A LITURGY *of* GRIEF

A Pastoral Commentary on Lamentations

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Preface

This book, which endeavors to integrate biblical scholarship and pastoral care, is what happens when an Old Testament professor looks at Lamentations through a chaplain's eyes. The latter perspective reflects more than eighteen hundred hours of experience as a volunteer chaplain at a local hospital. I am grateful to its spiritual care department for the opportunities I have been given and for all I have learned from colleagues and patients over the years. (In this book, patients' names have been altered and few medical details given for the sake of confidentiality.) Listening to patients' stories led me to read over a score of personal grief accounts, such as C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, and to study grief manuals, and I have correlated Lamentations with what I have learned. What emerges is that Lamentations belongs to a genre of grief literature that is recognizable by and relevant to the modern reader not only in its general message but also in many of its details. It is bifocal, engaging in grief work from the perspective of suffering and in pastoral care from the perspective of caregiving. I have been encouraged by the forays Old Testament scholars have been making into the realm of psychology to explain the book of Lamentations—Gous (1992), Joyce (1993), Reimer (2002), and Labahn (2002).

I am most grateful to my friend and colleague David Augsburger, professor of pastoral counseling, to whom the book is dedicated, for reading the manuscript and making insightful observations that have improved it. Nicholas Wolterstorff, author of *Lament for a Son*, has done me the great honor of writing the foreword. As usual, I have appreciated the staff and resources of Fuller's Hubbard Library and the painstaking work of Susan Wood of Faculty Publications Services.

I also want to thank my daughter Miriam and her partner, Sheryl, for sharing their particular expertise.

The five chapters in the book of Lamentations are really five separate poems, and they are treated as such in this commentary. The verse numbering in our Bibles represents stanzas of mostly three lines in the first and second poems, and stanzas of two lines in the fourth poem. On the other hand, the verses in the fifth poem denote individual poetic lines, while in the third poem the verse numbering refers to lines that fall into stanzas that have three lines. The numbering used in my translation follows the convention of verse numbering, except that in the third poem the stanza numbers have been added in parentheses. The notes on the translation and the Scripture index employ chapter and verse references to Lamentations.

The manuscript of this book was completed in April 2010 and submitted according to contract to Hendrickson Publishers, to whom I am grateful for the encouragement and support they gave me. However, later that year, a week before I was to receive galley proofs, they passed on their academic books to Baker Academic. I am very grateful for the way the team at Baker Academic welcomed me and for their unstinting commitment to the book.

Introduction

Tears, Talk, and Time

Raymond was brought to the hospital late one evening, as a precaution against suicide. He was a fine man in his mid-twenties, assisting the youth pastor at his church and dedicated to helping teenagers. Now he needed help. A few months before, his parents had died, one after the other, two bitter blows. Then he learned his girlfriend was dead of an overdose. It was all too much. He was brought by ambulance to this locked psychiatric unit.

The next day a request was made by the staff for a chaplain to visit. When I arrived, I gently woke Raymond out of an exhausted sleep. Bleary-eyed, he sat up in bed and said, "All I want to do is sleep." I was glad to hear him demonstrate this safe form of denial. It made me realize his stay would not be an extended one, and so this was likely to be my only visit. I also realized that this was not the occasion for a long pastoral interchange. What short message could I leave about the way forward? I thought for a moment and said, "I want to leave three words with you, Raymond: tears, talk, and time." I added a brief sentence to each word and then told him to go back to sleep and remember those three words when he woke up. "And God bless you."

Raymond's traumatic grief brings to mind the book of Lamentations, though its grief is a chorus of mourning voiced by a community of survivors. This book of five poems, in the form of five chapters, certainly responds to its calamity in terms of tears, talk, and time. It responds to deep sorrow by bringing to the surface what lies buried far down, originally beyond tears and beyond words. As we read and ponder these poems together, we will encounter many tears, for the book comes from a Mediterranean culture that was able to express its emotions freely when necessary. Tears needed to flow as an outlet for pent-up emotions, and regularly in the book grief is literally poured out as tears: *She sobs and sobs*; *Water streams from my eyes*; *I am crying my eyes out*; *Let your tears run down like a torrent day and night*; *Streams of water run down from my eyes*. No wonder Kathleen O'Connor called her commentary *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*.

There is a lesson here that those of us from stiff-upper-lip northern cultures badly need to learn. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in grieving for his son, asserted, "I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see" (1987, 26). If tears do not come, at least one must experience a lump in the throat and periods of deep sadness. Sadness must be allowed to permeate one's life, so it can gradually do its cleansing work. There is a Yiddish proverb that calls tears the soap of the soul. The release, rather than the bottling up, of inarticulate emotion is a valuable first aid to be applied over and over again to the raw wounds of grief.

Talk is the most obvious feature of the five long poems. In the first four there is talking for and with the grieving community, while in the fifth the community at last talks back in its own prayer. All the way through the poems, the purpose of talking is to articulate grief, to face up to haunting memories with the defining clarity of speech, and to talk through emotions and reduce them to words, words that still hurt, but (one hopes) at a slightly lower level on the pain scale. Sandy Broyard, mourning her husband's lost battle with prostate cancer, describes the value of words as "pulling forwards and through" (2005, 55). In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* the bereaved Macduff is told, "Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak / Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break." Dorothee Soelle has written of the need "to find a language that leads out of the uncomprehended suffering that makes us mute, a language of lament, of crying, of pain" (1975, 70); she warns that silence can lead to the utter despair of suicide.

The poems keep on telling the grief story because they have to, for survival's sake. "Every time you say something, you're getting a little more of the poison out of your system by verbalizing that horrendous thought" (Barkin et al. 2004, 35). The old story is always breaking news to those who grieve. The poems instinctively know it must be told and retold. Kübler-Ross and Kessler explain this storytelling as the pain of the mind trying to catch up with the pain of the heart: "The pain is in your heart, while your mind lingers on the facts of the story, reenacting and recalling the scene of the crime against your heart" (2005, 62–63), and so helping to lessen the pain there.

Tears and talk are safety valves. Time, just as necessary, works indirectly. We conventionally speak of time as a healer. Yet a wound heals over time only with proper tending. In a similar way, time creates room for the processing of grief, and it is this processing that holds out hope of healing. It takes time for the mind to catch up with the heart. "People live on best after calamity . . . by facing it and measuring its dimensions" (Hillers 1992, 4). Every experience of grief has its own timetable; its pace must be respected, whether slower or quicker than others expect. Its duration depends on a number of individual, variable factors and is often too slow for the observer. "The dynamics of each person's sorrow must be allowed to work themselves out without judgment" (Wolterstorff 1987, 56). Nevertheless, it will perhaps be disappointing to readers of the book of Lamentations to discover that closure for the grief never comes. The happy ending we all want for those who are suffering does not yet materialize in this case. The distress of the final poem is as evident as that of the first. Yet the book does reach a turning point, a resolution that is reachable from the book's own perspective. The journey of grief continues, but a milestone on that journey is attained. No wonder that one of the lessons taught in the third poem is to *wait patiently*.

Trauma: The Source of This Grief

What is the nature of the grief that pervades the book? It is a very specific and traumatic type of loss and change that has befallen a community and left it shattered. There is widespread scholarly agreement that this major disruption is to be related to the tragedy of 586 BCE. The bare bones of the tragedy are sketched in 2 Kings 25:1–12. The passage gives a dispassionate account of the historical events of 588–586 BCE in a corner of the Babylonian Empire. It briefly tells the story of the invasion of the vassal state of Judah to punish its rebellion, of the long siege of Jerusalem and its eventual fall, of the vassal king's capture, and of the systematic destruction of the city and the deportation of its citizens.

The story has been supplied with a passionate introduction in 2 Kings 24:19–20, which an awkward chapter division may make us overlook. It views the tragedy from a theological perspective that emotionally interprets the history in terms of the vassal king's previously *doing evil in the sight of the Lord, just as Jehoiakim* [his predecessor] *had done* and of *the Lord's anger*, so intense that *he thrust them from his presence*. The book of Lamentations has a similar blend of history, theology, and emotion. But, whereas 2 Kings presents these elements to the reader separately on the dinner plate, as it were, here they are mixed together in a salad bowl. The mix lends religious vehemence to the grief of survivors left in Judah to which Lamentations bears witness. Divine anger and rejection in response to human provocation are taken seriously as providential keys to the disaster. Emotion pervades not only the book's theology but also its reliving of historical details. For instance, we readers will be told more about the mass starvation of 2 Kings 25:3 than we ever wanted to know.

Tradition: Ancient Idioms of Grieving

Though its form varies greatly, grief is a universal, cross-cultural reaction to loss and change, as anthropological studies summarized by Archer (1999, 52–54) have shown. How could so tragic a grief as that caused by the calamity in 586 BCE be processed? There were national traditions, reflected in the book of Lamentations, on which the survivors could draw. The same can hardly be said of the culture in which most of us readers now live; contemporary Western culture provides little space for grief. Sixty years ago, after my mother died, I recall the drapes kept firmly closed at the front windows in the daytime, my older brothers wearing black armbands on their coats, and a black tie replacing my school tie for a long time. Now a funeral service may be reduced to an ostensibly more healthy form of a celebration of life. In general, church services can be uncomfortable and unsatisfying for the one who grieves, for these services may reflect an aversion to sorrow that takes no account of the somber realities of life. All this cultural aversion handicaps the necessary task of grieving because one is ill prepared. Everyone has a right to grieve and an obligation to respect the grief of others.

Older cultures gave grief much more respect, regarding it as a necessary part of lives that were potentially fragile at every level. Like other cultures, Israelite culture had its traditions of grieving. Apart from nonverbal mourning rituals, there were grooves, as it were, within the social framework of oral communication along which the expression of grief could move with a measure of ease. It is important for readers to recognize these culturally normal channels through which the text flows in order to articulate grief.

The first of the traditional speech forms is the funeral dirge, in reaction to bereavement. There is a fine, extended example in 2 Samuel 1, where David mourns the deaths of Saul, his king, and Jonathan, his friend. The dirge typically employed, and often began with, a shriek, *ekh* or *ekhah* in Hebrew, which introduced an exclamatory statement of loss. In the book of Lamentations the longer form marks the beginning of the first, second, and fourth poems. I have translated it *How terrible that . . . !*

The dirge was capable of adaptation to other situations of grief besides bereavement, and in Lamentations its conventions are used to mourn the general calamity of the siege and fall of Jerusalem and its ramifications. In the dirge, the descriptions focus on contrasting a sunny past with the dark storm that has now blotted out life's sunshine. Such contrasts appear frequently in the book and permit the articulation of what the tragedy meant in detailed respects that were important to those who yearned for what they had lost.

The dirge told the grief story, as for example in Jeremiah 9:21 (or 21–22 according to such versions as the NAB, NJB, and GNT). Despite the religious flavor that Lamentations has in other aspects, the book makes good use of the essentially secular nature of the dirge, which characteristically did not mention God. So Lamentations can take human suffering seriously (Moore 1983) and allow the multifaceted aspects of the human side of grief to be fully explored. When lives are shattered by change, their range of human interactions is fragmented. The dirge gave permission for broken piece after broken piece to be picked up and wept over. The book draws heavily on the dirge tradition and finds it an invaluable aid in the expression of grief.

Another tradition that dealt with grief and was available to use was the lament psalm. There are sixty-five of these in the book of

Psalms, nearly half of the total collection, a proportion that testifies to their perceived need and value in the precarious living of ancient times. The lament psalm comes in two forms, communal and individual, and is essentially a prayer to God, unlike the dirge. Like the dirge, it makes room for a grieving description of a crisis, but now as part of a plea to Yahweh to intervene positively and put right what is woefully wrong. Readers will discover that in the first two poems there is a creative movement from dirge to lament (Linafelt 2000, 43) and so implicitly from a necessary bemoaning of what is past to looking to a future that God can help these sufferers to achieve eventually. The fifth poem consists of such a lament, one of which also opens and closes the third poem. Both the dirge and the lament psalm provide necessary perspectives for the outworking of grief in the book.

The lament psalm has often been called a complaint in scholarly circles. However, Craig Broyles (1989) has made an excellent case for identifying a subtype of lament psalm, again both communal and individual, that in twenty-one psalms represents a shriller, more strident prayer that may appropriately monopolize the name "complaint" in the sense of complaining to God about what God has or has not done. If one reads the examples of complaint in the Psalms, it is not difficult to recognize its presence in the closing six lines of the fifth poem in Lamentations. This is an important phenomenon since the climax of the book is involved. In the exposition, I will carefully point out parallel texts from the Psalms and let their meaning guide the exegesis of this key passage.

A further tradition that has been claimed to explain Lamentations is the so-called city lament, which was a feature of much older Mesopotamian culture and literature. Typically, a city lament mourned the gods' destruction of a city (Lee 2002, 38–39); its affinities with the representations of Zion in Lamentations probably result from the expression of a common experience within a similar religious culture (Ferris 1992, 167–75; Lee 2002, 37–39; Berlin).

The distinctive role of Zion in the book not only as the representative of the congregation but also as a model for them to follow recalls the Israelite tradition of professional women mourners who took the lead on behalf of the bereaved, encouraging them to break into tears (2 Chron. 35:25; Jer. 9:17–18, 20), and suggests the participation of one of their number. If so, the function of such a female singer is here strikingly developed from mourning to engaging in prayers of lament.

A Liturgy of Grief

The book of Lamentations is best understood as the script of a liturgy intended as a therapeutic ritual. It was composed for the survivors of the calamity of 586 BCE who were left behind in Judah, and the liturgy was performed at the site of the ruined temple to mourn their losses. Zechariah 7:5 is relevant, for it refers to the early postexilic period as a time of continuing fasting and mourning that had been carried out annually in the fifth and seventh months "for the past seventy years." (The fifth month was when the temple was destroyed; see 2 Kings 25:8–9.) Within Lamentations, it is significant that in two places direct address to God in prayer is associated with the temple. The first is in Lamentations 1:10, where mention of foreigners aggressively entering the temple is followed by an abrupt turning to God in second-person address. The second is in Lamentations 5:18, which introduces the closing section of ardent prayer with a reference to the devastated temple area. As one might expect from a poetic grief account, the text is allusive in its historical references. However, analysis of the language used in the poems has shown that its transitional character fits the exilic period, from 586 to 520 BCE (Dobbs-Allsopp 1998).

The coherence of the book is apparent when it is regarded in terms of a story. The verbalization of grief essentially consists of the telling of a complex story, in a piecemeal fashion but eventually covering the basic facts of loss and change. In this case the poems follow a loose pattern of consecutive narrative. Most of the grieving consists of intrusive memories that vividly recall episodes of the long siege. Such flashbacks are typical of grief: "Even though I am here, I know that the smallest thing—a song, a sound, a smell—can send me back there" (Hood 2008, 156). This looking backward to the siege is especially true of the first two poems. The fourth poem gradually shifts to the closing days of the siege and the frustrated efforts of priests and others, including the king, to find refuge after the city fell. The fifth poem focuses on the postwar occupation of Jerusalem and Judah. So the poems follow a story line, incorporating a collection of assorted but roughly consecutive narratives.

Another aspect of the development of a story is that it works toward resolution of an earlier complication. This happens in the book of Lamentations, although readers are in danger of regarding the book as unfinished because they look in vain for the closure to grief they would like to see, in the form of acceptance or accommodation and moving on with a renewed quality of life despite unforgettable loss. In personal terms, acceptance "does not mean forgetting the person we have lost, but instead placing that relationship somewhere inside us where it's comfortable so we can carry on with our lives" (Bouvard and Gnadu 1998, 33). But there is no acceptance here. Rather, the fifth poem presents the congregation's prayer of lament. This prayer represents the attainment of a sustained effort made in the first three poems to encourage such a prayer as an aid in coming to terms with grief. The effort is most obvious in the explicit call to prayer in Lamentations 3:40–41, *Let us lift our hearts . . . to God in heaven*, and the supplying of a model prayer in the next lines. But model prayers have not been lacking in the first two poems (1:11–16, 18–22; 2:20–22). They have been placed on the lips of a character called Zion, who represents the listening congregation and has the roles of their "model and teacher" (Berges 2000, 10). From the perspective of the fifth poem, she prays in order to encourage the community to bring their own prayer, suggesting in her prayers the lines their prayer should follow.

Moreover, the third poem begins and ends with examples of individual prayers of lament taken from the speaker's experience, which like Zion's prayers are meant to stimulate the congregation to break into their own articulation of grief, when they are ready. The poems work toward an intended goal. That goal is congregational prayer, which represents not the closure of grief but a turning point in the communal grieving that bravely and even defiantly challenges their suffering and expresses a longing to move beyond it.

The book's coherence relates to its present form as a completed liturgy for a memorial service. This is not to deny that it may have grown by stages and so reflects a compositional unity. For instance, a feature of the first four poems that is invisible to the reader of the English text is that they are self-contained. Each poem is written as a separate alphabetic acrostic that uses in turn each letter of the Hebrew alphabet at the beginning of stanzas in the first, second, and fourth poems and at the beginning of each line of the stanzas in the third poem. Ronald Knox's version (1956) does represent the alphabetic sequencing, for instance, "Alone she dwells . . . / Be sure she weeps . . . / Cruel the suffering . . ." and so on in the first poem, but it has to resort to contrived translation. There is a peculiarity about the order of the Hebrew letters. While the first poem follows the usual order, the next three reverse the order of two letters that correspond to "o" and "p" in the English alphabet. This order is attested elsewhere, but the difference is striking. The first poem may represent an initial attempt that was later supplemented with the other poems for the liturgy. Hunter (1996) has argued that the first half of the first poem represents a core that the rest of the book expands. Does this function reflect a poem written subsequently to introduce an extant collection? Its generality and comprehensiveness may point to that conclusion.

As the book stands, there is a growing intensity in the first three poems. In the exposition I compare this trend with the development in the first two chapters of the book of Joel, as far as Joel 2:17. Both texts move steadily and with increasing passion toward a dynamic appeal to the congregation to utter a prayer of repentance, and they both support that appeal with an assurance of Yahweh's grace and compassion. The third poem represents an interim climax, to which the factor of the intensified acrostic, mentioned earlier, draws attention. The real climax of the book is to come in the communal prayer of the fifth poem. The third poem, by issuing its summons to the congregation to pray, points forward to their response in the final poem. The theology in the middle of the third poem, with its providential sweep beyond judgment to salvation, is the handmaid of pastoral care.

In the liturgy, I hear three voices speaking. The third voice is the communal one in the last poem. The second voice is that of a woman personifying Zion. Gottwald has called Zion "an imaginative figure who both embodies and stands apart from particular Judahites" (1993, 167). She functions as a role model for the congregation meeting in the city and is meant to inspire their own reaction in due course. This modeling is evident from a comparison of Lamentations 2:16 with 3:46. Zion is addressed with the words, *Staring openmouthed at you were all your enemies*, while the congregation is encouraged to say of itself, *Staring openmouthed at us are all our enemies*. Zion is a representation of the congregation projected onto a screen, as it were, where in an ideal way she voices its suffering and expresses its grief. She is the poster girl for the responses to tragedy the community should make.

And whose is the first voice? I suggest that a pastoral mentor is speaking; he plays a number of roles in the first four poems. Himself a member of the suffering community, he endeavors to guide them through their distress and engage in grief work on their behalf. Occasionally in communal laments in the book of Psalms, the worship leader speaks for a while as an individual, expressing a conviction the rest of the congregation is not yet ready to aspire to and so guiding them toward a stronger faith (Pss. 44:4–6; 74:12–17; 123:1). In this case the liturgy leader assumes a much larger role of a similar kind. He mentors members of the community by giving expression to the grief he and they have in common, turning incoherent feelings into words and explaining the experiences they have all been through. He acts as a reporter in the first two poems, surveying and describing different aspects of their cataclysmic loss. He is also an interpreter of their loss, claiming that the congregation should take responsibility for what had happened and yet affirming their sense of grievance (see the section "Trajectories of Grief, Guilt, and Grievance" below).

In the third poem this worship leader, mentor, and reporter presents himself as a wounded healer, another role model for the congregation alongside Zion. He gives a personal testimony of surviving merited suffering on an earlier occasion and then preaches a sermon that draws on divine resources for resilience and recovery, before appealing to the congregation to pray a prayer of repentance and giving another testimony that respects their grievances. He can speak with true sympathy, a reaction of fellow feeling that emanates from a significant overlap of suffering experienced previously in his own life.

In the fourth poem he leaves time for the community to react to his counseling by resuming a reporter's role and describing its suffering further, but at the close he echoes the hope of the third poem.

Then at last, in the fifth poem, the third voice speaks. The congregation, duly taught by its mentor and nurtured by the role modeling that he and Zion have provided, is ready to articulate its grief in its own prayer. Grief continues, but the congregation has reached a turning point and starts to move forward in turning to God.

Thus the poems make up a therapeutic ritual to deal with grief (see Rando 1993, 313–31; Sanders 1999, 252–57). It is a ritual of transition that sensitively takes the congregation through the emotional and spiritual trauma of their losses, helps them toward a new start, and finally involves them in a creative response of their own that they are ready to make in the final poem.

Commentators often remark that there is no fourth voice—the voice of God—that takes part in the liturgy. This absence accords with the admission in Lamentations 2:9, *Her prophets found no revelation from Yahweh*, and with the broader prophetic tradition that links divine silence with disobedience on the part of God's people. In more general terms, it agrees with the phenomenon that the most spiritual of grievers encounter a silent, distant God. However, in two respects, though the voice of God is not directly heard, it is overheard. First, the preacher imparts hope by testifying to having heard God's reassuring voice in another time of grief: *you said, "Don't be afraid"* (3:57). Second, notice should be taken of the way the book freely mentions the *mouth* of God (1:18; 3:38) as having engaged in past speech and God's having *ordered* or *given orders* (1:10, 17; 2:17; 3:37) and *announced* a day of judgment (1:21). This second phenomenon may imply that the reading of religious texts accompanied the liturgy and that these repeated references to divine speech allude to them.

Albrektson (1963, 233–36) has urged that there are quotations of Deuteronomy 28 in Lamentations. His most feasible examples are Deuteronomy 28:41 in Lamentations 1:5 and 18; Deuteronomy 28:44 in Lamentations 1:5 again; Deuteronomy 28:53 in Lamentations 2:20; and Deuteronomy 28:65 in Lamentations 1:3. Although he admits that verses 47–68 are generally regarded as later additions to the text, he himself is doubtful whether such editing occurred. Berlin recognizes the cases in the first poem—except for the one in 1:18—as echoes of Deuteronomy 28 but does not mention the problem. Brandscheidt (1983, 210–14) simply accepts the cases in the first poem as already showing familiarity with the later growth. This seems to be a wise conclusion, even if it means placing the book later during the exile.

Within the poems, there seems to be awareness of other texts. The theological importance of Zion is illustrated by references to specific psalms (Pss. 48:2; 50:2 in Lam. 2:15; Ps. 76:12 in Lam. 4:12), while Lamentations 5:18–19 echoes an aspect of the Zion tradition (Albrektson 1963, 224–28). A common feature of the book is allusion to authoritative traditions known to us from the preexilic prophetic books. According to Lamentations 1:17; 2:17; and 3:37, what was evidently a prophetic program was *ordered* by Yahweh. It is difficult to pin down particular quotations, apart from *my poor people's catastrophe* (Lam. 2:11; 3:48; 4:10 from Jer. 8:21); the plural use of a typical phrase from Jeremiah, "terror from everywhere around" (in Lam. 2:22); in Lamentations 4:17 verbal echoes of Isaiah 30:7; and in Lamentations 5:21 a quotation from what we know as Jeremiah 31:18.

However, the blatant description of the tragedy in terms of hostile divine intervention and dire human consequences (Lam. 1:12–15; 2:1–9), a pairing that is copied in the testimony that opens the third poem, seems in general to reflect the program set out by the prophets. It is evidently based on the announcement of disaster that is so widespread in the prophetic literature, where this standard pattern is followed. In turn, the book's insistence on Zion's or Judah's sinfulness sounds like an echo of the accusation that regularly precedes the announcement in prophetic oracles of disaster, although appeal is also made to the overall prophetic program as a source of hope (3:38). The prophetic literature included the promise of *good fortune* as well as pronouncements of *misfortunes*. Beyond all expectation Israel was to rise like a phoenix from its ashes. In the third poem we will also find awareness of a fund of positive theological truths that are found throughout the Old Testament. So God's voice is overheard from afar at crucial places in the book, both as having heralded in the past the community's time of suffering and as offering newness of life for a future beyond that suffering.

Trajectories of Grief, Guilt, and Grievance

Grief comes in many shapes, shades, and sizes. The grief of Lamentations is of a traumatic, collective, and complicated nature, which counselors and pastoral caregivers distinguish from "normal" grief and which displays exaggerated and prolonged features. *Grief* is a general term used of the whole process of adjusting to loss and change. It is also used of a particular part of the process, a reaction of distress. In the latter sense, grief, guilt, and grievance represent three trajectories that run through Lamentations. I can recall only two cases of such a mix told to me by patients, cases quite different from each other. The differences are a warning that the exposition will need to study carefully the relationship between the three trajectories.

Sarah, an older woman, had been a foster mother for many years. A short time before I visited her, she had slapped a naughty child, who reported her to the social worker. Her fostering license was taken away, and now her life was empty—in fact, when she died the next week of complications following her surgery, the death certificate might have specified a broken heart as a contributing factor. She realized she had done wrong but protested to me that her punishment had been excessive in view of her many, unblemished years of service. I had been a foster parent at an earlier period of my life, and so I was deeply moved as Sarah told me of her grief in which guilt and grievance were tangled.

In the other case, Tom, a chronically disabled patient, could hardly wait to tell me that his parents would have nothing to do with him and that his only sister would not answer his phone calls. He was in great distress. "Do you have any visitors?" I asked. "My wife drives in most evenings," he replied. "She's Mexican," he added in a noticeably apologetic tone. I wondered whether that had anything to do with his family rejecting him, but I did not ask. I did know the couple lived a long way from the hospital. I felt I ought to gently suggest that the next time his wife visited him, he should tell her he loved her and how grateful he was that she was family. Tom thought and nodded. His grief and sense of grievance had a measure of guilt attached.

There is an impressive consensus among commentators, such as Hillers, Re'emi, Westermann, and O'Connor, that the theme of Lamentations is the articulation of grief, but apart from O'Connor, who wrote from the depths of her own grief, they are not sensitive to its presence. Gottwald has characterized the book as a "project of 'grief work' by which [those who grieved] bridged the gap between primal grief and outrage at the fall of Jerusalem and the ethics and theology by means of which their people interpreted public events and oriented their lives" (1993, 173). The pervasive use of alphabetic acrostics in the Hebrew is commonly interpreted as indicating the totality of grief, all-encompassing from A to Z. This also seems to be the acrostic's role in the course of a lament psalm, Psalm 25, while in the hymns of Psalms 111 and 145 it signifies a totality of praiseworthiness, and in the tribute of Proverbs 31:10–31 it conveys an impression of the complete wife. The suggestion has also been made that in Lamentations the acrostic aims to reinstate stability and order, but the dominance of grief in the book favors the notion that its main role is to reinforce it.

In these pages, grief is intertwined with loss and change as an inevitable reaction. A keyword runs through the original Hebrew whose overall usage registers this instinctive combination. It occurs six times, and I have translated it *devastated*. The translation is a useful one because, like the Hebrew word, it can cover the objective facts of suffering and/or the subjective feelings they evoke. The term occurs at the close of the book, in Lamentations 5:18, to describe the ruined temple site: *Mount Zion . . . lies devastated*. At the opening of the book, in 1:4, it has as its subject the broken city gates through which pilgrims no longer passed. It is used in a metaphorical way that blends objective and subjective aspects: Zion's gates *feel devastated*. Loss and grief are so bonded that grief is perceived as permeating the material evidence of the loss. In 1:13 Zion exclaims that the tragedy, viewed as divine punishment, *left me feeling devastated*. She goes on in 1:16 to subtly allude to the resentful distress of the listening congregation: *My children feel devastated that the enemy has prevailed*. In 3:11 the mentor's testimony about his own suffering echoes Zion's cry in 1:13 by saying that Yahweh's punishment *left me devastated*. In 4:5 the term is used of the effect of the long siege on one group of its victims, formerly rich people, who now *lay devastated in the streets*. Here again objective and subjective factors are combined. Apart from this keyword, grief manifests itself constantly through the book in the combination of a telling of objective facts of suffering and a reaction of subjective feelings of distress.

A second trajectory for the book takes the form of guilt. "Guilt reactions . . . are a normal and expectable aspect of the grief experience" (Rando 1984, 31), whether legitimate or not. Here they are claimed to be legitimate and appropriate to the situation. The distinctive presence of guilt endorses the message that is sounded loud and clear in the canonical preexilic prophets, that Judah's downfall, when it came, was to be no mere consequence of political rebellion against a secular power but a theological event by which divine intervention would punish Judah's spiritual rebellion. The vehement language of Yahweh's active hostility against Zion in 1:12–15 and 2:1–9 has been misunderstood by some commentators in terms of angry protest directed at God. Its true nature can be gathered from the fact that the recapitulation of this hostility in 3:43–47 is prefaced with a call for repentance and confession of sinning in lines 40–42.

Hunter (1996, 115, 145–46), appealing to Lamentations 1:5, 11, has fittingly looked behind agency to causality, behind Yahweh's responsive role as executor, using Babylon as an instrument, to Israel's initiatory role as the real cause underlying the divine intervention. The tragedy of 586 BCE was to be acknowledged as God's punitive intervention, the mentor urges in 2:1–9. No wonder his teaching assistant, Zion, anticipates him in 1:12–15 and is made to exclaim in 1:18, *Yahweh is the one in the right, because I defied (the words of) his mouth*. Two supporting stratagems are used in the book to teach the same lesson. First, divine anger comes to the fore in the second poem and is echoed in the mentor's first testimony in the third. It is to be understood as the awesome reaction to human sinfulness. Second, mention of human guilt and/or Yahweh's intervention that presupposes it occurs at significant junctures in the fourth and fifth poems.

In the Christian canon the book of Lamentations has been placed among the Prophets, next to the book of Jeremiah. However, in the older Hebrew canon of Scripture it belongs to another section, the Writings. The repositioning was due to an early tradition that Jeremiah wrote it, miscuing from 2 Chronicles 35:25. The tradition was already known to the Greek version, which was probably produced around 50 BCE. This tradition, which attempts to break through the anonymity of the book, has been revived by Lee (2002) in the case of the first voice in Lamentations 1 and 2 and in 3:46–51 and 4:1–16, 21–22 on the grounds of linguistic parallels with the book of Jeremiah. I have found this tradition of little value in expounding the five poems. Nevertheless, the placement is helpful in that it puts Lamentations at the heart of the prophetic literature, whose fundamental message the book avidly endeavored to teach.

For many people, guilt is not a major factor in the processing of their grief. However, there are situations in which it looms large, for example when a drunk driver has caused downright harm. In fact, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a modern counterpart to Lamentations in its insistence on guilt. Not that the organization uses the term, because it has good reason not to. For an alcoholic, the word is a dangerous one, heard not as "guilt" but as "shame," an emotion that can encourage defeatist, purely mental self-recrimination liable to drive him or her back to drinking. Instead, not at an initial stage but at subsequent steps in the twelve-step program, the movement teaches and implements processes of confession to God and another human being, of commitment to God's help, and of a pragmatic making of amends for specific wrongdoing, where possible. The necessity of taking responsibility for harm done, as an important means of regaining a clean and sober life, lies at the heart of the program.

The mentor of the community in the book of Lamentations has a kindred spirit in the AA sponsor who nurses along a particular recovering alcoholic and is committed to the progress of his or her charge. The handling of grief-stricken guilt is a task known both to the ancient mentor and to the contemporary sponsor. However, although there is overlap, the demand for accountability that Lamentations makes is not the same. It does not go so far as the human righting of wrongs the community has done. Instead, it is concerned with an intermediate goal, an admission that the punishment of sins was necessary and just, and it looks to God to right the wrongs done to the community. So guilt, in a legal sense, is a reasonable description of what was required, though theologically it transcends a purely forensic significance. The mentor sought a guilty plea to accompany grief so that the admission might trigger God's forgiveness of their sins and the fresh start predicted in the prophetic books—that "hope" for which Paul continued to look (Acts 26:6–7; 28:20). The attribution of guilt has a larger role in the liturgy as a whole. It is the start of a persuasive process of finding meaning for tragedy, a process that will culminate positively in the third poem, with its message that in God's overall purposes *good fortune* can be the intended sequel of such *misfortunes* (line 38). The confession of guilt has grace as its goal.

The third trajectory in the book is grievance, a theme that is liable to make readers uncomfortable. Does not grievance conflict with admitted guilt? And it hardly seems to be an acceptable spiritual response to suffering. Yet from a psychological perspective such anger is “a basic emotional response to loss” (Archer 1999, 70) and so a normal part of the process of grief. It is not surprising therefore that it is assigned significant space in the first two poems. The stage theory of grief lists anger as one of its five regular manifestations, after numb disbelief and yearning for the loss, and before depression (or at least profound and pervasive sadness) and acceptance; moreover, grief resulting from traumatic events—such as the book of Lamentations reflects—has been found to generate a higher degree of anger (Maciejewski et al. 2007, 712, 722). Looked at in this light, the book comes across as a comprehensive mingling of the three middle components—nostalgic yearning, deep sadness, and angry protest—with another item thrown into the mix, a sense of guilt. Advocates of the stage theory do not insist on strict sequencing, while there is a widely held view that the process of grief consists of a jumble of responses, disordered emotional debris. The book appears to reflect this view. The congregation’s silence until the fifth poem implicitly signifies the prolonging of shocked numbness, which, as characteristically in cases of traumatic loss, hampered the expression of their own grief and necessitated the pastoral efforts of the first four poems. Those efforts eventually enabled the people to break out of the spiritual inertia in which they were sunk.

Anger, then, has a part to play in the outworking of grief. “Despite impressive evidence that unacknowledged anger causes psychological, behavioral, social, and physical problems, anger is a poorly tolerated and often misunderstood emotion in Western societies” (Rando 1993, 464). Israel’s culture was realistic in finding room for expressions of grievance in the Psalms and the prophetic books. An instructive example of the latter occurs in Isaiah 10:5–19, which announces that Yahweh’s punishment of Israel was to be followed by the punishment of Yahweh’s human instrument, Assyria, for going beyond divinely set limits. This prophetic message is clearly a response to a sense of grievance at what was regarded as excessive suffering, for which the human enemy was blamed rather than God. It is this sort of grievance, as an element in a complex situation, that pervades the book of Lamentations. Judah had been the victim as well as the culprit, the injured party as well as the guilty party, sinned against as well as sinning.

At this point it is helpful to compare contemporary grief in response to a traumatic experience because it makes such grievance easier to understand. Abigail Carter (2008) calls one section of her tale of personal loss from 9/11 "the cleansing winds of anger." Certainly the grief of homicide survivors includes intense anger. When a close relative is randomly killed by a drunk or speeding driver or is murdered, no one is surprised at the family's angry desire for the offender to be caught and for justice to be manifestly done (Lord 1990, 19–22). It is in this spirit that the grievances of Lamentations are to be viewed. The mentor counsels that his people's deep anger over their wartime and postwar experiences should be brought to Yahweh as the one who has the providential power to bring about justice.

Accordingly, in the first poem, Zion, the congregation's role model, is heard praying about their enemies' acts of injustice and bringing them to God to resolve (1:21–22). The third poem provides an assurance that God takes notice of unjust behavior perpetrated during the postwar occupation (3:34–36). Moreover, in that poem the mentor cites as an example in his second testimony his prayer for justice over his own undeserved suffering at the hands of his enemies (3:52–66). The fourth poem closes with the mentor's assurance that Edom, Judah's archenemy, will get the comeuppance it deserves. The prayer in the fifth poem brings to the divine notice outrages committed by the occupying forces—and in the closing lines dares to express a measure of anger against God. The trajectory of grievance, like the trajectories of grief and guilt, runs through the book as evidence of raw and impassioned sorrow that cries out for relief. The hand stretched out in appeals for compassion and help turns at times into a clenched fist, and this is right and acceptable in the outworking of deep anguish, especially in its early stages.

The Fifth Poem as Finale

The last poem, the shortest of the five, is the real articulation of grief on the community's part, to which the earlier poems have been a preamble. Primed by what it has been taught, the congregation now poignantly speaks with its own voice. Of course, all that the two other voices, those of the mentor and of Zion, have said has doubtless brought relief, since the mentor is one of their own, having suffered what they have suffered and more besides, while Zion is a dramatic version of themselves. Yet without this particular articulation in the fifth poem, something would have been seriously lacking. "The sufferer himself must find a way to express and identify his suffering; it is not sufficient to hear someone else speak on his behalf" (Soelle 1975, 76). So their speaking out is necessary; it spells substantial progress in the processing of their grief. In fact, taking a stand of their own marks a turning point within grief, for which the mentor and Zion have been working so diligently and waiting so long. The congregation's speaking spells a change for the better and a decisive step toward coming to terms with the tragedy that has befallen them.

So much has been learned to give them an insight into their suffering. The three trajectories, the gut-felt themes of grief, guilt, and grievance, all come to a head in the fifth poem. Here the guilt, brief though the references to it are, is thoughtfully explored and set at structurally salient places in tones of sincere apology. Grief is covered in both its subjective and objective aspects, the latter now relating to the postwar occupation. The congregation has appreciated the flashbacks of the earlier poems, the necessary emotional reliving of horrible memories and the speaking of the unspeakable.

Now they can move to contemporary causes of distress. The grief is permeated with resentful grievance over their enemies' ill treatment, from which they have all been suffering in a multitude of ways. The community makes the three trajectories its own and creatively develops them as it echoes them.

The fifth poem is a prayer. That is not the most natural place for the grief-stricken to find themselves at, nor is it where the book itself began. It began with a voicing of the dirge, a step beyond a shocked and mute preoccupation with tragedy, but still a step that is able only to explore the human areas to which the tragedy pertains. In the first two poems the mentor recommends going further and turning to God in prayer, and the listening congregation hears Zion comply. The underlying reason for praying is bound up with the special nature of the catastrophe as divine punishment. The God who had torn down was the only one to turn to for restoration (Hunter 1996, 146). In the fifth poem the congregation engages in its own prayer, leaning on the tradition of the lament psalms. Something of the dirge survives: the account of suffering is much longer than what one finds in a lament psalm. Their traumatic grief still needs the emotional space the dirge provides.

From the perspective of prayer, the three trajectories take on new meaning, both here and earlier in the book in prayer contexts. Grief appeals to the compassion of God, and guilt produces confession that appeals to God for forgiveness, while grievance appeals to the justice of God. In this case the close of the prayer enterprisingly draws on another prayer tradition, one not used in the book hitherto, the tradition of a complaint psalm that challenges God. It dares to remind God to keep promises earlier made to the community of faith. The resources of prayer are ransacked because the congregation knows that whatever it can do by itself is not enough. They depend on God's taking the initiative: *Restore us to yourself, so that we can be restored*.

Balm for the Grief-Stricken

Brevard Childs summed up the canonical value of Lamentations by saying it "serves every successive generation of the suffering faithful for whom history has become unbearable" (1979, 596). This biblical book validates grief. It is God's gift to those who grieve. Historically, Lamentations is an effort to come to terms with 586 BCE, to face up to the shock it generated, in the hope of moving beyond it. The presence of Lamentations in the Bible emanates from the subsequent endorsement of the faith community, who recognized that this liturgical text was of supreme spiritual worth and in a special way was in tune with God's own heart. The book's canonicity is striking because so much of it is concerned with human suffering and with distress over human losses. Those who grieve will resonate with the book, hearing in it echoes of their own stories and emotions.

However, I recall a patient who, having undergone a mastectomy, found it difficult to grieve because of her Christian faith. She felt she was letting God down by failing to accept what she perceived as the loss of her womanhood. She thought grief was a sign of spiritual weakness and lack of trust. It had to be stifled as dishonoring to God. Her grief, repressed, was not lessened; her fear of owning and expressing it blocked any processing. Lamentations belies such a stoic view. It pushes human suffering to the fore as an indispensable concern. As a religious liturgy, the text brought human grief right into the temple courts (see the section "A Liturgy of Grief" above).

Judaism has two titles for the book. The first is its initial word, the shocked scream *ekhah*, which I have translated *How terrible that . . . !* It comes from the dirge, a secular manifestation of grief. The second title, found in the Talmud, is *Qinoth*, which comes from the same background. It means "dirges," elegies that bemoan human loss with no reference to God. This meaning underlies the English title, Lamentations. Each of the Hebrew titles recognizes that the intent of the book is to honor human grief; the titles invest grief with spiritual value. The book sanctifies the human process of dealing with the consequences of suffering as invaluable to its victims and so to a compassionate God.

Every grief is special. The story a grieving person has to tell is both like and unlike any other. This is particularly true of the book of Lamentations, whose historical and collective nature and cultural interpretation make it so distinctive. Little attempt has been made in the exposition to draw parallels with modern experiences of communal disasters, experiences that Zinner and Williams's collection of studies (1999) analyzes. As those studies show, there is considerable overlap with grief and adaptation to change on the personal level. The communal nature of the disaster depicted in Lamentations is a significant indication of the special nature of its grief. Still, any who grieve will welcome insights from the book, despite its idiosyncrasies that they do not share. Grief creates a canon within the biblical canon, headed by the books of Job and Lamentations and the lament psalms in the book of Psalms. They all offer literary companionship. Grieving people develop a knack of welcoming what they recognize as relevant to them and ignoring the rest. No matter that these biblical resources have different approaches to suffering. No matter that Job and Lamentations stand at opposite ends of a grief spectrum that ranges from innocence to guilt. The main thing is that they all embrace grief. So they enable those who grieve to feel at home with their generalities, whereas the world around and even their Christian circle may strike them as alien and unfeeling. Here are Scriptures that stand where the grieving stand. Such literature turns grief into a spiritual pilgrimage, excruciatingly arduous though it is, and permits faith to somehow survive despite the strains put on it.

A Book for Caregivers

I use the word *caregivers* to refer primarily to the pastor, counselor, or chaplain. For these caregivers, my exposition of Lamentations offers role models for dealing compassionately with those who grieve; stories about patients may prove especially useful for counselors or chaplains as they work with clients or patients. Pastors may apply the insights to their work with individuals in their congregations or, in a communal setting, use the material in this book as the basis for a sermon series about grief and caregiving.

In addition, a friend, relative, or good Samaritan may be a caregiver. These persons may hear echoed the desperate cry at two places in the book, "Will somebody out there—anybody—please listen?" (Lam. 1:12, 18); and those who grieve are liable to buttonhole strangers. For these caregivers, the text's insights about a sympathetic listener, along with the material about the grieving process, may prove valuable.

The book of Lamentations is a tribute to caregivers in view of the dominant part played by a speaker I call the mentor (see the section "A Liturgy of Grief" above). It is the mentor who helps the community to come to terms with its calamity. Himself one of its suffering members, remarkably he is able to step forward and minister to the needs of those whom he compassionately calls "my poor people."

Sometimes all that is required of caregivers is companionable silence, especially in the early stages of grief. That was what Job's three friends supplied at first (Job 2:13). Even Jesus asked his disciples to be such caregivers in the garden of Gethsemane, as in anticipatory grief he underwent the ordeal of waiting for the worst to happen: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (Matt. 26:38). In Lamentations the mentor needs to do more, to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15 NRSV), openly participating in their emotional turmoil. This is easier said than done. As Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote in her poem "Solitude," "Laugh and the world laughs with you. / Weep and you weep alone" (1958, 72). But supremely the mentor gives his community words and ways to grieve by articulating their grief and directing them to helpful traditions of expressing sorrow in a coherent manner. As a fellow sufferer, he is well positioned to experience and express the community's feelings.

In the third poem, this speaker puts on the mantle of the wounded healer, sharing his own stories to help the congregation get through theirs. Like Paul, he shows Yahweh to be "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor. 1:3–4). The mentor both reveals God to be compassionate and by his mentoring shows his own compassion, which is the foremost spiritual virtue according to Colossians 3:12. He is able to call the congregation to renewed faith and hope—and yet to fall back into fresh articulation of grief in the fourth poem, as he waits for them to catch up with him.

Readers of Lamentations have the opportunity to exercise their own skills in empathy, in direct response to Zion's appeal, *Listen, peoples everywhere, and look at my anguish!* (Lam. 1:18). Empathy is the capacity to gain a sensitive understanding of another's pain that has not first been one's own. "To read literature without an empathic view gives rise to interpretations of the work that fail to appreciate the inner mental life that the author, wittingly or unwittingly, is attempting to portray" (Muslin 1984, 303). Readers' success in this task depends on immersion in the total text rather than in selected parts. The book of Lamentations, read as a whole, takes readers into the hearts and minds of grieving folk and provides an exercise in empathic listening. It sets before us a case study that challenges us to identify with the feelings expressed in the text, step by step, and to understand its cultural traditions and theological presuppositions. It also invites us to appreciate the case study within the case study, how the mentor not only takes the congregation's grief seriously but also endeavors to help them move forward in their grief and gradually align that grief with appropriate faith and hope.

What will emerge is the singularity of the grief. The chaplain walks into the patient's room as well versed as possible in his or her history and still acutely aware of a need to pick up cues from the patient and learn the other person's perspective. There is a particularity about grief that must be acknowledged and respected. This is certainly true of the grief in Lamentations. As one reads these five poems, a story emerges that is familiar only to those who have read 2 Kings and the prophetic books. There is no obvious New Testament parallel to its theological interpretation of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE as the wholesale punishment of the people by an angry God for their sins. The destruction of the people of God, corresponding to the divine declaration in Amos 8:2 (NRSV), "The end has come upon my people Israel," is never envisioned in the New Testament. True, parallels of sorts with the Christian gospel present themselves, such as the bad news/good news sequence offered in the third poem, while basic truths about God and humanity emerge. Nevertheless, the nearest one can come to such punitive suffering in the New Testament is the loving Father's disciplining in Hebrews 12:5–11, which is borrowed from the wisdom teaching in Proverbs 3:11–12. However, Psalm 89:30–45 trenchantly distinguishes such tough love from the dire calamity that involved the ending of the Davidic monarchy as part of the dismantling of the Judean state.

In the New Testament, especially in Romans 1–8, God's anger rests on sinning humanity as a whole and is to be finally put into operation at the last judgment. However, a favorable verdict has been anticipated for God's people because of the death of Jesus Christ. God has graciously made that provision by which Jesus took their judgment upon himself, and so they no longer face a verdict of condemnation but are set on a Spirit-led road of being right with God. This radical theological realignment puts Lamentations, along with its matching Old Testament material, in a class by itself and not to be directly taken over by Christian readers.

Its pre-Christian content has to be read with theological sensitivity, just as any account of grief has to be read with psychological discernment. Undoubtedly, however, the lessons to be learned are profound and unforgettable.

Certainly the chaplain has to be careful not to jump to conclusions. A call to visit an extremely ill Japanese patient drove that lesson home. From the doorway I saw the aged patient unconscious or just asleep and an Asian lady sitting with bowed head in a lonely vigil. I realized I would be relating to the woman, evidently the patient's wife. As I entered the room, a silly joke came into my mind, and to my horror I found myself telling it to her with a broad grin. She threw back her head and laughed and laughed. "I needed that," she said. "I haven't laughed for a long time." Only then did we get down to serious matters. However, the humor, and the subsequent conversation, left that Japanese American woman fortified to continue her vigil. In spite of the cultural assumptions I initially brought to the visit, I had hit on the right approach. In a similar sort of way, the case study of Lamentations challenges Christian readers to discern its manifold significance aright.