

Lamentations & (Anti)Theodicy

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Abstract

This article argues that a careful reading of Lamentations 3 reveals a broader tension in the Hebrew Bible: How can belief in a good and just deity square with the realities of human suffering? Most interpreters have placed the remainder of the poems in Lamentations in opposition to the voice of the man in Lamentations 3, specifically 3:21-42. The poet seems to offer a classic theodicy, counseling penitent acceptance of God's righteous judgment. In contrast to this, it is argued that Lam. 3:33-39 subtly manipulates the expected theodic solution until Yahweh's culpability as oppressor is denied rather than justified, ultimately providing an antitheodicy.

"Theodicy: Ça se déconstruit"

Those words were too much,
too little was said, understood, imagined.
Win your peace, vindicate your god,
it is pyrrhic, brittle.
Thumb the pages of that same old text,
and hope – quelled to bare velleity, dim
and frail – whimpers o'er another
field of fallen sparrows.
God the All-Powerful, All-Passive,
rendered now a vacant notion
shorn of love, full of strength:
God omni(im)potent!

By a curious twist of history, one of the fragments of Lamentations found among the Dead Sea Scrolls switches the order of a few lines. The poems of *'eikhah* (the Hebrew title comes from the first word, evoking something like a desperate sigh) are arranged acrostically, so this simply involves changing the sequence of two letters in the alphabet. Scholars quibble about why this happened, but basically it means that Lamentations 1:15-18 as it appears in our modern Bibles *also* existed as

Lamentations 1:15, then followed by verses 17, 16, and 18. Not unlike most of the Scrolls, this scrap is badly damaged and riddled with lacunae, but the last line is particularly interesting:

My children are desolate [because] the enemy prevailed;

the L[ord] is righteous, [because]...

(4QLam, col. III: frg. 3, line 10 = Lam 1:16c, 18a)

The line is meant to end, “The Lord is righteous, because I have rebelled against his word.” But what if we were openly tendentious in our reading? What if we capitalize on this coincidence of history and decay? The very ink itself has been effaced, unwritten: “The L[ord] is righteous, [because]...” Because...why? In the midst of slaughtered children, dare we whisper of a righteous deity? The scroll can only partially name this God. It offers no reason, no justification, as though to do so has become an unspeakable act. Perhaps Irving Greenberg was right to exclaim, “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”¹

And yet...

The book of Lamentations has never enjoyed a prominent place in the religious thought of Judaism and Christianity. This is not to say the book was ignored or its canonicity questioned (it never was). Still, one gets the sense that we have never really known quite what to do with these poems. To this day, for example, Lamentations remains entirely absent from the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. Robin Parry and Heath Thomas aptly observe that,

...were it left to us, it may well not have had a place at the table *at all*. Rather, like the desolate

character of Lady Jerusalem sitting alone as people pass by on the other side of the road (Lam 1),

the book of Lamentations itself has been passed by, ignored by the other guests....We often turn

¹ Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, and Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1977), 23. See also Kelly M. Wilson, “Daughter Zion Speaks in Auschwitz: A Post-Holocaust Reading of Lamentations,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37 (2012): 93-108.

away from that text sitting alone in the corner weeping.²

And yet its presence persists. Whatever the reason, this little book has survived (if not a little malnourished).

Historically, the tendency has been to focus on the central portion of Lamentations 3 as the heart of the book, constituting the core of its theological message: *hope in the midst of deserved suffering*. The character at the center of chapter 3 – the *geber*, “strongman” – is frequently presented as a model sufferer for both his present community and future readers. After a brief indulgence in complaint (Lam. 3:1-20), the man seems to come to his senses (3:21), and through most of the remainder of the chapter eloquently recites the proper posture of God's people in the midst of the present calamity: Yahweh is good; he is in control of all that occurs; though this suffering is harsh, we deserve it and must respond with repentance and prayer. A large portion of Lamentations 3, then, seems to provide a classic theodicy *avant la lettre*.

If we step back and read the poem in its entirety, however, one is immediately struck with how out of character this portion of Lamentations 3 is with the rest of the chapter, let alone the whole book. Raucous complaint and chilling descriptions of suffering continually assault the reader as we are propelled through the acrostic form and experience, as it were, the A to Z of despair (or, in this case, *aleph to taw*). “Look, Yhwh!” the poet pleads. “Consider! Whom have you ever afflicted like this? Should women eat their children, their own infants?” (Lam. 2:20a). The *geber* of chapter 3 is no stranger to such extremes: “To me, God is like a bear lying in ambush, like a hidden lion stalking its prey. He has obstructed my paths and torn me to pieces; he has made me desolate. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrow” (3:10-12). And further on, after offering his theodicy: “You have smothered us in anger, pursued us; you slaughtered without mercy. You have wrapped yourself in a cloud so that no prayer can pass through” (3:43-44). Yet in the middle of this despair, the same poet counsels patience, and reflects on the wisdom and goodness of God’s punishments (3:22- 33). What are we to make of this stark contrast?

One of the most helpful avenues forward, I think, is to come to terms with the Bible as a diverse set of literature *with a diverse set of opinions*. Put another way, the Bible very often disagrees with itself. This is not the tired old game of Bible contradictions, but instead the rather transparent observation that the Bible was composed by multiple human authors. And, as humans are wont to do, they interpreted things in varying, sometimes contradictory, ways. Very often these are matters of little consequence. The name of Moses’ father-in-law, for instance, seems to

² Robin Parry and Heath Thomas, “Introduction,” in *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture*, eds. Robin Parry and Heath Thomas (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011), xiii (original italics).

have been a source of confusion for biblical authors.³ Other times, however, the disagreements were rather more substantial: The author of 2 Samuel 21 recounts a disturbing vignette where Yahweh incites David to sin by taking a census of his military, resulting in Yahweh sending an angel that slaughtered “70,000 men from Dan to Beer Sheba” (2 Sam. 21:15). The author of 1 Chronicles 21, on the other hand, writing hundreds of years later, apparently found this theology objectionable and attributed David’s temptation to Satan, *not* Yahweh. On an even larger scale, the Bible’s attitude toward the Moabites is far more complicated than it first seems. Born of incest from Lot (Gen. 19), the Moabites were constantly in conflict with the Israelites and, according to both Deuteronomy 23:3-5 and Nehemiah 13:1-3, they were to be permanently excluded from the assembly of Yahweh. “For the rest of your days,” continues Deuteronomy 23:6, “you should never promote their welfare or prosperity.” The book of Ruth, however, provocatively flips the script: The Judahite Boaz cares for the Moabite Ruth, and Yahweh’s only active role in the story is to bless their sexual union with conception (Ruth 4:11-13). From that line would come King David (4:18-22) and, eventually, Jesus (Matt. 1:3-6).

The theological contours of Lamentations 3 reflect this more severe disjunction. Scholars have long noted how the Babylonian exile (586-539 BCE) – comprising mass slaughter, destruction, and the forced migration of significant portions of the population – initiated not only a surge in creative literary production but a reimagining of Judahite theology. As a set of poems composed in the wake of this onslaught, these verses wrestle especially with a terrible question: Was it Yahweh’s meticulous providence that shepherded Babylon’s fierce wrath? Or was it instead merely Babylon’s lust for empire, operating in opposition to all of Yahweh’s hopes and dreams for Judah? Who was in fact responsible for this catastrophe?

And yet...

As the *geber* explores the cavernous expanse of his traditional theodicy, we can hear the echoes – always indeterminate, out of sight – of movement, fissure, instability. Yes, throughout Lamentations 3:22-32 Yahweh is explicitly defended as the causative agent enacting judgment for sin upon Jerusalem and the *geber*. In crucial places, though, the poet deftly separates the suffering caused by human sin from Yahweh’s agency and attributes *only* good, *not* evil, to the deity. Consider the following retranslation of Lamentations 3:31-39 in comparison with the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*:

³ There are four versions: Reuel (Exod. 2:18); Jethro, priest of Midian (Exod. 3:1, 18:1-2); the variant Jether (Exod. 4:18); and Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite (Num. 10:29; cf. Judg. 4:11).

[Mark Preston Stone]

³¹Surely the Lord will not reject

us forever.

³²Though he torments, he will have

compassion

in measure with his abundant loving-

kindness.

³³For abusing and tormenting humans

are against his very nature!

³⁴To crush underfoot

all prisoners of the land...

³⁵To pervert a man's rights

before the presence of the Most

High...

³⁶To subvert a person's just case...

the Master would not brook this.⁴

³⁷Who spoke that this should come to

pass?

The Lord did not command it!

³⁸From the mouth of the Most High

does not come evil but good!⁵

³⁹Why then should a survivor complain

when

the Most High strengthens sinners?⁶

[Alternative 3:39]

³⁹Why then should a man complain

against the Living One when the yoke

of his sin-fate overwhelms?⁷

[NRSVue]

³¹For the Lord will not

reject forever.

³²Although he causes grief, he will have

compassion

according to the abundance of his

steadfast love;

³³for he does not willingly afflict

or grieve anyone.

⁴ This half-line is taken from Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3: The Writings/Ketuvim. A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

⁵ Though virtually all English translations make this verse into a rhetorical question, the Hebrew simply has a nominative sentence: *mippî 'elyôn lô' tēšē' hārā'ôt wəhaṭṭōb*.

⁶ This rendering of Lam 3:39 involves a repointing of the Hebrew vowels found in standard scholarly editions. The repointing here is: *ma-yyit'ōnēn 'ādām ḥāy gibbēr 'āl ḥāṭā'û*.

⁷ This is another possible repointing of Lam 3:39: *ma-yyit'ōnēn 'ādām ḥāy gābar 'ōl ḥeṭ'ô*. Here I am largely following Mitchell Dahood, "New Readings in Lamentations," *Biblica* 59 (1978): 187.

³⁴When all the prisoners of the land
are crushed under foot,

³⁵when justice is perverted
in the presence of the Most High,

³⁶when one's case is subverted—
does the Lord not see it?

³⁷Who can command and have it done,
if the Lord has not ordained it?

³⁸Is it not from the mouth of the Most
High

that evil and good come?

³⁹Why should any who draw breath
complain

about the punishment of their sins?

The rhetorical movement here is clear: Theodic reflections on divine goodness lead inexorably towards heightened conclusions about this deity's role in human suffering. From limiting duration (Lam. 3:31-32), to positing inner conflict (3:33), to disapproval (3:34-36), and finally explicit denial that this deity has anything to do with evil (3:37-39). The attentive reader, however, will note just how differently the *NRSVue* (and nearly every other major English translation) renders Lamentations 3:31-39. The exact opposite point is made in these versions. There is a long tradition of reading in this fashion, and it squares nicely with a traditional theodicy of meticulous providence. However, notwithstanding the fact that these classic renderings fail to represent the Hebrew accurately, there is an even older approach dating back to Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 253 CE). He quotes this section of Lamentations several times throughout his oeuvre, but three in particular are worth noting as they represent the oldest known reflections on these poems. The first is found in *Origen against Celsus*:

It is true, certainly, that evils do not proceed from God; for according to Jeremiah, one of our prophets, it is certain that “*out of the mouth of the Most High proceedeth not evil but good*”

[*ek stomatos hypsistou ouk exeleusetai ta kaka kai to agathon*].⁸

Origen also quotes Lamentations 3:38 in his commentary on Matthew 13:6:

⁸ *Origen against Celsus*, in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. Frederick Crombie, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe; The Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 527.

...and such people have truly “set their mouth against the heaven,” when they say that some of the stars have a malevolent, and others a benevolent influence; since no star was formed by the God of the universe to work evil, according to Jeremiah as it is written in the Lamentations, “*Out of the mouth of the Lord shall come things noble and good*” [*ek stomatos kyriou exeleusetai ta kala kai to agathon*].⁹

Whether Origen worked from a different textual tradition or intentionally changed the text, it is remarkable that he produces the pair “noble and good” in this quotation instead of the opposite pair “evil and good.” His theology is transparently informing his translational choices. Finally, the first known commentary devoted entirely to Lamentations was produced by Origen, though most of it exists in fragments. In the relevant section, after quoting Lamentations 3:37-39, he goes on to say:

The text says it is impossible for mutually opposed things—*good and evil!*—to come from the mouth of the Lord [*ou gar dynatai, phēsi, ta enantia ek stomatos kyriou exelēlythenai, ta agatha kai to kakon*]. For a good tree does not produce evil fruit, nor an evil tree good fruit. Therefore, the fact that people suffer injustice at the hands of evil is contrary to divine justice. But it is nonetheless those events which are watched over dearly by God, just as happened to the Israelites who, once they turned back to God, are delivered from the hands of their enemies. Therefore, it is necessary to seek out this repentance for those who have been handed over to this punishment.¹⁰

⁹ *Origen’s Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, in *The Gospel of Peter, the Diatessaron of Tatian, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Visio Pauli, the Apocalypses of the Virgil and Sedrach, the Testament of Abraham, the Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, the Narrative of Zosimus, the Apology of Aristides, the Epistles of Clement (Complete Text), Origen’s Commentary on John, Books I-X, and Commentary on Matthew, Books I, II, and X-XIV*, trans. John Patrick, ed. Allan Menzies, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 9 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897), 478.

¹⁰ *Origen’s Klageliederkommentar 79b* (my own translation) in *Origenes Werke III: Jeremiahomilien, Klageliederkommentar, Erklärung der Samuel – und Königsbücher*, ed. Erich Klostermann, rev. Pierre Nautin, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte* 6 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983), 235-279. Unfortunately, Origen’s comments on Lam. 3:33-39 are not available in translation. For an English sampling of other sections from Origen’s commentary on Lamentations, see Joseph Trigg, *Origen* (London: Routledge, 1998), 73-85.

Though all three quotations differ slightly, in stark opposition to the ensuing history of translation and commentary Origen identifies an identical theological message each time: Lamentations 3:38 explicitly denies that God is responsible for evil.¹¹

What, then, should a survivor complain about (Lam. 3:39)? Certainly not the Most High! After all, “The Master would not brook this” (3:36b), “The Lord did not command it” (3:37), and “From the mouth of the Most High *does not come evil but good!*” (3:38). How then could this God be responsible? The poet’s meditation on divine goodness precludes the deity’s culpability. *A fortiori*, Yahweh does not “afflict” and “torment” sinners (3:31-33), nor does he “command” evil upon people (3:34-38), but rather “strengthens” them so that they might repent (3:39-42a). The *geber’s* theodicy reaches a new climax where the advised silence of Lamentations 3:26 has been renegotiated: the man may indeed rage as he did in 3:1-21, *but not against Yahweh*. Yahweh’s oppressive agency has been destabilized, and the traditional theodicy – one which looks upon unspeakable suffering and theological claims to omnipotent goodness, yet sees no conflict – is unmasked for the lie that it is. Remarkably, the poet has appealed to God in order to repeal god, or as Meister Eckart famously put it, “I pray God to rid me of God.” We glimpse here the evolution of theodicy into *antitheodicy*.¹² Our canons of plausibility change over time, especially under pressure from events of profound rupture. For instance, are the geopolitics of human history the primary arena of God’s revelation? This was essentially taken for granted in the world of ancient Southwest Asia and animates the background of the entire Hebrew Bible. But Lamentations, and the myriad laments and complaints from other cultures, witness to a sense of theological protest. These bold poems problematize the notion that the divine will is consistently displayed through the political maneuverings of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, or Rome. Might it be that world events unfold in a way *contrary* to a deity’s will? This is resistance theology predicated on a claim to God’s essential goodness.

As a piece of religious literature produced amid terrible suffering, Lamentations contains strains of both theodic and antitheodic reflection. All five poems display a vibrant dialogism that forces the text to remain open to interpretive possibilities. To employ a classic theodicy as found in

¹¹ Cf. Isaiah 45:7: “I form light and create darkness; I make peace *and create evil* [ûbôre’ rā]; I, Yahweh, do all these things.”

¹² For different perspectives on antitheodicy, compare Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 4; Bradley Jersak, *From the Cave to the Cross: The Cruciform Theology of George Grant & Simone Weil* (Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina, 2015), 197-272; *ibid.*, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel* (Pasadena, CA: Plain Truth Ministries, 2015), 161-80.

Lamentations 3 is to attempt to justify the morally unjustifiable, to sanctify human sacrifice as a necessary means to assuage divine wrath or exhaust the demands of divine justice. Right on the heels of his antitheodicy, though, the *geber's* work buckles under the weight of lived experience: "We have transgressed and rebelled...but you! You have not forgiven!" (Lam. 3:42). The ensuing distress and ambivalence throughout the rest of the chapter, indeed the entire book, underscores the moral absurdity of such justifications. As F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp puts it, the *geber* "does not disparage the ethical vision directly. He does not have to. In keeping with his paratactic style he merely needs to present an aspect of the ethical vision and then suffuse it with arresting and manifold images of human suffering to make the inability of the ethical vision to contain such suffering strikingly obvious. In other words, ultimately the events of 587/6 [BCE] explode and finally ironize the ethical vision."¹³

And yet...

"The L[ord] is righteous, [because]..." Because...why? The question lingers, and theodicy exposes us all as mere sciolists. Simone Weil once wrote of "feeling ceaselessly and increasingly torn" by her inability to reconcile God's goodness and the affliction of humanity.¹⁴ Any attempt to loosen this knot, to master the technology of theodicy, is bound to founder. To my mind, there are two nonnegotiable lessons to learn from the practice of lament: First, to lend suffering the eloquence due its honest refrain, and allow that rhetoric to break our hearts.¹⁵ Second, that "God is in all ways absolutely guiltless of evil."¹⁶ Both the horror of the first and the hope of the second must persist, and we dare not soil God's goodness by washing the blood off his hands. In truth, there is no need: God's hands need no cleansing. To attribute such wanton violence to God is one of the few theological gestures worthy of the censure "blasphemy." The *geber* of Lamentations 3 glimpses this truth, if only for

¹³ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology in the Book of Lamentations," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 74 (1997): 47. See also Carleen Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

¹⁴ Simone Weil, "Lettre à Maurice Schumann," n.d. (prb Dec. 1942), in *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, Collection Espoir (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957), 213. French: *J'éprouve un déchirement qui s'aggrave sans cesse...*

¹⁵ Here I am paraphrasing the German philosopher Theodor Adorno from his 1966 book, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973): "The need to lend a voice to suffering [literally: "to let suffering become eloquent"] is the condition of all truth" (17-18). German: *Das Bedürfnis, Leiden beredt werden zu lassen, ist Bedingung aller Wahrheit.*

¹⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies* 7.2, in *The Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe; The Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 526.

a moment.¹⁷

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¹⁷ For a more in-depth investigation of Lamentations 3, and a full defense of the offered re-translation, see Mark P. Stone, "Vindicating Yahweh: A Close Reading of Lamentations 3.21-42," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (2018): 83-108; Mark Preston Stone, "(More) On the Precative *Qatal* in Lamentations 3.56-61: Updating the Argument," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45 (2021): 493-514.

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