Introduction

This paper posits several observations concerning the context of Lamentations and the function of its acrostic form, with the goal of drawing out some broader implications for how evangelicals should read Lamentations.

Several studies have indicated that the book of Lamentations, like the Sumerian city laments, is concerned in part with the preservation and restoration of the scattered Judahite people. This paper will suggest that certain poetic features of Lamentations contribute to this ongoing preservative/cohesive function in faith communities.

Lamentations displays tension between completeness and incompleteness in both its form and its content. The utter decimation of the society is reflected in the complete and indiscriminate destruction of Judah’s people and institutions, and in the incomplete and fragmented state of Judah’s population. Lamentations utilizes the acrostic form to accentuate the complete/incomplete motif; the reader is confronted with completeness—a nation’s complete destruction, the complete range of human emotion—and with incompleteness—a fragmented people, broken institutions, unanswered theological questions.

These contextual and exegetical points contribute to a broader hermeneutical approach that considers Lamentations to be not primarily a confession of sin but a protest against the perceived injustice or excessiveness of YHWH’s punishment. I will argue that evangelicals should embrace Lamentations as protest, but integrate that protest into a coherent biblical theology.

After briefly setting Lamentations in the social context of Judah during the Babylonian period, I will spend much of our time exploring the relationship between a unifying rhetorical function of Lamentations and the alphabetic acrostic form. These points support the notion of “Lamentations as protest.” I will then conclude by addressing the fundamental disagreement between evangelicals and critical scholars on this point, and attempt to chart a middle path that is faithful to scripture as a whole and also to the unique message of Lamentations.

Historical Background

This study rests on two broad historical premises: the fragmentation of Yahwistic communities in the Persian period, and a unifying rhetorical function of communal laments and city laments in ANE culture.

Fragmentation

The historical consensus is that various Yahwistic communities emerged from 587 BCE and came into conflict in the Babylonian and Persian periods. Ezra-Nehemiah’s accounts of the restoration efforts portray ongoing conflict between the returning golah (exile) community and the “people of the land.” Furthermore, Jewish communities in Egypt (Jer 42-44, 46) and the east (Daniel 1-6, Esther, Tobit) developed different modes of religious expression apart from the rebuilt Jerusalem temple.

The following three statements summarize the relevant background to a possible “unifying” function of Lamentations.

1. **Yahwism was pluriform prior to 587 BCE.** Contrary to any monolatrous biblical ideal, YHWH was worshiped in several sacred locations and with varying degrees of syncretism, as demonstrated both by the biblical portrayals and the archaeological findings.

2. **After 587 BCE, Yahwism became irretrievably fragmented.** The destruction of the temple and the scattering of Judah eliminated the possibility of complete centralization and uniformity of Yahwistic worship. Strains of Yahwism developed separately in Babylon, Palestine and Egypt.

3. **After 587 BCE, most expressions of Yahwism that made their way into the Hebrew Bible were oriented toward restoration of land, people and temple.** These hopes were expressed in different ways (inclusion/exclusion of the nations, monarchic/hierocratic government). But preservation of the community appears to be a significant motivation behind the formation of the Hebrew Bible.

**Unifying Function of Communal/City Laments**

Communal laments (and city laments in particular) appear to have functioned in ancient societies as a way of maintaining community cohesion in the midst of crisis. Laments were not merely personal expressions of emotion, but socially and religiously sanctioned, controlled ways of expressing grief. The performance of a lament fulfilled several important functions in a

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2. The usage of the term שָׁאָר (‘remnant’/‘leftover’)—analogous to גוֹלוֹה (‘exile’) and referring to the communities of Judahites left in the land after 587 BCE—is purely descriptive, chosen to avoid the theological associations with the English term “remnant.”


4. Even Esther, which is not “return”-oriented, is about the preservation of the Jewish people in the Diaspora.

5. This concept is not easily understood by modern Western readers, for whom the most authentic expressions of emotion involve spontaneity and individuality. See Gary A. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion* (The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 1991), 8.
community. First, it contributed to social cohesion in the face of catastrophe. Second, it was a way of elevating the voices of survivors before the world and before heaven. Third, a lament performance provided some sense of completion of the tragic event—a way for individuals and communities to move forward.

Communal laments by their very nature concern the preservation of a group. The performer attempts to mobilize the deity and the broader society in the interests of the community. The laments may also invoke blessing on new collective endeavors, such as the rebuilding of temples and cities.

Dobbs-Allsopp, in a literary analysis of the city laments, identifies nine “major generic features” of these compositions. Three of these features are of particular interest to this study: the description of the city’s destruction, the personification of the city as a weeping goddess, and the restoration of the city and return of the gods.

The descriptions of the cities found in the Sumerian city laments are greatly concerned with the completeness of the destruction. The tragedy extends to all the people, the whole society, in all aspects of life. The destruction decreed by the gods and carried out by foreign enemies is indiscriminate: everyone—from the priest and king down to the lowest slave, from the city dwellers to those on the rural outskirts, from those killed or starving in the city to those who are taken captive—suffers a common fate.

The personification of the city as a weeping goddess is found in all the city laments except one. Personification gives voice to the city; the patron goddess grieves over the loss of her temple and treasures, as well as the death, suffering and captivity of her people. As in Lamentations, the goddess’s people are sometimes portrayed as her children.

Most of the Sumerian city laments exhibit consistent concern for the destruction and fragmentation of the city’s population. Fragmentation involves the breakup of social, religious and family structures, indiscriminate destruction of all classes and groups of people, and the death, destitution, flight or captivity of the whole populace.

Furthermore, wherever these poems describe divine or royal restoration—whether anticipated or realized—the regathering of the people and the reconstitution of those social and familial structures are important components of that restoration.

The Text of Lamentations Reveals Concern for all Sorts of Judahites

Having highlighted one aspect of the historical setting of Lamentations, and one specific function of the genre, I will now turn to the text of Lamentations. I approach the book as a carefully edited unity in its final form. I favor a date between the fall of Jerusalem and the Cyrus

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7 Xuan Huong Thi Pham, Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Tod Linafelt, Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
11 Ibid., 66-90.
13 Ibid., 77.
edict; however, none of the literary observations made here is dependent upon a specific author or date for Lamentations during the Babylonian or Persian period.

**Acrostic Form**

It is well-known that four of the five poems of Lamentations are alphabetic acrostics. The purpose of the acrostic form and its relevance to interpretation has been a subject of some debate, particularly in light of recent attention to the literary aspects of the book of Lamentations. In a recent article, I offered a summary and critique of some views of the acrostic form in the Hebrew Bible, and posited a theory regarding the use of certain verbal forms in acrostic poetry.14 This article proposed that the only consistent connotation of the acrostic form is the sense of *completeness* through the use of the entire alphabet from א to ת.15

The acrostic form, utilized so neatly and intentionally in Lamentations 1-4, provides a tool for interpreting the often-vague paratactic relationship16 between poetic lines:

The acrostic poems have at least one discourse feature, however artificial, that connects each line to the next. Like the wayyiqtol in narrative, the alphabet is the macrosyntactic framework of the acrostic poem.17

The acrostic form, therefore, has two significant implications for the study of Lamentations. First, the use of the entire alphabet *in its proper order* connotes completeness—the complete devastation of Judah and the fullness of anguish. Second, the use of the rigid form accentuates the points at which the poetry resists or breaks the requirements of the form. Let us now consider two instances of this “rebellion.”18

Linafelt,19 Dobbs-Allsopp,20 Mandolfo21 and others have argued that the content of Lamentations 1 consists of Zion’s protest of her suffering at the hands of YHWH her husband. My approach brings out this protest through the use of the acrostic form:

Zion’s eagerness to [proclaim] her abused status breaks across the macrosyntactic constraints of Lamentations 1. The rigid acrostic form—22 verses of three lines each…points to a natural division in the poem: between verses 11 and 12.

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15 Additionally, the acrostics appear to exhibit a preference for the use of the qatal (“perfect”) verbal form over the yiqtol (“imperfect”) form; this is partly due to the limits of the acrostic artifice,19 and partly due to the perfective, completed connotation of the alphabetic acrostic form (Giffone, “A ‘Perfect’ Poem,” 61). Since Hebrew is primarily a verb-subject-object (VSO) language, the acrostic’s predetermination of the initial letter of poetic line relegates a verse-initial yiqtol form to the ס, י, נ and ת lines, whereas the qatal may occur at the beginning of any line in the acrostic.
18 Some of this analysis was presented previously as Giffone, “How Lonely Sits the Text: Lamentations 1-2 and Evangelical Appropriation of Postmodern Biblical Studies” (Eastern regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, March 4, 2011); and ibid., “From Time-Bound to Timeless: The Rhetoric of Lamentations and Its Appropriation” (MTh thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2012), 72-104.
19 Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*.
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<th>Lam 1</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
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<td>1-8</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>General</td>
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<tr>
<td>Her uncleanliness is in her skirts; she did not remember her end. And so she goes down wonderfully! She has no comforter.</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
<td>YHWH</td>
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<td>“Look, YHWH, at my affliction, for the enemy has become great!”</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Observer</td>
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<td>…</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>General</td>
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<tr>
<td>All her people groan, searching for bread; They give their treasures for food to bring back the soul.</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
<td>YHWH</td>
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<td>“Look, YHWH, and see that I am despised!”</td>
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<td>12-16</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>General</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by on the road? Look and see whether there is any sorrow like my sorrow…”</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
<td>YHWH Passersby</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Observer</td>
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<td>18-22</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>General</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 “Look, YHWH, for I am in distress…”</td>
<td>Daughter Zion!</td>
<td>YHWH</td>
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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 ראה (1:9c) and והביטה ראה (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 ר line is the proper place for והביטה ראה—but she cannot restrain herself and speaks out of turn.22

Here we see how the acrostic form accentuates the dialogue between the two voices in Lamentations 1. The voices imbalance the two halves of the poem created by the neat acrostic artifice.

The idea of the ר line as the “proper” moment for the accusation is supported by the repetition of ראה in 2:20. Of course, it could be argued that these repetitions are simply the result of the fact that ראה is by far the most frequently-used word beginning with ר in the Hebrew Bible; indeed, various conjugations of ראה occur as thirteen out of twenty-two “alphabetic words”23 in ר lines of the biblical acrostics. But the use of והביטה ראה in the twentieth line does not appear to violate the logical progression of either Lamentations 1 or 2; it does not seem that the poet forced the poetry into the artifice in this regard. Rather, the “deviant” repetition of ראה in 1:9 and 1:11 (not to mention והביטה ראה in 1:12) accentuates the “proper” artificial usage in 1:20 and 2:20.

Nancy Lee proposes a similar way of thinking about the usage of the והביטה ראה lines in Lamentations. She remarks, “This acrostic pattern is being used in a rhetorical battle…between two groups of singers with very different theological outlooks.”24 She observes that most of the acrostic psalms are “heavily invested in the idea of ‘retributive justice,’” making significant use

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23 I use the term key word to refer to “the word in a poetic line that links the line to the acrostic. Most often the key word will be the first word, but this is not always the case” (Giffone, “A ’Perfect’ Poem,” 50n2).
24 Lee, Singers of Lamentations, 165.
of the צדק root.\textsuperscript{25} By contrast, Lamentations offers a critique of YHWH’s retributive justice, replacing צדק in 1:18 with צעק (“cry out”) in 2:18, צוד in 3:52 and 4:18, צמד (“annihilate”) in 3:53, and צופ (“flow/engulf”) in 3:54. This apparent perversion of justice is signaled prior to the צ line by the reversal of the ע and פ lines in Lamentations 2-4:

[The authors of Lamentations,] in their rebelling against a simplistic retributive understanding of events…employ the acrostic structure to invert that order of justice, with strategic inverting of the letters ע and פ. It is probably no accident that these letters suggest in their root meaning what someone (or YHWH) “sees” and “speaks.”\textsuperscript{26} and they precede the צ letter…. The צ word to follow that is most often used or emphasized in the psalmic acrostics, and used for YHWH and his righteous followers, is צדק. Yet the acrostic with the first inversion of letters in Lam 2 leads not to the expected צדק but to [the prophet’s] appeal to the female singer to “cry out” (צעק) in lament, a virtual wordplay with צדק!\textsuperscript{27}

Lee’s explanation for the difference of alphabetical order within the book of Lamentations is intriguing.\textsuperscript{28} In the handout I have provided two other examples of “crossover”—the resistance of the rigid form—from Lamentations 2 and 3.

**Summary**

Even within the constraints of the elegant, symmetrical acrostic form there is creativity, diversity, resistance and asymmetry.\textsuperscript{30} The acrostic form imposes order upon disorder. The consistent use of such a contrived form in a book about death, chaos, disorder and fragmentation leads the reader to investigate the implications of the form for interpretation.\textsuperscript{31} Variations upon or deviations from that baseline form indicate tendencies toward incompleteness, resistance and fragmentation. Such “rebellion” actually serves as part of the content of the poem, accentuating certain stanzas, lines, phrases or words.

**Diverse Communities**

This section will merely sample the evidence of the fragmentation of Judah in two chapters of Lamentations which most prominently display this motif: chapters one and four. As in the Sumerian city laments, the city of Judah is personified as a woman deprived of her children.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 164 (emphasis original). Cognates of צדק occur thirty-seven times in the eight acrostic psalms, and as five out of fourteen צ key words.

\textsuperscript{26} On the use of the names of the letters of the alphabet in the acrostics, see Giffone, “A ‘Perfect’ Poem,” 54.

\textsuperscript{27} This recalls the overt wordplay in Isaiah 5:7, in which משׂפח (“bloodshed”) is substituted for משׁפט (“justice”) and צעקה for צדקה.


\textsuperscript{29} See Giffone, “A ‘Perfect’ Poem,” 55-56. See also the discussion of the correction of the order of ע and פ in Ps 34:16-18 (“A ‘Perfect’ Poem,” 64); if Lee is correct, the presence of צעקה in Ps 34:18 would account for the “original” inversion of the preceding ע and פ, which was then “corrected” by later scribes in such a way as makes these three lines obscure in their current received form.

\textsuperscript{30} In fact, the artificial constraints of the acrostic serve to heighten the creativity of the poet; see Scott N. Callaham, “An Evaluation of Psalm 119 as Constrained Writing,” Hebrew Studies 50 (2009): 121-135.

\textsuperscript{31} Dobbs-Allsopp observes, “Lamentations through literary artifice, through language, is able to give meaning where meaning is otherwise absent. Hence, the simple act of helping the community to regain its voice is profoundly theological in its ramification” (“Tragedy, Tradition and Theology,” 58).
Zion’s fragmented children experience many different calamities in Lamentations. Four categories of Zion’s children are mentioned within Lamentations: the dead, the captives (golah), those who have fled (Diaspora), and those left desolate in the land (she’erit).

**Lamentations 1**

Lamentations 1 is directly focused on the city of Jerusalem, personified as Daughter Zion. However, this does not necessarily limit the drama to a particular spatial location; “Judah” has gone into exile and dwells among the nations (1:3), yet Daughter Zion still sits desolate within the city (1:12). The Judahite people, Zion’s children, experience a variety of fates.

As we have seen already, Lamentations 1 utilizes two poetic voices. A narrator describes the sufferings of priests (1:4), young women (1:4), children (1:5), princes (1:6), and the people as a collective (1:7, 11). Daughter Zion speaks of her warriors and young men (1:15), desolate children (1:16), young men and women (1:18), and priests and elders (1:19). Her suffering as a personification of the community extends to her entire body: nakedness (1:8), genitals (1:7, 8, 10), bones and feet (1:13), neck (1:14), eyes (1:16), bowels (1:20), and heart (1:20, 22).

Furthermore, the attack has scattered the community. Children, young people and Judah herself have gone into exile or captivity (1:3, 5, 7, 18). Many have perished in the city or the countryside (1:15, 19-20). A surviving she’erit community lives among the ruins (1:4), while princes have fled in search of protection elsewhere (1:6).

**Lamentations 4**

Zion’s children experience several different fates in Lamentations 4. In addition to those who have perished in the war (4:5-6), many survivors have starved (4:3-4, 9-10). A she’erit community includes starving babies (4:4) as well as debased princes (4:7-8).

Lamentations 4:14-16 appears to refer to the golah and Diaspora communities, living disgraced in Babylon and abroad. These Judahites included “priests” and “elders” whom YHWH had scattered (4:16), but they were considered “unclean,” “fugitives” and “wanderers” (4:15). 4:20 describes the king, “YHWH’s anointed,” as having been captured and taken into exile.

Lamentations 4:17-19 describes the attempts to escape Jerusalem into the hill country and the neighboring nations. Lamentations 4:21-22 invokes punishment upon Edom. Edom is repeatedly singled out for condemnation in the Prophets for failing to come to Judah’s aid and mistreating the Judahite refugees (Ezek 25, 35; Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11; Obad 11).

Like the first two poems, Lamentations 4 mentions a wide swath of people who suffer indiscriminately: infants and children (4:4, 10), the wealthy (4:5), princes (4:7), women (4:10), prophets, priests and elders (4:13, 16).

**Summary**

Lamentations attempts to bring together a fragmented people through its use of different voices and its focus on the suffering of many different communities and classes of people. Lamentations appears to treat the various communities of scattered Judah as equally important members of the community. Though the poems of Lamentations describe in detail the desolation of the land and its remaining inhabitants, those who have fled or been exiled are mourned as equal victims of the destruction.

**Lamentations as Protest?**

At the beginning, I stated that I would link Lamentations’ context and rhetorical strategy vis-à-vis the acrostic form to the idea of Lamentations as protest against YHWH. I have attempted to demonstrate that Lamentations, in unifying and mobilizing the Judahite community, takes a stance of protest rather than one of confession. I will now sketch some possible interpretive responses to “Lamentations as protest,” and how evangelicals can embrace this notion while still remaining faithful to scripture.

What have interpreters done with protest?

In Lamentations and the Tears of the World, O’Connor recommends Lamentations as an instrument of personal and communal healing. Lamentations’ “theology of witnessing” provides a theological antidote to blind praise amid suffering, as well as a way of validating pain and protesting suffering in the world. O’Connor argues that the acrostic form and other poetic devices become 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 abbreviates the acrostic form found in the first three chapters; chapter 5 is even further abbreviated, and breaks with the acrostic form. Lamentations concludes without hope—hope which is present in Lamentations 3, but which 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 suffering. Lamentations mirrors human sorrow and permits it to stand unmitigated and unanswered—“It calls us to see.”

O’Connor, along with many others, argues 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.

Frankly, evangelicals have not, in my estimation, placed enough emphasis on Lamentations’ message of protest. 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 orthodox theology, but too often import valid theological conclusions into a book that, on its face, resists theological conclusions. I believe we can appropriate the literary and historical insights of critical scholarship in the service of interpretation, bringing the theological insights about lamentation and protest generally into a coherent biblical theology. We don’t need to reject orthodoxy because of Lamentations’ difficult message, as critical scholars do—nor do we need to “mix in”

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33 Kathleen O’Connor, Lamentations and the Tears of the World (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), 79.
34 Ibid., 85.
35 Ibid., 86.
36 Ibid., 94-95.
some orthodoxy like evangelicals unfortunately try to do. Rather, we need to let Lamentations’ unpalatable stance of protest be part of a complete, balanced theology.

If indeed protest is the dominant posture within Lamentations, the book then presents a difficulty 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. How does this complaint against the decree of God function as the Word of God itself?

For the sake of time, I will briefly raise and then leave unaddressed five approaches to Lamentations that I feel are misguided or inadequate. 38

One approach has been to soften or ignore the protest of Lamentations. For example, rabbinc interpretation of Lamentations attempted to “clarify” that YHWH was quite righteous in punishing Israel for her sins. Second, Lamentations has been understood as prefigurative of the sufferings of Christ at his crucifixion. This is a valid christological reading of Lamentations 3, 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. 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. Essentially, then, any protest in Lamentations would be considered sinful. Fifth, these protests could be understood as poetic exaggerations of both the destruction of Jerusalem and of God’s responsibility for it.

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 is a plea that YHWH 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 a consistent biblical theology.

Evangelicals can embrace protest

“Lamentations as protest” 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, which ultimately finds its resolution in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Walter Brueggemann presents this tension in terms of Israel’s different testimonies concerning the reality of the world and YHWH’s rule in it. 39 According to Brueggemann, Israel’s testimony can be categorized into three streams: core testimony, counter testimony, 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.” 40 Let’s consider briefly these notions of core testimony and counter testimony.

38 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 both express extreme dissatisfaction with God and his world. I have adapted some of Brian’s ideas and applied them to the psalms of lament and Lamentations; see Brian G. Toews, “Imprecatory Psalms, Jesus, and Our Enemies,” presentation to the Student Theological Society at Cairn University, March 8, 2006.


40 Ibid., xvii.
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. 41

Brueggemann defines Israel’s “countertestimony” as a necessary cross-examination of Israel’s testimony to YHWH’s mighty acts. 42 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. 43

Lamentations is an excellent example of biblical countertestimony. Israel does not deny its sin, but implicitly brings before YHWH his own covenant promises—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.

Summarize, Emphasize: Unity through Tragedy

In conclusion, we’ve seen that Lamentations commemorates the shared sufferings of the Judahite community. The tension between the completeness of Judah’s catastrophe and the fragmentation of the people plays itself out both in the use of and rebellion against the acrostic form, and in the surveys of indiscriminate destruction.

The observations presented here support the idea that Lamentations, by galvanizing a beleaguered community, contributed to the preservation of Judah in the Babylonian and Persian eras. With its members scattered in Babylon, Edom and Egypt, Judah looked for ways to perpetuate its identity. 44

I’ve contended that Lamentations stands in 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. Evangelicals need not fear this difficulty, but should rather embrace Lamentations’ implicit tension with other teaching in the Old Testament. This tension resolves in the work of Jesus, and mirrors the tension that we find in the Christian life between Christ’s resurrection and ours.

The death and resurrection of Jesus, then, 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.

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 world is not as it should be based on his own precepts and his own revealed will. Lamentations,

41 Ibid., 306.
42 Ibid., 317.
43 Ibid., 321.
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.

I have argued here for a canonical reading of “Lamentations as protest.” 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. Both are necessary in our gospel witness in the church and to the world.
Lamentations’ Acrostic Form and Fragmented 
Judah in the Persian Period

I. Introduction
II. Historical Background
   a. Fragmentation of Judah
      i. Yahwism was pluriform prior to 587 BCE
      ii. After 587 BCE, Yahwism became irretrievably fragmented.
      iii. After 587 BCE, most expressions of Yahwism that made their way into the Hebrew Bible were oriented toward restoration of land, people and temple.
   b. Unifying Function of Communal/City Laments
      i. Communal Laments
      ii. City Laments
         1. Totality of destruction
         2. Personification of city as weeping goddess
         3. Restoration of the city and return of the gods
III. Lamentations’ Concern for All Sorts of Judahites
   a. Acrostic form and “crossover” in Lam 1
   b. Diverse communities
      i. Lam 1
      ii. Lam 4
IV. Lamentations as Protest
   a. Critical Interpretations
   b. Historic and evangelical responses to “Lamentations as Protest”
      i. Soften or ignore
      ii. Prefigurative of Christ’s suffering
      iii. Unsanctioned private/personal sentiments
      iv. Resistance of chastening for sin
      v. Poetic exaggerations
      vi. Righteous protest
   c. Evangelicals can embrace protest
      i. Core testimony
      ii. Countertestimony
V. Summary
   a. Unity through tragedy
   b. Form and meaning
   c. Protest in biblical theology
Selected Bibliography


Xuan Huong Thi Pham, *Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).


Brian G. Toews, “Imprecatory Psalms, Jesus, and Our Enemies,” presentation to the Student Theological Society at Cairn University, March 8, 2006.
### Lam 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td>Her uncleanliness is in her skirts; she did not remember her end. And so she goes down wonderfully! She has no comforter. <strong>“Look, YHWH, at my affliction, for the enemy has become great!”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td>All her people groan, searching for bread; They give their treasures for food to bring back the soul. <strong>“Look, YHWH, and see that I am despised!”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>12-16</strong></td>
<td>12 “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by on the road? <strong>Look and see</strong> whether there is any sorrow like my sorrow…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>17</strong></td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18-22</strong></td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td>”<strong>Look, YHWH, for I am in distress…”</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Lam 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>Agent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>YHWH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td>The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence; They have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; The young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground.</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td>My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns… … because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city.</td>
<td>Prophet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>12-19</strong></td>
<td>12 They cry to their mothers, “Where is bread and wine?” … 13 What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? …</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20-22</strong></td>
<td>20 ”<strong>Look, YHWH, and see! With whom have you dealt thus?”</strong> …</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 As with 1:11c, 2:11 appears to cross over the artificial middle of the poem created by the acrostic. 2:1-10 describes YHWH’s barrage against his city and sanctuary from an omniscient third-person perspective. 2:11-19 employs a first-person prophetic voice speaking to Daughter Zion directly. 2:20-22 concludes the poem with Daughter Zion’s appeal to YHWH at the prophet’s urging.
Lam 3

1 3:20 My soul certainly (זָכוֹר) remembers [my affliction] and is bowed down within me.

1 3:21 But this (זֹאת) I revive in my heart, and therefore I hope:

י 3:22 The covenant love (חַסְדֵי) of YHWH—it is never exhausted, nor do his compassions ever end;

י 3:23 They are renewed (חֲדָשִׁים) every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Community Fragmentation in Lam 1 & 4

Lam 1
• Indiscriminate suffering
  o Priests (1:4)
  o Young women (1:4)
  o Children (1:5)
  o Princes (1:6)
  o The people as a collective (1:7, 11)
• Daughter Zion’s children
  o Warriors and young men (1:15)
  o Desolate children (1:16)
  o Her young men and women (1:18)
  o Her priests and elders (1:19)
• Daughter Zion’s afflicted body as a personification of the community
  o Nakedness (1:8)
  o Genitals (1:7, 8, 10)
  o Bones and feet (1:13)
  o Neck (1:14)
  o Eyes (1:16)
  o Bowels (1:20)
  o Heart (1:20, 22)
• Daughter Zion’s scattered children
  o In exile or captivity (1:3, 5, 7, 18)
  o Perished in the city or the countryside (1:15, 19-20)
  o Surviving she’erit among the ruins (1:4)
  o Other elites have fled (1:6)

Lam 2
• Order: ו → ש → צ (inverted ‘ayin and peh)
  Tsade key word: צָעַק (“cry out”)

Lam 3
• Order: ו → ש → צ (inverted ‘ayin and peh)
  Tsade key words: צַדִּיק (“just”)
  צָעַק (“cry out”)

Lam 4
• Order: ו → ש → צ (inverted ‘ayin and peh)
  Tsade key word: צָעַק (“cry out”)

Lee: Inversion of “Justice”

Lam 1
• Order: ו → ש → צ (traditional)
  Tsade key word: צַדִּיק (“just”)

Lam 2
• Order: ו → ש → צ (inverted ‘ayin and peh)
  Tsade key word: צָעַק (“cry out”)

Lam 3
• Order: ו → ש → צ (inverted ‘ayin and peh)
  Tsade key words: צַד ("hunt"), פְּצֵף ("exterminate"), וּפֵרְפָא ("overflow")

Lam 4
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d2 The triple-acrostic form accentuates the crossover, which subtly resists the formal constraints of the poem. Even as the artifice struggles to contain the poetic expression, the poet grapples with his own emotions and the constraints of a “good theology” of a righteous sufferer.