postmodern scholars have paid quite a bit of helpful attention to Lamentations in the last fifty years, especially in light of the Holocaust. I argue that we can appropriate some of these literary insights in the service of interpretation, and bring the theological insights about lamentation and protest generally into a coherent biblical theology.

Here’s my attempt at an analogy. Imagine you’re at a restaurant, and the waiter brings you a blob of ketchup on a plate—and, that’s it. The ketchup represents the message of Lamentations: strong and unpalatable by itself. Critical scholars say, “This meal is terrible—what an awful restaurant!” Evangelicals say, “No, no, the restaurant is fine—let’s just try to make a ketchup that tastes like a burger, French fries and ketchup all mashed into one!” What I’m saying is, let’s keep the ketchup—and order a burger and fries to go with it. We don’t need to reject orthodoxy because of Lamentations’ difficult message, as critical scholars do—nor do we need to “mix in” some orthodoxy like evangelicals unfortunately try to do. Rather, we need to let Lamentations’ “strong taste” be part of a complete, balanced theology.

But it’s important to note that postmodern interpreters are by no means the first to be uncomfortable with Lamentations’ message of protest. Christian Brady (incidentally, an evangelical Anglican who teaches at Penn State) shows that the rabbinc interpreters perceived the book as possibly too rebellious, too vindictive towards God. The Rabbis therefore sought to “vindicate God” by smoothing over the sharp protest into a confession of sin and imprecation against the Jews’ enemies.10

Having considered some of the secondary literature, the question remains: does the text of Lamentations itself reflect this stance of protest? Let’s take a look at the book itself. We’re going to focus primarily on chapters 1-2 in this brief examination.

First, let’s consider whom the text blames for the troubles of Judah. Lamentations 1:5 and 1:8 place the blame on the nation of Judah for its many sins. Elsewhere—for example, 1:10—the poets blame Judah’s enemies, the Babylonians who invaded. The last verses of chapter 4 even blame Judah’s cousins, the Edomites, who supported the Babylonian invasion rather than lending aid to their distant relatives.

But most often, Lamentations places the blame squarely on YHWH’s shoulders. For example, let’s look at chapter 2, starting in verse 1:

“How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob; in his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers.”

If you continue reading through verse 8, you’ll see that YHWH’s barrage against his people seems to have no end. Even while acknowledging Israel’s sin, the poet asks whether YHWH has gone too far. In 2:20 he says: “Look, YHWH, and see! With whom have you dealt thus? Should women eat the fruit of their womb, the children of their tender care? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?” At the heart of Lamentations is this question

of God’s justice in allowing (and even causing) human suffering. Perhaps the leadership of Israel, or even the entire adult population could be held responsible—but the children? Are they to blame? Do they deserve to starve or be slaughtered?

Let’s now integrate the strange acrostic form of the poetry and see how it contributes to the book’s meaning. Each of the 22 verses in chapter one consists of three poetic lines, making a total of 66 poetic lines. Each of the 22 verses begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet—the first line of three in each verse.

Next, you’ll notice that verses 1 to 11 have few phrases in quotation marks; these verses are mostly spoken by an omniscient, third-person poetic voice, whereas verses 12 through 22 are mostly in quotation marks, indicating a separate, in this case feminine, voice. This female voice is the Daughter of Zion, the city of Jerusalem personified as widow weeping over her children.

Again: remember that there are 22 verses, 66 phrases. The most logical place to divide such a balanced and neatly structured poem would seem to be right down the middle, between verses 11 and 12. This would produce 11 verses and 33 phrases in each half. What the poet in fact does with these two poetic voices is quite close to an even division. However, you’ll notice that Daughter Zion chimes in twice in the first half of the poem: once in the third phrase of verse 9 (“Look, YHWH, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed”) and once in the third phrase of verse 11 (again, “Look, YHWH, and consider, for I am despised”). If we were to picture this poem as a performance in a courtroom, and the poet were a prosecutor, bringing charges against YHWH, it’s as if Daughter Zion as the victim can’t contain herself; she bursts out before “her turn” to speak. Does that sort of make sense?

Here’s another way of thinking about it. Three times in Lamentations 1, Daughter Zion says bitterly, “Look, YHWH.” Repetition focuses our attention on something that’s important. The word for “look” in Hebrew—רְאֵה—begins with the twentieth letter of the alphabet. If you were to read this poem with the acrostic in mind, you would expect this phrase to occur at the beginning of verse 20, which it does. But the fact that Daughter Zion bursts out twice before verse 20—רְאֵה in verse 9 and וְהַבִּיטָהְרְאֵה in verse 11—these outbursts show us her emotion, the depth of her anguish and protest as a weeping mother.

This is one example of the way in which the strange form of the poetry acts like a skeletal structure to focus our attention on things we might not notice apart from that structure. In this case, the acrostic form draws attention to the emotion behind the measured, structured poetry—anguish and turmoil hidden behind a thin veil of composure.

Proposition 2

I am arguing that protest runs through Lamentations as the dominant posture. You may begin to perceive the difficulty that Lamentations poses for a doctrine of scripture that takes the Bible seriously as authoritative revelation from God. These poems are simultaneously the word of humanity in protest against God and the authoritative Word of God revealed to human beings. Do you see the problem? How does this complaint against the Word of God (that is, the decree that Israel be punished) actually function itself as the Word of God?

As I mentioned before, modern interpreters are not the first to see these problems with Lamentations. Let’s consider several possible ways of explaining this apparent contradiction in scripture’s witness.¹¹

¹¹ I’d like to acknowledge my debt to Professor Brian Toews, one of my mentors, for his teaching on the imprecatory (or hateful) psalms. There are quite a few similarities between the imprecations and the laments in the Old Testament and the ways in which these two genres have been interpreted in the church historically, since they
One approach has been to soften or ignore the protest of Lamentations. As I mentioned previously, rabbinic interpretation of Lamentations attempted to “clarify” that YHWH was quite righteous in punishing Israel for her sins. Many Christian interpreters likewise don’t take the protest of Lamentations seriously, instead choosing to focus on four verses in the middle of Lamentations 3: the “Great is Thy faithfulness” passage.

Second, Lamentations has been understood as prefigurative of the sufferings of Christ at his crucifixion. This is especially true of Lamentations 3, in which a geber (“strong man”) suffers as a representative of his people. This is a valid christological reading of Lamentations 3 especially, but poses some difficulties in the other chapters.

Third, Lamentations may express the poets’ personal and private sentiments, which are not sanctioned by God, but are to be excused because of the state of crisis. Certainly these scriptures contain fervent emotion. But it would be difficult to understand why God would choose to include Lamentations, if the emotions were completely unsanctioned and inappropriate. Plus, scripture contains no explicit statement that, “These poems aren’t to be taken seriously.”

Fourth, the protests of Lamentations could express resistance of God’s chastening for sin, which reflects Israel’s hardened rebellion that led to the exile and their ultimate rejection as God’s particular people. Essentially, then, any protest in Lamentations would be considered sinful. And again, it is difficult to understand why God would allow so much sinful protest to stand in scripture unexplained and uncontraverted.

Fifth, these protests could be understood as poetic exaggerations of both the destruction of Jerusalem and of God’s responsibility for it. There may in fact be some exaggeration of the extent of the destruction of Jerusalem and its environs—but certainly many people died and suffered a great deal, even if some of the specifics are expanded for poetic effect. Once you “dial back” the suffering somewhat to account for hyperbole, you are still left with the problem of suffering and protest against God, which still needs to be explained.

A final explanation is that Lamentations expresses a righteous protest, with the goal of convincing God to intervene on Israel’s behalf and to exact his justice upon her enemies. Lamentations, in this view, does not reflect rebellion against God but a plea that he would resume his covenant promises to Israel. This, I think, is the interpretive approach that does justice to the depth of the emotion expressed in the book but also allows us to integrate its message into the consistent message of scripture as a whole.

Proposition 3

This leads us to my third proposition: Lamentations accentuates a key point of tension in the Old Testament: God’s justice in punishing sin, and his faithfulness to his covenant. This is a tension that we see throughout the Old Testament, that ultimately finds its resolution in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In his Theology of the Old Testament,\textsuperscript{12} Walter Brueggemann presents this tension in terms of Israel’s different testimonies concerning the reality of the world and YHWH’s rule in it. For Brueggemann, Israel’s testimony can be categorized into three streams: core testimony,...

countertestimony, and unsolicited testimony. These three divergent but complementary streams together form Israel’s proclamation of the testified version of reality: “Yahweh-dominated truth and Yahweh-governed reality.” Let’s take a moment to consider in particular these ideas of core testimony and countertestimony.

The core testimony consists of the Bible’s descriptions, metaphors and record of actions that reveal YHWH’s character. This core testimony reveals YHWH’s purposes for the world, and his sovereign power to accomplish his purposes through Israel, for Israel’s own good and for the good of the world.

Brueggemann defines Israel’s “countertestimony” as a necessary cross-examination of Israel’s testimony to YHWH’s mighty acts. Cross-examination is not intended to undermine the core testimony but to strengthen it and to mobilize YHWH to act in accordance with the core testimony to his character.

In Lamentations, we find perhaps the best example of countertestimony in the Old Testament. In Lamentations, Israel does not deny its sin, but points out to YHWH that he has made covenant promises to his people—to dwell in their midst within his temple, to bless them in the land, and to protect them with his royal and priestly representatives. These promises, Israel contends, have been broken—but YHWH is powerful enough to save and to restore his reputation. Consider the concluding verses of Lamentations:

But you, YHWH, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations.
Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?
Restore us to yourself, YHWH, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.

Answers

Now, let me bring back together a few of the strands we’ve been unraveling here.

I’ve contended that Lamentations consists primarily of protest against the suffering that YHWH perpetrated upon his people, and that this protest is difficult to reconcile with other testimony in the Old Testament concerning YHWH’s character as a faithful God who keeps his covenant. I’ve argued that this difficulty is not something that we as Christians committed to the authority of Scripture should be afraid of, but that we should embrace this “countertestimony” and the implicit tension with other teaching in the Old Testament.

I believe that we can embrace this tension for two reasons: because it finds its culmination and resolution in the work of Jesus Christ, and because it mirrors the tension that we find in the Christian life between Christ’s resurrection and ours.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I would argue, proves that Israel’s protest against God in Lamentations was successful. Israel, wallowing in the consequences of her sin, appealed to God’s covenant. In his faithfulness, God provided a means by which his justice could be satisfied—his wrath against sin, poured out upon Jesus as he hung on the cross—and by which God could once again dwell among his people—except this time, his presence was mediated through a better priest, a greater king, a surer covenant.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray: “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In this prayer, we acknowledge God’s sovereignty, but also point out to him that his

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13 Ibid., xvii.
14 Ibid., 306.
15 Ibid., 317.
16 Ibid., 321.
world is not as it should be based on his own precepts and his own revealed will. Lamentations, like the psalms of lament and the cries of the prophets, constitutes a divinely-sanctioned (even divinely-commanded) protest against God, continually calling upon him to keep his promises.

The subtitle for this presentation is, “a canonical reading of Lamentations.” By reading Lamentations in the context of God’s unified revelation, we can see both the sharp, unmitigated protest against God’s tolerance of human suffering, and God’s plan to redeem the world in Jesus Christ. I think that both are necessary in our gospel witness in the church and to the world.

Implications

So now, in conclusion, let me offer three areas in which Lamentations should affect our ministry to our churches and to the world. There are so many other aspects of Lamentations that I wish we had time to explore: its similarities to the city laments of ancient Sumeria; its intertextual relationship to Deuteronomy 28 and Isaiah 49-54; its use in Jewish and Christian liturgy throughout the centuries. But I hope today will be the beginning of your exploration of Lamentations rather than the end.

At the beginning we asked: what would be missing from God’s revelation if Lamentations were not in the Bible? We have seen that Lamentations contributes one facet of scripture’s unified witness to God’s holiness: his judgment upon sin, and also his impeccable faithfulness to his promises. The countertestimony challenges and strengthens the core testimony; both are validated at the cross of Christ.

Lamentations has the potential to deepen our liturgy and personal piety. In an article entitled, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” Brueggemann exposes the deficiencies that result in the life of the church when laments are marginalized in liturgy and interpretation.\(^\text{17}\) He argues that laments provide a sense of genuine covenantal interaction between God and human beings: “Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being….The greater party (God) is surrounded by subjects who are always ‘yes-men and -women’ from whom ‘never is heard a discouraging word.’”\(^\text{18}\) He wonders: what kind of relationship would we have with God if we could never bring to Him our complaints, our anger, and our pain?

I think that those of you who stand in a liturgical tradition have an advantage over the rest of us in this regard, since laments are part of the historic liturgy. Brueggemann notes that the Christian liturgy retains this tension between praise and lament, in, for example, the commemoration of Holy Week: even though “Sunday resolves Friday, the core testimony resolves the countertestimony,”\(^\text{19}\) both sorts of prayers “linger” alongside one another in the prayer book.

Suffering people in our churches often struggle with the feeling that no one sees, no one understands their pain. In a Western culture that tries to cover, ignore or drown out pain, Lamentations is a breath of fresh air and cool honesty.\(^\text{20}\) Daughter Zion asks in Lamentations 1:12, “Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me.” To those who are in pain, Lamentations says: God sees. To us who minister, Lamentations commands us to look and see, to acknowledge suffering and brokenness, not to pretend that we can fix what only God can fix.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 60.
Finally, Lamentations can be a powerful apologetic tool against the argument that the Bible has no answer to the problem of evil. At the heart of the problem of evil is the tension between human responsibility and God’s sovereignty: the Bible affirms both. The atheist argues: how could a good God foreordain evil, or create human beings with the capability of choosing evil?

The atheist’s attack self-deconstructs, since an atheist has no basis for a definition of evil. But the problem remains for Christians who believe what the Bible says: that God is good, and just, and merciful, and sovereign—and also allows evil to exist.

Lamentations is God’s statement that he sees, that he knows and understands. The book points us toward an answer to the problem of evil: even if I cannot explain suffering, I trust that God can. We can trust that He has experienced the worst of human torture—“coming in the likeness of men…and humbling himself to the point of death—the death of the cross.” Rather than destroying our pain, scripture says that “our griefs He Himself bore.” What other religion has such a story, in which the Creator enters his creation to save it, the playwright joins the cast, the potter becomes the clay?

God’s justice, and His faithfulness to His promises, and His love, and His sovereignty, are all proven at the cross.
When YHWH Becomes an Enemy: A Canonical Reading of Lamentations

Lamentations


Ancient Near Eastern Laments


Rabbinic Interpretation


When YHWH Becomes an Enemy: A Canonical Reading of Lamentations

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Why Study Lamentations?

• Great difficulties posed by Lamentations
• Difficulties addressed
• Implications for theology, apologetics, ministry
An Unlikely Choice

- No prophetic author
- Time-bound concerns
- Alphabetic acrostic form
### Lamentations 1

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<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>(א) How (אִישָּה) โลนely sits the city that was full of people;</td>
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<td>1b</td>
<td>She has become like a widow, she who was great among the nations;</td>
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<td>1c</td>
<td>The princess among the provinces has become a slave.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2a</td>
<td>(ב) She weeps (כָּהָה) bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks;</td>
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<td>2b</td>
<td>She has no comforter among all her lovers;</td>
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<td>2c</td>
<td>All her friends have betrayed her, becoming her enemies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3a</td>
<td>(ג) Judah has gone into exile (גָּלְתָה) because of affliction and much servitude;</td>
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<td>3b</td>
<td>She herself dwells among the nations, not finding a place of rest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3c...</td>
<td>All her pursuers have overtaken her in the midst of her troubles….</td>
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Alphabetic Acrostics: A Triple Acrostic

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lamentations 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (א)</td>
<td>I am (ן) the strongman who has seen affliction under his rod of fury;</td>
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<td>2 (א)</td>
<td>It is I (א) whom he has driven and brought to darkness without light.</td>
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<td>3 (א)</td>
<td>Surely (א) he has turned against me; he overturns his hand all day long.</td>
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<td>4 (ב)</td>
<td>He has worn out ( דברו ) my flesh and my skin; he has broken my bones.</td>
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<td>5 (ב)</td>
<td>He has built ( דברו ) against me and surrounded me with bitterness and tribulation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 (ב)</td>
<td>He has made me dwell in darknesses ( כמותא כחימין ) as the eternally dead.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 (ג)</td>
<td>He has walled me in ( דדים ) so that I cannot go out; he has made my chains heavy.</td>
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<td>8 (ג)</td>
<td>Even though ( דים ) I call and cry out, he shuts out my prayer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 (ג)</td>
<td>He has walled up ( דדים ) my paths with hewn stones; he has twisted my ways.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
An Unlikely Choice

• No prophetic author
• Time-bound concerns
• Alphabetic acrostic form
• Theological tension with rest of Scripture
The Problem

Proposition 1: Lamentations is not primarily a book of confession, but a protest against the perceived injustice of God.
Lamentations: Protest

“[Lamentations] 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.”

Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 4 (emphasis original).
Lamentations: Protest

“To [sustain the hope of Lamentations 3] would be to lie, to cover over, to deny the reality of the survivor’s longing for God’s missing voice.”

Lamentations: Protest


Who is to Blame?

• “Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper, because YHWH has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe.” (Lam 1:5)

• “Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy.” (1:8a)

• “The enemy has stretched out his hands over all her precious things; for she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation.” (1:10)

• “The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish; he will uncover your sins.” (4:21-22)
Who is to Blame?

• “How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob; in his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers.” (Lam 2:1-2)

• “Look, YHWH, and see! With whom have you dealt thus? Should women eat the fruit of their womb, the children of their tender care? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?” (Lam 2:20)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lam 1</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>Text</th>
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<td>1-8</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>“Look (נָא), YHWH, at my affliction, for the enemy has become great!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
<td>Her uncleanliness is in her skirts; she did not remember her end. And so she goes down wonderfully! She has no comforter.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
<td>All her people groan, searching for bread; They give their treasures for food to bring back the soul.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
<td>“Look (נָא), YHWH, and see that I am despised!”</td>
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<td>12-16</td>
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<td>“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by on the road? Look (נָא) and see whether there is any sorrow like my sorrow...”</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>“Look (נָא), YHWH, for I am in distress...”</td>
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<td>18-22</td>
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<td>“Look (נָא), YHWH, for I am in distress...”</td>
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</table>
The Problem

• Proposition 1: Lamentations is not primarily a book of confession, but a protest against the perceived injustice of God.

• Proposition 2: Lamentations poses significant difficulty for a high view of Scripture: How can a complaint against the Word of God actually function itself as the Word of God?
Surviving Lamentations: Approaches

1. Soften or ignore the protest
2. Prefigurative of the sufferings of Christ
3. Unsanctioned personal emotions
4. Sinful resistance of God’s chastening
5. Poetic exaggerations
6. Righteous protest, an appeal to God’s covenant promises
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• Proposition 2: Lamentations poses significant difficulty for a high view of Scripture: How can a complaint against the Word of God actually function itself as the Word of God?

• Proposition 3: Lamentations accentuates a key point of tension in the Old Testament: God’s justice in punishing sin, and his faithfulness to his covenant.
Lamentations: Answers

• Lamentations epitomizes the tension between core testimony and countertestimony.
• Lamentations points to the resolution of this tension in the cross of Christ.
• Lamentations expresses our painful existence between Christ’s resurrection and ours.
Lamentations: Implications

• Coherent theological witness within Scripture as a diverse canon
• Deepened liturgy and personal piety; acknowledgement of human suffering
Loss of Lament?

“Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being....The greater party (God) is surrounded by subjects who are always ‘yes men and women’ from whom ‘never is heard a discouraging word.’”

Lamentations: Implications

• Coherent theological witness within Scripture as a diverse canon
• Deepened liturgy and personal piety; acknowledgement of human suffering
• Apologetic answer to the problem of evil: God knows
When YHWH Becomes an Enemy: A Canonical Reading of Lamentations

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