

Pain, protest and prayer Lamentations: an introduction

Her strength gone, her food reserves exhausted, Jerusalem fell to Babylonian forces in 586 BC. For the Judeans, years of servitude and terror had culminated in conquest, occupation, siege, famine, bloodshed and exile. Their king, Zedekiah, had fled with his army towards Arabia, only to be overtaken by Babylonian forces near Jericho and delivered to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon at his headquarters in Riblah.¹ After forcing Zedekiah to watch as his sons were executed, the Babylonians 'put out' his eyes and took him in chains to Babylon. Then Jerusalem – complete with its walls, houses and the temple of Yahweh – was looted, burned and razed. The Babylonians gathered up the survivors; the elite – that is, all the potential leaders – were delivered to Nebuchadnezzar in Riblah, who put them to death, while the rest were taken back to Babylon as captives. Only small numbers of the poorest citizens were left behind to work the land.

Read 2 Kings 25:1–12 and 18–21: Having lived through invasion, occupation, war, siege, conquest and famine, the Judean remnant left behind were a devastated people in a devastated land. Through the five poems that make up the book of Lamentations, we come face to face with their raw pain. The poems, which contain testimony and prayers of protest, were written in the wake of genocidal violence, in the midst of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Plenty of Christians can identify with this horrific scenario. They know exactly what it is like to be invaded by hostile forces, occupied, oppressed, persecuted and enslaved. They have survived (or are struggling to survive) ethnic-religious cleansing, famine resulting from the actions of humans, indiscriminate slaughter, sectarian pogroms, dispossession and displacement. Consequently, though Lamentations speaks *of* the trauma of Jerusalem in the sixth century BC, it is absolutely relevant today, for it speaks *into* the contemporary sufferings of the church. Today, Christian survivors are asking the same questions that Jerusalem's survivors asked: "How long O Lord? How much O Lord? Why do you forget us? Can you even see us? Do you even care?" The fact that Jerusalem acknowledges its guilt does not make Lamentations irrelevant to 'innocent' Christians. On the contrary, if the defiantly rebellious, unfaithful 'Lady Zion' can cry for mercy to the LORD whom she so shamefully betrayed and aggrieved, then so can anyone!

Did you know? ... On account of phenomenal church growth since the 1960s, around *80 percent* of the church is now found in the non-Western world; many of these believers suffer as persecuted religious minorities in nations known for their appalling corruption and shocking record of human rights. This figure amounts to some 200 million Christians living with the threat of imprisonment, torture and death hanging over their heads, and a further 400 million Christians living with crippling religious discrimination and social hostility – the sort that guarantees generational poverty and endless hardship.

Discuss:

- Does it surprise and/or shock you that millions of Christians are this day living with severe hardship and trauma on account of crippling discrimination, violent persecution and genocidal war? Why shouldn't it surprise us?
- When you are deeply hurt, angry and confused, and feel the need to 'vent', 'offload' and get those emotions and questions 'off your chest', to whom do you turn: an intimate and trusted friend or a casual associate or stranger? Why is this so?
- Are your personal private prayers the perfectly polite and shallow communications that reveal God is little more than a casual associate or stranger, or are your prayers the open and honest communications of one in a secure, trusting and intimate relationship with God?

Maybe *this* is the whole purpose of Lamentations: to show us that God wants us to come to him *in* our pain and confusion, *with* our pain and protest, that we might be open and honest with him as we would with an intimate, trusted friend. Maybe in Lamentations God is giving us permission to grieve and express our pain

¹ At that time, Riblah, in the land of Hamath, was located in the north of Israel. Today it is in the south of Syria, just south of Hama.

and confusion openly and honestly, to protest and even be angry – anything, just so long as we do not withdraw with simmering tensions and unanswered questions; just so long as we keep communicating.

Lamentations is not the recording of an emotional outburst. Lamentations is a work of art that has been carefully and purposefully formulated, structured and gifted to us by God himself.

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The first four poems are acrostic – that is, they follow an alphabetic pattern, with each verse starting on a subsequent letter of the (Hebrew) alphabet. These four poems also make much use of the *qinah* meter, also known as the ‘limping meter’ because its form – three accent groups in the first colon, followed by two in the second – gives the verses an unbalanced, limping feel.²

Maybe when suffering is as ‘vast as the sea’ (Lam 2:13c) – that is, so vast that you just don’t know where to begin, and when trauma is beyond compare (Lam 1:12b) – such that it threatens to render you speechless, then form and structure not only provide the poet with a place to start, but also constrain the poetry – like a boundary or even a straightjacket – ensuring the poet does not spin out of control.

Task: To appreciate how helpful and profoundly constraining the acrostic poem is, attempt to write a short five-line poem – titled, for example, ‘My friend’, ‘My pet’ or ‘My God’ – with each sentence starting on a consecutive letter of the alphabet. You will notice that while this style of poem gives you a place to start, it also constrains and limits what you can say. If you are up for the challenge, you can make your task even more difficult and more constrained by enforcing a meter (a rhythm). You can use any meter, or you can try using the *qinah* meter: each sentence must have two lines divided by a semi-colon. The first line must have three beats or syllables or accents, and the second line must have two. *See if you can do this. (If you are in a group, share your poems.)*

Discuss: Did this exercise give you a greater appreciation for the highly structured work of art that we see here in Lamentations? *(Discuss your experience and share your impressions.)*

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With no acrostic and no meter, the final poem – Lamentations 5 – is different in every way, except that it has 22 lines, the same number of lines as letters in the Hebrew alphabet. While some commentators see this lack of acrostic and *qinah* meter as a sign of exhaustion and despair (‘I can’t do it any more’), I agree with those commentators who see it as a sign that healing has begun (‘I don’t need to do it any more’).

Discuss:

- Have you ever felt so hurt, confused and angry that you were unable or unwilling to talk to God? *(Please share, for this is not an uncommon experience.)*
- What does harbouring hurt and withdrawing communication do to a relationship?
- How might formal liturgy or Christian psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (the words we recite and the songs we sing in church) help us endure suffering, persecution and trauma?
- How do you think the raw expression of pain and trauma found in Lamentations might help comfortable believers who are unfamiliar with suffering relate better to believers who have suffered or are suffering?

Homework: In preparation for the next five studies on the poems of Lamentations, familiarise yourself with the subject of contemporary Christian suffering. Visit the website www.elizabethkendal.com and explore the ‘Blogs and Links’ for contemporary cases of severe Christian suffering. The ‘Critical Prayer Requests (CPR)’ blog presents a global overview, while the Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin and the various Christian news and advocacy sites provide testimonies, breaking news and regular updates on specific situations. Becoming familiar with this topic will help you appreciate just how absolutely relevant Lamentations is for us today.

² In the context of this discussion, ‘meter’ refers to the number and type of syllables in a poetic line, and a ‘colon’ is a clearly defined section of a sentence or phrase.