

Lamentations appears to be a book without a happy ending—its final comment is distinctly ambiguous. And yet is it best known for a verse that promises hope: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.'

This booklet explores the issues in reading Lamentations, in order to help those reading it, preaching from it or using it liturgically, to hear its message and meaning. To do this, we must learn how to read the book with integrity—reading the whole book with our whole lives.



**Dr Heath Thomas** is Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. He serves on the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar executive committee, an international project aimed at renewing biblical interpretation so that all the resources of biblical studies may be directed towards hearing God's address in and through Scripture today.

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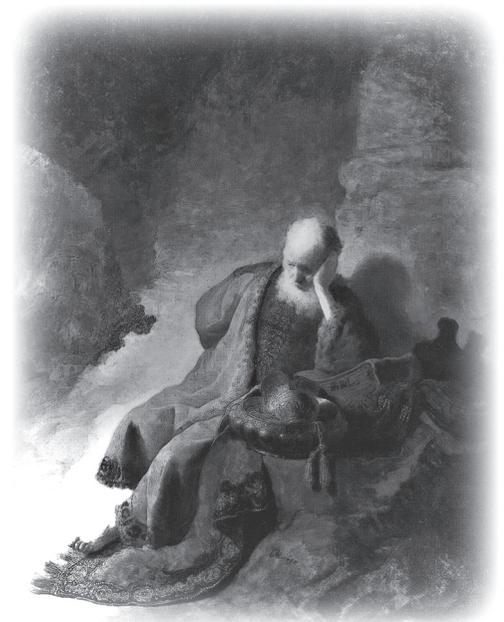
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# 'Until He Looks Down and Sees'

The Message and Meaning of the Book of Lamentations



**Heath Thomas**

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# Contents

1	Introduction .....	3
2	The Tears and Prayers of Lamentations .....	7
3	Lamentations as Christian Scripture .....	17
4	Practical Implementation and Recommended Reading.....	24
	Notes .....	26

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# 1

## Introduction

Lamentations is perhaps the only book that does not conclude with a ‘happy ending.’ Its final verses—‘Unless you have utterly rejected us; you are angry with us forever?’—are ambiguous at best: will God answer or not? The book of Lamentations is marked by such challenges. It affirms God’s goodness (Lam 3.21–24) yet also raises questions about God’s sanctioned abuse (Lam 1.10). He is painted as an angry divine warrior (Lam 1.14; 2.1–10), a grim party host that serves up poison and rotten food (Lam 3.15) and even a God that enables cannibalism (Lam 2.20). It complains about enemies (Lam 4.18–19), but then also complains about sin (Lam 1.18). It links sin with disaster and exile (Lam 1.17), but also moves beyond these expressions of a ‘sin-consequence’ relationship (Lam 3.49–51). What can be done with this difficult book?

The aim of this booklet is to help those who read Lamentations (or preach from it or use it liturgically) to hear its message and meaning. To do so, we must learn to read the book with integrity. What do I mean by this? Quite simply, I hope to help us discover how to read the whole book as opposed to reading just selected verses. Further, we will explore how Lamentations fits as Christian Scripture. The rationale behind these aims is fairly straightforward and theological: as Christians, the goal is to become immersed and transformed by the *whole* of Scripture (2 Tim 3.16–17), rather than bits that we like or those that sound good to us.

And there are a few bits in Lamentations that sound quite good...but the rest of it is pretty hard to swallow. The good bits are relatively familiar. For example, Robert Chisholm wrote *Great is Thy Faithfulness*, a hymn etched into the cultural memory of Christian worshippers. The chorus to Chisholm’s hymn reads:

Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness.  
Morning by morning new mercies I see.  
All I have needed, thy hand hath provided.  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.<sup>1</sup>

In the song, the world is affirmed through the prism of the faithfulness of God (Lam 3.21) and a vision of hope: God’s mercies are new every morning (Lam

3.24). Now, songs like this encourage and inspire faith. And they present a fundamental theology of the reliability of God.

It is not my purpose to diminish this point one bit (or the hymn, for that matter). Rather, I would challenge us to reconsider these verses in light of the *whole* of Lamentations. It is one thing to recognize these verses (Lam 3.21–24) as positive and hopeful, but another thing altogether to *interpret* them in the light of the whole of the book. When we read Lamentations with integrity, we see a rather different view of these verses, as well as the whole. Ultimately, we will wrestle with the assertion of the man speaking about God in Lam 3.24, ‘I will hope in him,’ and discover how the concept of hope figures in Lamentations’ own horizons and then new horizons as Christian Scripture. As we wrestle with the text, we will discover that hope is anticipated in the poetry but not finally consummated, drawing us more fully into the notion of Christian hope, itself exemplified in the words of Lam 3.50: ‘*Until* he looks down and sees: Yahweh from the heavens’ (italics mine).

### What is Lamentations: Poetry or Prose?

Lamentations is poetry (and *very* good poetry at that), comprised of five individual poems. The poems are organized by an alphabetic acrostic—each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This is true for each poem, except for chapter five, which has 22 lines that correspond to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, but without the strict alphabetic arrangement.

The acrostic structure remains interpretatively significant (though it is somewhat hard to see what the fuss is about in the English translations of the book).

Some have viewed the acrostic as demonstrating a ‘comprehensiveness’; it expresses the entire range of suffering(s) in the book from *alef* to *taw* (or A to Z). In other words, it gives a multiform and fully-fledged portrait of suffering and pain. This insight is useful in that it shows us that Lamentations does not shrink away from expressing pain, but addresses it

### The real experience of tragedy in life is a note rung in the symphony of Scripture

explicitly. The ‘earthy’ and real experience of tragedy in life is a note rung in the symphony of Scripture, and this reality should reverberate in modern faith—the Bible is not *always* praise-oriented. Nor does it put a naïve, happy face on pain. Rather, Scripture shows tragedy in all of its mournful detail. Lamentations’ acrostic shows this truth in its comprehensive depiction of suffering—from A to Z.

Another important feature of the acrostic must be reckoned with. For readers, the acrostic keeps us moving through the poetry, without letting us remain on one or two ‘pet’ verses for too long. We must go from A...to B...to C...to

D...etc, all the way to the final letter, which in Hebrew is *taw*. Thus the very structure of the poetry keeps us moving steadily forward, until we arrive at the last verse of the final poem. This ambiguous verse leaves us ‘hanging’ to a certain degree, so much so that in Jewish tradition they read the *next* to last verse after it, to make the final taste in the mouth a bit more palatable.

The constant forward movement of the acrostic structure offers an insight into Lamentations 3. This is the central and longest poem in the book, and the second longest alphabetic acrostic in the Bible (next to Psalm 119). Because it is the largest and central poem of Lamentations, some believe it to be the heart of the book.<sup>2</sup> The reason why people generally opt for this view is because it has some positive and hopeful verses (Lam 3.21–24) whilst the remainder of Lamentations remains pretty dark. But if the governing structural device is the alphabetic acrostic, then one has to say that, although conspicuous due to its size, there is no reason to think that this represents the structural heart of the book. Again, our ‘pet’ verses must be transformed by reading and hearing the *whole* of the book!

### What is Lamentations About?

Whilst it would take us too far afield to explore this in depth, it is enough to note three major views as to the message of Lamentations’ poetry, set in no particular order:

Lamentations was written to:

- 1 Explain to God’s people why the fall of Jerusalem (587 BCE) occurred, with an emphasis upon suffering as a result of sin and the sovereignty, justice and ultimate mercy of God (Lamentations 3).
- 2 Instruct God’s people how to handle this disaster and ultimately move beyond it; Lam 3.25–39 remains central to this view.
- 3 Provide a way to complain to God, expressing the people’s pain to him in light of the disasters they face, especially through prayer (Lamentations 1, 2, and 5).<sup>3</sup>

Each of these views appears in the poetry and remains vital to understanding the whole. Let me illustrate by way of an analogy from the visual arts. In a painting, each hue has its part to play. If one attempts to remove or highlight one specific colour then the whole force of the painting becomes distorted. The same holds true with Lamentations. Each theme of the book has its part to play—instruction, explanation, complaint and questioning. So all three hues identified above do appear in the poetry, but generally views one and two have been overplayed, distorting the force of the whole book.

## How Has Lamentations Been Used?

Lamentations has always been integral to Jewish worship. The traditional view of Lamentations as liturgy has been followed in Judaism right up to the present, as part of the Ninth of Ab services that commemorate every major disaster in Jewish history—the destruction of Jerusalem, of God’s temple, and the exile and other tragedies in Jewish history up to the Holocaust.

In Christianity, however, many avoid Lamentations in both private and public worship. This is due perhaps to the darkness of its contents and off-putting descriptions of war and God that permeate its pages. Of course these depictions will raise questions about the goodness of God, to which Lamentations 3 may be seen as a kind of way around these rather uncomfortable issues with its statements of hope in God in Lam 3.21–24. But this has not always been the case.

In the Western (Catholic) church tradition, Lamentations has been read (or sung) during Holy Week, specifically during the *Tenebrae* (‘shadows’) service, which included Matins and Lauds. In the last three days of Holy Week, then, Lamentations served as a kind of funeral dirge over the death of Christ, as well as a memorial to the stain of sin for which he gave his life.<sup>4</sup> Understood and read in this light, then, Lamentations becomes a matrix through which one mourns the death of Christ, which naturally reminds us of our sin. Beyond this, however, reading Lamentations with Christ’s death also leads us to anticipate *resurrection* and forgiveness, where sin, pain and mourning can be transformed into joy.

## The Tears and Prayers of Lamentations

### Introduction

This chapter digs a bit more deeply into Lamentations by investigating two major themes that emerge in its poetry: *pain* and *prayer*. Hope in God is illuminated by wrestling with these, and they comprise central features of the spiritual life, as C S Lewis reminds us in his *Letters to Malcolm*. Upon hearing of his friend’s experience of a loved one’s disease and how to deal with it, Lewis says, ‘Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith. I don’t agree at all.’ He goes on to state that as anxiety and pain are part of the human condition, in the Christian life prayer comprises a faithful response to God in light of these. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, adds Lewis, when facing impending death, Jesus did an extraordinary thing: he prays to God about his pain, ‘My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15.34).<sup>5</sup> So we see that praying through pain can help to shape the spiritual life.

In Lamentations, too, we discover a shape for living life before God faithfully in pain and prayer. On the one hand Lamentations helps us reflect upon suffering, and on the other it helps us reflect upon the way(s) one prays to God out of such an experience. When we reflect upon Lamentations and prayer, we discover that the statement of Lam 3.24, ‘I will hope in him’ (one of our pet verses from Lamentations 3!), understood within the logic of the whole of the book is, at the very least, an affirmation *and* an appeal. Lamentations provides a real sense of depth and complexity in our relationship with God—it shows us that we can affirm God’s activity in the world (affirmation) but yet can cry out to him when faced with the challenges of life (appeal).

**In Lamentations we discover a shape for living life before God in pain and prayer**

### Historical and Literary Horizons

To see this clearly it is helpful to place Lamentations in its historical and literary contexts. It is likely that the book was composed in the exilic period in Judah, roughly 587–520 BCE. This is a time when God’s people faced a real crisis, which is seen in the biblical texts produced during this time: God has destroyed his temple, his nation (and its borders), and exiled his appointed Davidic king. Moreover, God had exiled many of his people into various coun-

tries (Egypt and Babylon especially). All of this served to fragment pre-existing social, political and cultic structures that had helped to shape the identity of God's people. In what way would the worship of Yahweh continue, and what kind of people would they be? How would they be a 'people' of God in light of these new realities? Questions and instabilities regarding social, political and even psychological realities run through the text of Lamentations. So the historical period in which Lamentations arrives is one fraught with a sense of loss and trauma at various levels.<sup>6</sup>

Some have argued that specific parts (namely Lam 3.21–39) were written after the other chapters, or in Babylon rather than Judah, but it is better to understand the whole of Lamentations as uniquely Judahite—that is to say, the entire book was composed during the exilic period but with a particularly

*Judahite* perspective of the exile. As such, it describes the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem with a somewhat different emphasis from, say, Ezekiel, the book of Kings or even Jeremiah. Whilst it acknowledges and confesses the failures of the people of God to live faithfully

### **Lamentations highlights the immediacy of the experience of suffering**

in relationship to him (like Kings and Ezekiel, especially Ezekiel 16 and 23), Lamentations highlights the immediacy of the *experience* of suffering as well as providing a general mechanism for the people remaining in Judah (non-exiled Judahites) to pray to God. So Lamentations served as a sombre liturgical text that mourned the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (587 BCE; see 2 Kings 25); it is a text that reflects all of the social, political and cultic fragmentation that the destruction produced.

Until the past 100 years or so, commentators have read Lamentations as if it comes from the mouth of Jeremiah the prophet. It is likely that this is due to the close link with the prophet in some text traditions, particularly the Greek Septuagint (LXX) and Latin Vulgate, where he is seen as the author of Lamentations. Jewish tradition, too, traces the authorship of Lamentations to Jeremiah through 2 Chr 35.25. With this tradition firmly entrenched, commentators have recognized and 'read' Lamentations through it in their work. As such, the message of Lamentations is wrapped up in the message of Jeremiah, which is a message of hope after the exile of God's people as well as a strong message of God's judgment against his people for their sin.

Today, though many hear Jeremiah's voice in the poetry, the authorship of Lamentations remains disputed. The Hebrew text makes no mention of Jeremiah's writing the poems of Lamentations. The New Testament gives no hint of Jeremianic authorship of either. At any rate, even allowing for allusions to Jeremiah's book (there are many), the point of Lamentations' poetry is not to profile a prophet, but rather provide the people with a worship text.<sup>7</sup>

The preceding points give a shape to the discussion on Lamentations' literary horizons. In terms of where it sits in the canon of the Old Testament, we may note that its position varies. In the LXX, Lamentations is alongside Jeremiah and Baruch, but in the Hebrew text tradition it sits in the third section of the Hebrew Bible (Writings), particularly within the *Megilloth* (five festal scrolls—Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther). As we have seen, this suggests that Lamentations serves within a larger liturgical tradition in which the community might commemorate, mourn and turn to God concerning disaster.

### **The Problem of Pain: The Tears of Lamentations**

The historical and literary horizons of Lamentations demonstrate that this text is written in a time of great upheaval and change. As such, it is profoundly placed to engage a universal reality: the problem of pain. Now we talk about pain in a number of ways—psychological damage within our minds as a result of traumatic experiences, physical damage to our bodies or even disruption that creates breakage in our social networks (friendship groups, family, work, or even church group). Pain touches a number of different areas of life and helps us understand what it is to be human.<sup>8</sup> So when I use the term 'pain' here I mean the diverse psychological, physical, spiritual or social disruptions we experience in life.

The problem of pain, as we know so well, must be engaged in some way. And generally speaking, when we hear someone do so, we will hear *reasons* for pain in the human experience, the relationship between God and suffering and the way that it may (or may not be) overcome. All of this is done in a kind of systematic-philosophical manner, and in the argument you often hear the word 'theodicy' employed (a defence or explanation of the relationship between God and evil/suffering).

### **Prayer in Lamentations can only be understood alongside a focus on pain**

Well, Lamentations does not do that. By using the sub-heading, 'The Problem of Pain,' I simply mean that Lamentations presents pain as a challenge—in a refreshing way, its poetry does not avoid the issue or try to explain it away philosophically. What is the problem of pain, then for Lamentations? The bottom line is that it is the existence (or persistence) of pain in the present situation. We see this in a number of themes in the book: isolation and abandonment; the reality of sin; and the presence/absence of God. Each of these will be taken in turn. Prayer in Lamentations can only be understood alongside a focus on pain.

### **Isolation and Abandonment**

The people of God feel (and are) isolated and abandoned. The opening line of

the poetry shows this; 'How she sits alone, the city once full of people.' The people of God are personified into a woman (Lady Zion), and in the verse, she sits *alone*. The language of isolation and abandonment is developed through the repetition of, 'There is no comfort' or related language that occurs in Lam 1.2b, 7c, 9b, 16b, 17a, 21a. Each of these shows different reasons for isolation: friends do not comfort (Lam 1.2b); political allies do not comfort (Lam 1.17c); and nobody on the planet comforts the people of Jerusalem, despite their pain (Lam 1.7c, 21a).

The result of this lack of comfort is that God's people experience isolation and a sense of abandonment...even betrayal, by friends (Lam 1.2). No one likes to be alone. In fact, God did not make humanity to be alone. So when we see the themes of abandonment and isolation in Lamentations we see a stark and real source of pain.

### The Reality of Sin

But sin is also a source of pain, as numerous texts indicate (Lam 1.3, 5, 8, 9, 18, 20; 2.14; 3.39; 4.13; 5.7). Perhaps the clearest admission of sin is in Lam 1.5b: 'For the LORD made her grieve on account of the greatness of her criminal acts.' Notice also Lam 1.8a: 'Jerusalem has sinned greatly—therefore, she has become a ritually unclean thing.' The bottom line is that Lamentations presents the reality of sin as a real source of pain.

Modern commentators tend to downplay the significance of this point due to the fact that the admissions of sin in the book are mostly generic in the way they describe sin, using stereotypical language to point out wrongdoing.<sup>9</sup> But psalms of lament often do this as well (as in Ps 25.7; 51.1–4). In these instances, one could not argue that the psalmist is *downplaying* sin. It may be that the text is *intentionally* vague in reference to sin, so that the worshipper might reflect upon how *specifically* he or she has sinned, and then confess.

A similar function of 'sin' language may well be at work in Lamentations. The sin of the people was so great, and their break from the Lord was so extensive, that generalized language provided a way for survivors of disaster to reflect upon their own sin, whatever it might be. Stereotypical language gives adequate scope for the breach against Yahweh. If this is the case, then it follows that sin is a source of pain in Lamentations. Sin creates a situation where the Lord becomes a warrior against his own people (Lam 2.1–10) and it creates inner anxiety within personified Jerusalem herself:

Look, O LORD! For I am anxious! My innards burn,  
My heart turns inside me, for I have rebelled exceedingly!  
Lamentations 1.20a–b

As a modern analogue, Christians do this kind of thing through the liturgy in corporate worship. The congregation will say a general confession such as, 'Lord have mercy.' The confession is a regular occurrence in the liturgy and the *content* of the sin is generalized to a degree, so that worshippers might 'fill in the blank' in the confession, so to speak.

### God Present and Absent

Whilst the issue of sin is apparent in Lamentations, we do not want to overdo its impact. In Lamentations the perceived absence and presence of God represents a deep-seated and repeated source of grief and hurt. This may sound contradictory at first, but both the presence and absence of God are crucial for comprehending the tears of Lamentations.

At the outset, we ought to note that the poetry is written generally from the perspective of the sufferer, and as such does not provide an objective point of view. That is to say, the four major speakers in the poetry—whether the narrator (chapters 1, 2, and 4), Dear Zion (chapters 1 and 2), the suffering man (chapter 3) or the community of God (chapter 5)—speak about their suffering and then speak to the Lord from a limited, human perspective. Never do they stand *outside* or *above* their condition in life, and so they do not *fully* see what God is doing. As a result, they can only state their experience, hope and questions of God from this embodied perspective. From this position in the world, the speakers (by their own testimony) *perceive* the presence and absence of God as problematic.

**The major speakers never stand outside or above their condition in life so do not fully see what God is doing**

For example, God's presence is often described through violent imagery. In the speaker's depiction in Lam 2.1–10, God is portrayed as a warrior fighting against his own people, city and nation. No less than thirty active verbs of destruction are used to show how the Lord has 'rejected,' 'spurned,' 'demolished,' 'crushed,' or 'burned' his people and land. The language is so explicit that Lam 2.4–5 describe God like an 'enemy' or 'foe.' God has a bow and he burns the cities and countryside with fire, as a warrior. This leads Longman to state that 'God as warrior' is the predominant picture of God in the book.<sup>10</sup> This same language is carried over in Lam 3.1–18, as the paradigmatic figure of the 'man' (who in my view is analogous to Zion in the previous poems) is driven by God to dwell in 'darkness and not light' (Lam 3.2) and is shot through by the Lord's arrows (Lam 3.13). The pain of Lamentations that derives from the presence of God comes directly from the perception that God declares war on his own people! God's destructive presence leaves personified Jerusalem (once again Lady Zion) crying out in Lam 2.20:

Look, O LORD, and consider! To whom you have done this!  
Should women eat their own fruit—little children raised to health?  
Should priest and prophet be slaughtered in the sanctuary of the  
Lord?

But the people's perception of God's active presence against them is juxtaposed against other statements about his apparent absence in Lamentations:

Over these things I weep, my eyes constantly pouring water.  
Because far from me is a comforter—the restorer of my soul.  
My children have become desolate, for the enemy is great  
Lamentations 1.16

The loss of a 'comforter' is equated here with 'the restorer of my soul.' This phrase is rare in the Old Testament, and echoes Ps 23.3. The psalmist says about God, 'He restores my soul.'<sup>11</sup> Using inverted logic, the speaker of Lam 1.16 points out that divine absence (distance) prevents any kind of restoration of the soul in suffering. A point of pain, then, is the perceived *distance of the Lord himself*. In essence, God *is* or *can be* the one who restores the soul, but for Lamentations he stands far off, preventing any restoration at all. God is perceived and portrayed as absent as a 'comforter' and 'restorer' (Lam 1.16), as a 'redeemer' (Lam 3.58), and 'vindicator' (Lam 3.59). The pain of this absence is tragically summarized in the prayer of Lam 3.49–50:

My eye flows and it is not still; there is no rest;  
Until he looks down and sees: Yahweh from the heavens.

The tears of the book that derive (in part) from isolation and abandonment, sin, and the experience of God present and absent, leave sufferers knocking on heaven's door, awaiting God's response, 'until he looks down and sees.' The poetry anticipates response from, and an encounter with, God.

It is this 'threshold' between the present experience of pain and the hope for God's response which provides a proper entree into the poetry of Lamentations.

### The Push Towards Hope: The Prayers of Lamentations

Further, we see that pain is not something that is logically or systematically explained away in a philosophical treatise in Lamentations. Rather, each of these themes of pain is woven together to comprise the tapestry of the book. In this tapestry, each thread of pain is set within a vibrant seam of prayer, and the seams of prayer help us understand how the tears of Lamentations

are negotiated. It is one thing to explain systematically God's activity in the world. It is something else altogether to address God in *prayer* about his activity in the world and then wait for his response and encounter. Lamentations demands the latter of the two.

Each of the poems (excluding Lamentations 4) contains a prayer: Lam 1.9c, 10c, 11c, 20a–22; 2.20–22; 3.17, 42–50, 59–66; 5.1–22. The entire fifth poem is a communal prayer, indicating that the finale to the book was corporate address to God. To begin, the push towards prayer becomes apparent in the myriad of imperative verbs that occur in the prayers. Among these are:

Look! (Lam 1.9, 20)  
Look and consider! (Lam 1.11, 12; 2.20)  
Consider and look! (Lam 5.1)  
Remember! (Lam 3.19; 5.1)  
Do not close your ear! (Lam 3.56)  
Judge my cause! (Lam 3.59)  
Restore us to yourself! (Lam 5.21)

These addresses to God are lament prayers. The 'lament' is a term that is used to identify the kind of speech we find in the Bible that is directed to God out of distress or pain, with the hope that he will change the situation of distress when he hears the prayer. In lament prayer, three major sources of pain quite often appear: enemies, self (sin) and even God's actions (or inaction).

When we look at the prayers above, we see a bit of all three. Pain derives from anxiety over sin (Lam 1.20), or the activity of enemies (Lam 1.9), or God's acts against his own people (Lam 2.20) or even a notion of disgrace (Lam 5.1)—the events that have come upon Israel, and the reversal from honour to shame. In each of these, glimmers of the thematic threads indicated above appear—isolation and abandonment, reality of sin and God present and absent. What remains significant in the imperatives of Lamentations, however, is the sustained focus upon presenting that pain to the Lord through prayer, whatever its source.

Prayer is vital. C S Lewis states in regards to prayer, 'We can bear to be refused but not to be ignored. In other words, our faith can survive many refusals if they really are refusals and not mere disregards. The apparent stone will be bread to us if we believe that a Father's hand put it into ours, in mercy or in justice or even rebuke.'<sup>12</sup>

True prayer, Lewis understands, is the act of setting a petition before God in the hope that he will respond. It is the *response* rather than the *answer* that is in view—the Lord's encounter with the petitioner through the process of

praying. ‘Answers’ to prayer are really only useful if we think that knowing why something is happening in tragedy, or being able to explain it, is going to somehow help the situation. But in fact this may do little. Knowing the answer to, say, why my wife miscarried does not necessarily diminish the pain of the loss. Nor does only looking for ‘answers’ in prayer. True prayer leaves the answers to the side and looks for the face of God in his response. Answers may come, but true prayer presses towards the person of God in communion with him.

This is how the prayers of Lamentations function as well. They *do* exhibit specific requests, but each of these prayers has in common a need for, and anticipation of, God’s response (refusal, rebuke or the like) as opposed to his ‘disregard,’ in Lewis’ terminology. So prayers in Lamentations constantly press God not to disregard his people, but appeal to him to ‘look’ and ‘consider’ the plight of his people (Lam 1.9, 11, 20; 2.20; 3.59; 5.1)—they ask him to *respond*.

### Lamentations 3 and the Logic of Hope

We should talk about Lamentations 3 because one might think that this chapter, especially with Lam 3.21–24 (our ‘pet’ verses), answers the appeals set out in the rest of the poems and is the most hopeful. On this view, one should just trust that God’s mercies are new every morning, that he is faithful and out of these covenant qualities God’s people can hope in him. Well, this is certainly true in general, but not exactly what is stated in Lamentations. When we read the book with integrity, we see that these verses are only understandable within the logic of prayer, like the rest of the poetry. This is evident in the way the poem is constructed.

Lamentations 3 begins with a lament section (Lam 3.1–18), moves to a transitional section that affirms hope and God’s mercy (Lam 3.19–24), develops into a wisdom-like set of instructions for patient suffering (Lam 3.25–39) and then back to lament (Lam 3.40–66). The acrostic structure keeps us moving steadily along, and in fact does not let us stop very long at Lam 3.21–24. We move forward from lament to hope, to wisdom, to lament. In other words, the central section, often deemed to be theologically central as well, actually is a step along the road that, like the other poems (except chapter 4) ends with prayer to God about present distress (specifically unnamed ‘enemies’ in Lam 3.64–66). What does this show us?

It reveals that the hope on display in Lamentations is not related to a special set of verses, but lies rather in the very logic of prayer. Prayer invites God’s people to present their distresses directly to him—a face-to-face encounter of intimacy. Even if God is seen to be the oppressor and source of pain, which does occur in Lamentations (Lam 2.20; 3.1–19), the hope is that in prayer,

God’s people can address the divine ‘Thou.’ As a just, powerful and good God, the Lord surely will hear the case made in prayer and respond. Patrick Miller says that such an impulse reveals prayer to be, at least in part, a persuasive action:

[The] fundamental ground of prayer, that is, the responsiveness of God to the cry of human need, is lifted up. All the description of the plight of the afflicted, wherever it occurs in prayer, assumes God’s care and compassion, especially for those in distress.<sup>13</sup>

A key to prayer, however, lay in understanding that God is not bound to respond as we see fit—he is not our errand boy! But the hope of prayer, exemplified in Lamentations 3, is that God, out of his mercy and love (Lam 3.21–24), will hear the cries of his people, recognize their sufferings and respond out of his goodness.

This is very much akin to the divine characterization one finds in Exod 2.24, where God ‘heard’ the groaning of his people, ‘remembered’ his covenant, and ‘looked upon’ the Israelites, and ‘took notice’ of them. In Lamentations, the plea is that God will ‘look’ and give attention to the various sources of pain laid out in the poems. The hope is that God will, indeed, act out of his goodness—that his mercies would indeed be ‘new every morning.’ Lamentations 3 reveals a logic of hope based on God through prayer. Prayer in Lamentations shines like a beacon, drawing worshippers to cry out, ‘Until he looks down and sees, Yahweh from the heavens’ (Lam 3.50).

### Paradise Anticipated, but Not Gained

Lamentations’ hope exemplified through prayer is never vindicated; we never get God’s response within Lamentations’ own horizons. The closest comes in Lam 4.22, ‘Your iniquity / punishment, dear Zion, is complete. He will not add to your exile.’ In this vision, exile and suffering is finished and presumably the enemies of Zion will get their just desserts! The hope for this reality is touched upon but never consummated as the very next verse in the book is Lam 5.1, by all counts another lament to God about distress.

**Lamentations’ hope exemplified through prayer is never vindicated**

The poetry certainly anticipates the day when God *will* hear and respond to the sufferings his people endure, but that day has not arrived. Reflect upon Lam 5.22: ‘Unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us forever?’ The ambiguity of the verse is palpable—how will God respond? There are two ways to respond to this uncertainty: first, argue that the poetry is ambivalent about God’s active intervention to save; secondly, argue that the poetry in fact leaves the weight of response upon

God—the faith of knowing that ultimately, ‘The LORD is good to those who trust in him, to the one who actively seeks him’ (Lam 3.25). This seems to be the force of the language, as it leaves the response to the prayer to the goodness of God. All this to say that in Lamentations, to use an analogy, paradise (pain removed) is anticipated, but not gained.

That is not to imply, as I have argued, that there is no hope. Instead, hope is always peeking around the corner, anticipated in the work of God. The tension of hope anticipated ‘now’ but realized ‘not yet’ reveals that Lamentations’ theology believes that God is indeed a trustworthy Lord (Lam 3.21–24), but pleads, perhaps even demands, that his goodness, trustworthiness, and mercy be made real in the present world. Hope in Lamentations, then, sits on the threshold of God’s *new* mercies waiting to be received. ‘I will hope in him’ becomes a statement of radical faith but a statement that looks forward to God’s in-breaking into the present situation of distress that responds to suffering.

## Lamentations as Christian Scripture

# 3

### Introduction

Paradise *anticipated* but not *gained*. Thus we left the last chapter with theological overtures towards Lamentations within a broader Christian frame, specifically setting the book within the Old and New Testaments and Christian theology, which comprises the substance of this chapter. When one understands any Old Testament book as part of the *Christian* canon, it means that the reader must learn to hear *that* text within the broader context of Christian Scripture and Christ himself. This is like learning to hear and appropriate the Scriptures in ‘stereo’ rather than ‘monophonic sound’: the two testaments play corporately to produce beautiful timbre that resounds in the person and work of Christ. If we neglect to give attention to this stereophonic quality, then we lose the richness, texture, and full tone of the Scriptures.

So how do we hear the ‘stereophonic sound’ of the Scriptures and, in particular, Lamentations? On the one hand, it means hearing the notes that ring within the confines of Lamentations’ five poems, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. But it also means hearing Lamentations within the larger Old Testament, and then moving outward into the New Testament as well. In this process, we will ultimately hear the voice of God speaking through the Scriptures in symphony.

### Appropriating Lamentations Within the Old Testament

Within the Old Testament, Lamentations may be read alongside a number of other texts. In the first place, there are links with Jeremiah, both the prophet and the book. The Old Greek (LXX) version of Lamentations has added a prologue: ‘And it happened after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem was laid waste, Jeremiah sat weeping.’ So the suffering of the prophet and historical reality of exile foregrounds the five chapters of Lamentations and hermeneutically frames its poems. Beyond this, however, internal links between Jeremiah and Lamentations offer a rich interchange of themes. From these connections, Judah’s sin (Lam 2.14 // Jer 14; Lam 1.9 // Jer. 13.22, 26; Lam 2.13 // Jer 30.12, 15; Lam 2.15 // Jer. 24.9; Lam 5.21 // Jer. 31.18 // Jer 15.19) as well as the prophet’s pain (Lam 2.11 // Jer 8.21) appear as twin themes. Jeremiah’s ‘confessions’ in many ways mirror the pain of ‘the man’ in Lam 3.1–18, leading Calvin, for instance, to view Jeremiah as ‘the man’ in Lamentations

3.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the hope for restoration that is held out in promise after the exile in Jeremiah (eg Jeremiah 26–36, especially chapters 30–33) sits on the threshold of Lamentations’ poetry.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond Jeremiah, however, one may see interaction between Isaiah and Lamentations, most notably in the lack of a comforter lamented in Lamentations 1 and 2, and then the comfort theme picked up in Isa 40.1; 49.13 and 51.12.

### **Lamentations becomes one stop along a larger story of God’s faithful relationship with his covenant people**

Other interactions between these two books occur as well (eg Lam 1.2–4 / Isa 52.11–12; Lam 3.25–30 / Isa 50.4–11; Lam 4 / Isa 51.17–23; Lam 4.15 / Isa 52.11; Lam 4.17 / Isa 52.8; Lam 5.19–22 / Isa 54.6–8; Lam 5.20 / Isa 49.14).<sup>16</sup> From this

interchange, one notes God’s answer or response to the pain and prayers of Lamentations: God *is* kind and will restore his people through their judgment. As a result, Lamentations becomes only one stop along a larger story of God’s faithful relationship with his covenant people, Israel. Lamentations, then, is not the final stop along the journey, but only a dark night before the dawn.

### **Appropriating Lamentations in the New Testament**

Beyond these context(s), Lamentations sits within the broader horizons of Christian Scripture. The challenge here is that unlike the Psalter, Deuteronomy, or Isaiah, Lamentations is not used as a prominent (or even recurrent) resource in New Testament citations of the Old Testament. There is, perhaps, one exception: Paul’s use of the language of ‘rubbish and dregs’ (NRSV) in 1 Cor 4.13 which echoes LXX Lam 3.45. In the Greek of Lam 3.45, the language is used in a derogatory and painful sense and expects God’s reversal of this situation of distress and shame. However, Paul’s usage of the language theologically reinterprets this sense of distress to emphasize the present condition of Christ’s followers in light of the darkness of the society. Christians, then, should understand their present perception as being ‘rubbish and dregs’ and rejoice in it in the sense that they are sharing in Christ’s degradation; as God did with the Son, he will restore them as well. But beyond this, New Testament citations of Lamentations are scarce indeed.

However, appropriating Lamentations within the context of the New Testament may be pressed forward through biblical theology: by relating biblical themes that appear in Lamentations and are picked up in New Testament texts as well. For example, the ‘no comfort’ theme (Lam 1.2, etc), taken up in Isa 40.1–2, is then taken up again in 2 Cor 1.3–4, ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted

by God.’<sup>17</sup> The comfort of the Spirit then speaks to an analogous situation described in Lamentations, and for a purpose beyond voicing individual suffering. Suffering is a tragedy, but God might comfort sufferers so that they might be the hands of comfort to others in pain. Or set on a more redemptive-theological theme, the ‘consolation of Israel’ anticipated by Simeon (Luke 2.25), and anticipated in Lamentations as well, is met in the birth of Jesus (Luke 2.29–32). Theological reflection of this sort will be more challenging, but such consideration between the testaments will prove creative, imaginative and enriching.<sup>18</sup>

### **Lamentations as a ‘Kingdom Text’**

To press even further, embracing Lamentations as Holy Scripture may also invite theological interpretation by setting this text within the larger creation-fall-redemption history as presented in both testaments. In order to understand Lamentations as Holy Scripture in this sense, one must observe how this thread is situated within the tapestry of God’s story that gives a basis for the meaning of history itself and further, how the interpreter may fit into that story.

I submit one way to do this is to understand Lamentations as a ‘kingdom text.’ This would establish a kind of analogical relationship between the thresholds of hope in the prayers of Lamentations and the hope established within the kingdom of God—a relationship that will drive the interpreter towards the text of Lamentations and more deeply into one’s identity in God’s kingdom. That is to say, this approach may provide both information about God’s dealings in history and a way for the interpreter to ‘perform’ the text in light of this theological disclosure.<sup>19</sup> Now this will be out of bounds for one who does not embrace this vision of reality, but for a Christian understanding of Lamentations as sacred text it remains crucial.

Ultimately, in the grand movement of the biblical drama, death and hell are defeated and suffering will also be swallowed up in the end because of the work of Christ and the movement of God’s kingdom (Revelation 21). It is important to remember that God’s kingdom was always assumed to be real in the Scriptures—*God really would reign on the earth justly, righteously and eternally*. And Christ’s death and resurrection show us that the real and present suffering that we experience has been suffered by God in Jesus (in death), but that ultimately suffering and pain is overcome (in resurrection). This overcoming of pain, suffering and death gives us hope that Jesus’ victory can be ours as well—by placing our faith and trust in him and living into the kingdom he has established.

The kingdom of God that Jesus has established creates a period of time between the moment of Christ’s victory over death at the cross and the moment

when he ultimately makes all things new (Rev 21). But what about the period of time between ‘not yet’—all things new—and ‘now’—present suffering? Thus the kingdom of God contains a ‘now/not yet’ picture of the victory of God that awaits his final defeat of death, much like the expectancy reflected in Holy Week.<sup>20</sup>

This anticipation is felt in the Maundy Thursday liturgy of the Anglican communion, particularly in the stripping of the sanctuary: the holy table and sanctuary are stripped bare, as Christ was stripped bare prior to his crucifixion and Christians are stripped bare of their sins prior to consecration to God. At this point in the liturgy, selected texts from Lamentations are read (Lam 1.1–2, 4–5, 12–13, 16; 2.15; 3.19–20, 22–31), with the congregational response, ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.’ The implication is that the suffering of Jerusalem becomes the suffering of the church, which is designed to lead the church to repentance. The hope, then, lies in the final verse that is read, ‘For the Lord will not reject for ever’ (Lam 3.31). Present suffering is not the final word for the church. As they press on with the Lord through faithful prayer, they await God’s victory over sin through forgiveness grounded in Christ’s work on the cross.

This sense of expectancy is also felt as Lamentations is placed in the mouth of Jesus in the liturgy for Good Friday. In the first lines of the first anthem during the Proclamation of the Cross, Jesus is depicted as praying Lam 1.12, ‘Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow

like my sorrow which was brought upon me, which the Lord has inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.’ The liturgy relates Jesus’ suffering on the cross to Jerusalem’s suffering in Lamentations. Both endure together and appeal to the congregation to observe their

### **Lamentations is placed in the mouth of Jesus in the liturgy for Good Friday**

sufferings and respond. Proper congregational response in the liturgy to Christ’s/Jerusalem’s appeal is: ‘Holy God, holy and strong, holy and immortal, have mercy on us.’ Thus the suffering of Christ and the suffering of Jerusalem drive the congregants to prayer and appeal for God’s mercy. In the liturgy, prayer is the crucial link that grounds the pain of the present with a hope for the future. Prayer for future triumph through a life like Christ’s concludes the Good Friday service:

Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.<sup>21</sup>

Christ’s work on the cross provides the means to ‘triumph in the power of his victory,’ and yet, as the service concludes, the congregants depart in silence, reflecting not only on Jesus’ death but also on the present suffering of the world. Despite the reality of God’s reign made manifest in the resurrection of Christ and the glimmers of God’s in-breaking kingdom in the world today, humanity *still* lives in brokenness and has cause to pray to God about this brokenness, awaiting final ‘triumph.’ There is reason and cause to hope, but this is grounded in the ‘not yet’—the time when God will finally heal his broken creation.

So the tension on display in the Holy Week liturgy represents a similar kind of tension on display in Lamentations. This tension in Lamentations can be seen to be central to its message, as we have seen throughout our study. In this, one sees that the prayers of Lamentations are designed to move God to respond to the petitioners. Prayer, especially of the kind found in Lamentations, finds hope in what God has done and may yet do, and then awaits God’s good response.

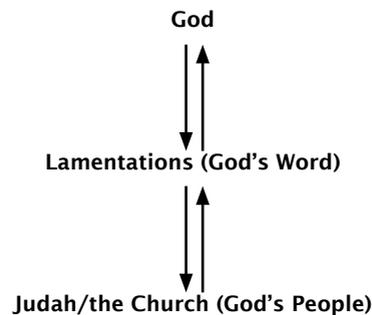
When one thinks about Lamentations in this way, it opens up a number of theological horizons for the Christian. First, one recognizes that God deals with sin in judgment, but that judgment always breaks into new life in salvation. This is part and parcel of the way God engages the broken world in which we live and aims to heal it through his kingdom and Christ. Lamentations reflects this notion of judgment in a particular time in history. As such, it highlights sin, confession and suffering, and *may* lead present day Christians to ‘perform’ the text along those lines. However, as Lamentations also opens up the horizon of prayer, it anticipates God’s ultimate response to pain, suffering and death. Through the kingdom of God, the divine response to death is life through Jesus, but Lamentations provides a focus upon the ‘not yet’ dimension of God’s restoration through Christ. As such, Lamentations opens an horizon of appeal where Christians might pray, in effect, ‘Come quickly, Lord Jesus’ (Rev 22.20); Christians may request God to break in and ease various sources of pain and suffering in the world (as in Lam 1.20–22; 2.20–22; 3.55–66; Lam 5). Both may be viable performances of the text.

### **God has given Lamentations as a composition for his people to inhabit through prayer**

However one embodies Lamentations (whether protest, confession or plea), any view depends upon a theological claim of divine revelation—it is not merely human words, but God’s word in human words (Holy Scripture). God has given Lamentations as a composition for his people to *inhabit* through prayer. In light of the multiplicity of the kinds of prayer present in the book, it is coherent to let these petitions shape the purpose of God’s

revelation through the text; so God's call for his people to confess sin is one note sounded, but not the only one. The words about God, given by God through the (ancient) community, provide for the reader (both ancient and modern) a vehicle designed for address and anticipatory encounter with the Lord: confession, appeal, protest and questioning. In the case of the prayers of Lamentations flagged above, their power depends upon the logic of such an anticipated encounter.<sup>22</sup> This holds true when one reads Lamentations as a 'kingdom text' as outlined above.

The precise shape of this encounter may vary: communal and liturgical, or personal and private.<sup>23</sup> But the logic of Lamentations in general depends upon this anticipated response from God. God has given a book created for encounter with him and this is indeed a gift. Theologically, it implicitly underscores the notion of a God reaching out to humanity, providing the means for his people to petition, confront and even protest to him. So Lamentations *is* about what people thought about God in the past, but it is also about how God invites ways of interacting with him in the present. To reduce Lamentations to only human words, without recognizing this divine dimension, obscures the gift of Lamentations as Scripture. To illustrate this, note the diagram below:



God's people (the church) sit with the mourners of Judah and Jerusalem. God gives the gift of Lamentations as a vehicle for encounter with him through its prayers and tears.

In the analogy between the prayers of Lamentations and life in the kingdom of God, Christian interpretation will not use the overarching story of the Scriptures, from creation (Genesis 1–2) to new creation (Revelation 21), as a means to 'explain away' the prayers and tears of Lamentations. It is appropriate to recognize that God has given a narrative that is world-encompassing, with a beginning and an (eschatological) end. But it is inappropriate to use that grand narrative to squash or silence its particular voices such as Lamentations, where the immediacy of the present realities of life, death and survival are explicitly in the foreground. Any propensity to run too quickly to 'the end of

the story' would preclude the necessary and urgent presence of the expression of pain in the text at hand.

God gives a series of poems as a vehicle to deal with the realities of death, life and survival. Sin, suffering or anger towards God each remain realities that comprise part of the human condition, and the book of Lamentations does not give a 'cheap' or 'easy' reflection to any of them. Rather, like the life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ, Lamentations provides a stern view of the brokenness of the present reality whilst anticipating a time when brokenness (ultimately) will be eradicated by the goodness of God in the culmination of his kingdom. As discussed previously, the prayers of Lamentations anticipate the time when God will 'restore' the soul of the suffering (Lam 1.16; 5.21), but the prayers themselves are grounded in faith that God is good and will hear the cries of his people, 'You have seen my wrong; judge my cause!' (Lam 3.59). Lamentations, then, serves to affirm God's trustworthiness, but appeals to him to be just that—faithful, true, merciful and trustworthy, as his kingdom really is: 'Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt 6.10). The hope is found in the centrality of Jesus, whose death and resurrection provide the model for new life. But with Lamentations, the accent falls on the *threshold* of this new life.

**The prayers are grounded in faith that God is good and will hear the cries of his people**

Finally, we might reflect upon the fact that in the book God never speaks, but rather voices speak *about* God—how, then, can we identify this book as 'God's word' (the voice of God) when it evidently uses human words and human voice(s) to speak *to* and *about* God? What could God be saying (or is he speaking at all)? Whilst it is true that God does not address anyone directly in Lamentations, when one receives the book as Holy Scripture one must say that God certainly provides the framework for divine address through the text itself. So it is plausible to say that God 'speaks' insofar as he gives a means for his people to address him.

As might be intimated in this discussion, one who does not embrace Lamentations as divine discourse which centres upon God in Christ may not find these comments persuasive or helpful. But that is precisely what identifies this approach as distinctively Christian in its orientation—reflecting upon the two testaments and their witness to God in Christ. As such, embrace of Lamentations as Holy Scripture does in fact demand that one sit within the community of faith to be identified with this reading practice. Such a practice does not slight other approaches but would urge them to press further to the substance of the text—God in Christ.

# 4

## Practical Implementation and Recommended Reading

### Practical Implementation

I have discovered that God speaks to the congregation through Lamentations' central message of establishing conversation with God in times of crisis. One parishioner approached me after a service centring upon Lamentations and in tears confessed that she had little notion that this kind of prayer and speech was possible in the life of faith. A music minister has recently found Lamentations a guide into deeper relationship with God in the face of the death of a son. As he has read through its pages, he has found his voice. I offer these examples to encourage us to realize that Lamentations is a book that needs to be applied to the life of the church.

On the Grove website ([www.grovebooks.co.uk](http://www.grovebooks.co.uk)), I offer three helpful ways for practical implementation. The first is a devotional experience out of formulaic prayers from Lamentations. The second is a liturgical or communal experience of Lamentations, adapted from traditional *Tenebrae* readings. This could also be related to the Maundy Thursday eucharist in accordance with Anglican liturgy, as discussed in chapter 3. The final implementation is an outline for a sermon on Lamentations 3, which links the prayers of Lamentations with the life of faith. These represent three useful ways to bring the riches of Lamentations to bear on the life of the church.

### Recommended Reading

Adele Berlin, *Lamentations* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). Reader-friendly commentary that treats background issues well and provides close and reliable verse-by-verse exegesis with an eye to poetic features.

F W Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Interpretation Commentary; Louisville: John Knox, 2002). Affords clear generic analysis and reads Lamentations theologically, in dialogue with holocaust theology; attentive to poetics as well.

Duane Garrett and Paul House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville/Milton Keynes: Thomas Nelson/Paternoster, 2004). Comprehensive and provides a detailed

discussion on Lamentations' theology. Differs in theological approach to Dobbs-Allsopp.

Robin Parry, *Lamentations* (Two Horizons Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [forthcoming]). Reads Lamentations as Christian Scripture with an eye to biblical theology and dogmatics. Creative and theological in approach.

Eugene Peterson, 'The Pastoral Work of Pain-Sharing: Lamentations' (chapter three, pp 113–148) in *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). Pastorally sensitive reading on Lamentations that is relevant though dated.

# Notes

- 1 All citations from the hymn derive from Robert Chisolm, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*, (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co, 1923, 1951).
- 2 eg W Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God: Christian Assurance and the Message of Lamentations* (Fearne, UK: Christian Focus, 2004) pp 19-22; B S Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) pp 594-595.
- 3 See further H A Thomas, 'The Liturgical Function of Lamentations' in *Thinking Toward New Horizons: Collected Communications to the XIX<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament*, Ljubljana 2007 (BEATAJ 55; Frankfurt am Main: Lang Verlag, 2008) pp 137-147.
- 4 *The Office of the 'Tenebrae'* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; London: Charles Cull, 1885) pp 7-8; E Fawcett and J H White, *The Office for Holy Week and of the Paschal Triduum According to the American Rite* (Brooklyn, NY: St Andrews House/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921) pp 210-215.
- 5 C S Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Bles, 1964) pp 61-62.
- 6 See D L Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).
- 7 For a well-developed discussion on the allusions to Jeremiah, as well as a nuanced discussion on authorship of Lamentations, see N C Lee, *The Singers of Lamentations: Cities Under Siege, from Ur to Jerusalem to Sarajevo* (Biblical Interpretation Series 60; Leiden: Brill, 2002).
- 8 K M Swenson, *Living Through Pain: Psalms and the Search for Wholeness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005) p 3.
- 9 F W Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) p 61.
- 10 Tremper Longman III, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (NIBC; Peabody, MA/Milton Keynes, UK: Hendrickson/Paternoster, 2008) p 336.
- 11 God is also described as the one who 'restores life,' using the same language, in Ruth 4.15.
- 12 Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, p 75.
- 13 P D Miller, 'Prayer as Persuasion: The Rhetoric and Intention of Prayer' in *Word and World* 13, 4 (1993) p 359.
- 14 John Calvin, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Geneva Series 5; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989) pp 388-455.
- 15 For a helpful discussion on the themes of judgment and restoration in Jeremiah, see J G McConville, *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993).
- 16 For discussion on the interaction between Isaiah and Lamentations, see N K Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (SBT 14; London: SCM Press, 1962) pp 44-46; C Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) pp 130-149.
- 17 See also Longman's association of Lamentations and the New Testament via the theme of the divine warrior: *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, pp 336-341. To see other instances where Lamentations may be received in the New Testament, see index in G K Beale and D A Carson (eds), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) p 1191.
- 18 Note the helpful work of Robin Parry, 'Prolegomena to Christian Theological Interpretation of Lamentations,' in C Bartholomew, S Hahn, C Seitz and A Wolters (eds), *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (SHS 7; Milton Keynes: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) pp 393-418.
- 19 See F M Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1990).
- 20 See A E Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).
- 21 For citations from the Anglican Passiontide and Holy Week liturgy, see Archbishop's Council, *Lent, Holy Week, Easter: Services and Prayers* (London: Church House Publishing, 1984, 1986). For an electronic version, see: <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/downloads/pdf/tspashw.pdf>
- 22 Miller, *Prayer as Persuasion*.
- 23 For some possibilities of actualization of lament prayer in Christian life, see S A Brown and P D Miller (eds), *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew and Public Square* (Louisville: WJK, 2007).

Lamentations appears to be a book without a happy ending—its final comment is distinctly ambiguous. And yet is it best known for a verse that promises hope: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.'

This booklet explores the issues in reading Lamentations, in order to help those reading it, preaching from it or using it liturgically, to hear its message and meaning. To do this, we must learn how to read the book with integrity—reading the whole book with our whole lives.

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