Lamentations: Responses to Questions

*How can we use these laments in our churches?*

\*\*After a 9-11 sort of event, I should think

*When is the best time to preach Lamentations?*

\*\*Any time, I should think—to prepare people for the time when they might have to use them.

*When is the book of Lamentations read today? Is it included in the Jewish liturgical calendar, like the book of Esther for Purim?*

\*\*It’s used every year on Tisha Be’av, the Ninth of Av, which comes in August, which commemorates the fall of Jerusalem in 587BC and 70AD.

*How this book has been used in modernity? How does its theological message relate to the problem of evil? How did the Jews use it during the holocaust? How did others? Does it, along with the exile, ever enter into modern Zionist debate/discourse?*

\*\*It wouldn’t be appropriate for the Holocaust because Lamentations relates to events that came because of the Jewish people’s unfaithfulness to God, and the Holocaust issued simply from Gentile hostility. So Job, the Books of Kings, the Psalms, Jesus, Paul, and so on all recognize that sometimes trouble comes because of our wrongdoing and are sometimes nothing to do with our wrongdoing. So we have to be discerning about different possibilities when trouble comes. On this occasion the Judahites knew that they could not claim that their trouble was nothing to do with their wrongdoing—as when Jesus forgives the sins if the paralyzed man in Luke 5 and Paul explains illness and death at Corinth in terms of people’s sins (1 Cor 11).

*What’s the historical context? When was Lamentations written? Was it within a few years of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple? Or was it written decades later? Where was Lamentations written? Jerusalem? Egypt? Babylon? How was it meant to be read? What was its function in the community?*

\*\*It doesn’t say when or where they were written. The only fall of Jerusalem in OT times that we know about is that in 587 so presumably it belongs in Jerusalem soon after that event (so for the background, see 2 Kings 25) and it was used on fasting and lamenting occasions there such as are referred to in Jeremiah and Zechariah, perhaps in the ruins of the temple. The five prayers are separate from one another and chapter 5 might suggest a time a few years later for that chapter.

*Who wrote Lamentations? Jeremiah? Ezekiel? Was he depressed?*

\*\*It’s anonymous. The Septuagint says Jeremiah, and it fits his theology, but that tradition looks like a guess from the contents. Yes, the author was depressed, but not in an inappropriate way. If you weren’t depressed at the fall of Jerusalem, there was something wrong with you!

*Why were these laments not included in the Psalms?*

\*\*My guess is because they were the “text” for particular occasions of fasting—hence their being linked in the Writings with the other scrolls that belonged to particular occasions (Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes).

*As much as the author recognizes that Israel’s sin caused them to be where they are, the author just describes what they are going through and prays for restoration, rather than expressing radical repentance like Psalm 51.  Why not such repentance?*

\*\*I guess it’s like some other psalms (e.g., 130) that acknowledge sin but focus on pleading for deliverance from its consequences. Apparently it’s okay to do that.

*Some questions/comments about the chapters’ poetic nature:*

1. *The language is brutal! Are there other instances in the Bible or Jewish texts where we see such desperate and foul depictions as in Lamentation?*
2. *It seems odd that such raw sentiments should be carefully expressed in poetry, as if its authors had the emotional energy to create art. I know that poetry and other art forms help to process intense emotions, but it just seems too neatly constructed. It reminds me of Job’s poetic banter with his “friends,” as if in his anger and pain he would have the patience to form his thoughts so beautifully.*
3. *The text is so beautiful and rich with literary devices. Do you have anything you might be able to talk about concerning a theology of aesthetics in Lamentations?*
4. *Should we make anything of the fact that Lamentations is alphabetical? Is that anything more than simply a poetic device?*

\*\*I don’t know what a theology of aesthetics is, but I find these contrasting comments by different people interesting because between them they note horror and beauty, and the comparison with Job is suggestive. Maybe one thing it reminds us of is that we are inclined to think that these texts (and the protest psalms) are the spontaneous outpourings of the heart, whereas they are the product of reflection and agonizing over time in which the poet seeks to find words that adequately express emotions and reactions. One might compare the way the great First World War poets describe the horror of the trenches. The alphabetical format both makes it possible to give some order and structure to a situation that seems chaotic and to give expression to pain from A to Z. The way the last poem abandons the alphabetical form makes me wonder whether this fits with its more resigned tone and ist lack of closure, as if it is now more difficult than ever to believe in resolution.

*Why is the feminine pronoun used for many of the metaphors? Jerusalem is referred to as a “her” or “she” (so are hurricanes and cars for that matter!)?*

The author also uses multiple names for Jerusalem, including daughter Zion, Jacob, daughter Jerusalem.  What is the significance of the word daughter when describing the city?

\*\*It may be because ancient cities could be portrayed as the their god’s consort, and the OT follows that custom.

*What is the follow up in the historical time line that follows the book of Lamentations and tells the conclusion of this book?*

\*\*The answer is the prophecies in Isaiah 40—55 with their declarations that Jerusalem has paid for its wrongdoing and their promises that Jerusalem would be restored—which then happened (see Ezra and Nehemiah). In particular note how Lam 1 keeps grieving that the city has no comforter, and Isaiah 40 now says “Comfort my people.”

I wonder about the usage of the feminine pronoun throughout Lamentations, and if there is perhaps some important, take away message to be had in knowing that Israel is not portrayed as a man (or inanimate object).

*The author often switches from using LORD to Lord in the NRSV.  I am not sure if there is a different word in the Hebrew for each of these, but I am definitely curious about that.*

\*\*Well spotted! If it’s “LORD,” the text is using God’s actual name, Yahweh. If it’s “Lord,” then the text is using the Hebrew word for lord or master or sovereign. That word that actually means lord comes more often in Lamentations than in most books. So it suggests that the one who is supposed to be my master and sovereign is treating me in this way.

*1:21-22: How are to think of the cursing? It does not seem very Christian.*

\*\*Well it fits with the curses by Jesus, Paul, and the martyrs (e.g., Matt 23; Gal 1; 2 Thess 1; Rev 6).

*2:12 is almost funny when the infants and babies cry out “where is bread and wine”.*

*2:15: Jerusalem is called “perfect beauty” and “joy of all the earth.” Is this a reference to some other part of scripture?*

\*\*Yes, see Psalm 48. Books sometimes refer to “Zion theology,” which means the fact that God had made the kind of commitment to Jerusalem/Zion that’s expressed also in Psalms 46 and 132 and that led people to think that Jerusalem would never fall, no matter what they did. That assumption has now been shattered.

*2:20; 4:10 “ate/boiled their own children.” Really?!*

\*\*Well maybe it’s a metaphor, but when people are desperate they do desperate things. I assume it means the children had died and they ate their flesh, not that they killed them.

*3:1-66 Is this the personal account of the author as a man who has witnessed the atrocities, or another personification of the Jerusalem community? Why are there 66 verses (22 in the other chapters)?*

\*\*The role of personification in the other parts of the books makes it more likely that it’s an alternative form of personification. In this chapter there are three verses for each letter of the alphabet.

*3:8 and 33 and 37-38 and 42 and 58—what do these verses mean in the context? How is it that the writer/s of Lamentations switched to faith and hope in God (3:22-40), despite all the other verses surrounding that section?*

\*\*As a whole, chapter 3 does well convey the bewildered position of the community and the way it wrestles to make sense of things. It reminds me of the way psalms often try to face two sets of facts. Here there is the reality of God’s punishment, which it knows it justified yet is painful and seems excessive. The people have turned to God, but he is not responding; parents know that sometimes they have to leave their children in a time out for a while even when they have said that they are sorry. Thus, while reference to not forgiving (3:42) may refer to the city’s downfall itself, it may refer to the fact that God carries on being unforgiving. The appeal to God to plead the people’s case (3:58) is a sharp reflection of the awareness that there is only one God, so you can only appeal to God to argue with himself. Likewise the fact that there is only one God means God is responsible for both the good things that happen and the bad things (3:37-38). One way of then picturing God’s position (again, like that of a parent) is to see that when God acts in judgment, he does so unwillingly (3:33)—more literally, it doesn’t come from God’s heart. At heart God is compassion and mercy, but nearer the edges of God’s person he has the capacity for judgment. The center of the chapter thus makes bold affirmations of what is in God’s heart, but those facts about God in relation to the people don’t alter the other set of facts to which the last part of the chapter refers.

*4:21-22 Zion’s suffering is over and next is Edom’s turn? Who is Edom and why does the author want punishment over her too? Is Edom not a part of the destruction in Jerusalem already? Are they enemies? Did this happen historically? Does this help to date Lamentations?*

\*\*Edom is the people to the southeast of Judah, south and east of the Dead Sea. The OT refers a number of times to Edomite attacks on Judah and it looks as if the Edomites either allied with the Babylonians when Jerusalem fell or took advantage of its fall to further their own cause. Certainly over the next century or two they took over much of Judah’s land. Amusingly, what eventually happened is that the Edomites got absorbed into the Judahite community—“converted,” if you like. It’s a good way to get defeated!

*5:22 seems an odd statement. The book seems to end with the people calling out to God and waiting for God’s response. There seems to be no closure. I wonder what the significance of this is. It seems like the people are left with having to wait and be patient for God to respond. What kind of meaning can we draw from this period of waiting?*

\*\*Yes, it’s odd, and painful, and that’s presumably because in the people’s experience there is no closure. God has not responded. So it corresponds to the way things often are—people and communities in pain and suffering pray and get to answer. So we keep praying until we do (as the Judahites got theirs, in the 540s from the prophecies in Isaiah 40—55).