

2008

## Constructing meaning in the face of suffering: Theodicy in lamentations

Elizabeth Boase

University of Notre Dame Australia, [liz.boase@flinders.edu.au](mailto:liz.boase@flinders.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo\\_article](http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_article)



This article was originally published as:

Boase, E. (2008). Constructing meaning in the face of suffering: Theodicy in lamentations. *Vetus Testamentum*, 58 (4-5), 449-468.  
<http://doi.org/10.1163/156853308X325029>

This article is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at  
[http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo\\_article/4](http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_article/4). For more information,  
please contact [researchonline@nd.edu.au](mailto:researchonline@nd.edu.au).



## **Constructing Meaning in the Face of Suffering: Theodicy In Lamentations**

**Elizabeth Boase**

**University of Notre Dame, Fremantle**

**Western Australia**

Suffering is an age old problem. The experience of suffering brings disjunction and discordance, and in the existential crisis which follows severe suffering, human beings – both individually and in community –struggle to construct meaning.

For communities which adhere to ethical monotheism, the struggle to construct meaning in light of suffering is an urgent task given the belief in a benevolent and loving God. Suffering raises questions about the nature of God, and God’s relationship to evil. The quest to justify God in the face of suffering is the task of theodicy. Driving this quest are three central tenets; “the belief in God’s goodness, the belief in his power” and “the belief in the real occurrence of suffering.”<sup>1</sup>

The book of Lamentations represents one example of a community’s struggle to construct meaning in the face the severe suffering which followed the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/6 BCE. Within these poems we hear the cries of the suffering community, a suffering which encompasses not only physical pain and distress, but also a loss of coherence and the collapse of the very traditions which helped to form community identity. The Temple had been destroyed, the political system dismantled and the social fabric of society torn apart. The collapse of meaning echoes the physical ruin of the city.

Within this existential crisis the Jerusalem community talks about and addresses God. The poems of Lamentations are profoundly theological; God is spoken of and spoken to. Over and above this, it can also be argued that these poems are also profoundly theodic. Lamentations incorporates speech which explores the relationship of God to the suffering, and while it cannot be argued that the book itself is a theodicy in its own right, it does grapple with theodic issues. In doing so, it not only reflects the present crisis, but proposes, and in turn subverts, possible theodic solutions to this crisis.

The question of theodicy in Lamentations has been considered in two recent publications. Johan Renkema, in his contribution to the anthology Theodicy in the World of the Bible,<sup>2</sup> argues that although the poets of Lamentations both experienced and expressed the existential crisis which arose as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem, the poets themselves were “far removed from any form of theodicy.”<sup>3</sup> Renkema suggests that while elements “akin to theodicy” do, at first sight, appear within the book (that is, elements which appear to justify Yahweh’s punishing behaviour<sup>4</sup>), there is no sense that an adequate theodicy has been achieved. Instead, according to Renkema, the poets did not consider Yahweh responsible for the disaster, and in fact were aware of the tremendous “tension that their misery must have engendered in Yahweh himself.”<sup>5</sup>

A differently nuanced discussion of theodicy in Lamentations occurs in the work of F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp.<sup>6</sup> In a reading which contrasts with that of Renkema, Dobbs-Allsopp notes that the destruction of Jerusalem and the associated suffering “prompted the same kinds of theodicy questions of sixth-century Judeans as those raised for their twentieth and twenty-first century counterparts.” He notes that “the overwhelming response in the exilic literature of the bible is theodic (theodicean), explaining in various guises Jerusalem’s destruction and the extreme suffering of the city’s inhabitants as just punishment for human sin.”<sup>7</sup>

According to Dobbs-Allsopp, Lamentations contains both theodic and anti-theodic strains. Theodic strains are identifiable in the nature of the text as prayer or address to God which implicitly brings the pain and suffering before God in the hope of response. In this way the poets affirm God’s ongoing potency. He also argues for theodic strains being evident in those places where the causality of human sin in the destruction is identified.<sup>8</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp argues, however, that to read Lamentations as theodic is to ultimately misread it, as anti-theodic strains are also evident. This anti-theodicy occurs in the refusal “to justify, explain or accept as somehow meaningful the relationship between God and suffering.”<sup>9</sup> It is seen in those places where there is a refusal to defend God’s actions in the face of the suffering, and in the protest against the very suffering itself. It is also evident in the treatment of sin, which both identifies sin as the cause of God’s actions (the theodic element) but also denies any sense of correspondence between sin and the suffering experienced.

The contrasting conclusions drawn by Renkema and Dobbs-Allsopp are strongly influenced by their understanding of the term theodicy. In setting the parameters of his study, Renkema defines theodicy as “a (self-) justification of YHWH’s actions or aloofness in the context of (significant) human suffering.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to state that “While no specific allusion can be found in the book of Lamentations to the *self-justification* of YHWH, clear reference is made to terrible human suffering and the question is raised as to the relationship between this suffering, the people who are forced to endure it, and YHWH.”<sup>11</sup>

Renkema’s definition, here at least, seems to indicate that to constitute “theodicy” a divinely articulated explanation of the suffering is required.<sup>12</sup> By its very nature, however, this definition precludes finding theodicy within Lamentations. The poems are the laments uttered by the Jerusalem community in the period following the destruction of the city. The one voice which is absent, in any form, is that of Yahweh. As such, on this application of the definition, theodicy is inevitably absent from Lamentations.

This focus on divine self-justification is not maintained in the article, and the definition becomes more orthodox in its focus on the justification of divine behaviour in the face of suffering. In his discussion, however, Renkema implies that to be identified as theodicy there must be a reasoned and rational reflection on suffering which is accompanied by a sense of resignation signifying the acceptance of a given explanation. So, for example, in relation to Lam. i 18 Renkema notes that although the statement concerning Yahweh’s righteousness (*sdyq hw’ yhwh*) would seem to provide a “rational” answer to the why of suffering, “the important notion associated with theodicy, namely that Yahweh’s actions satisfy human reason, is evidently absent.”<sup>13</sup> Specifically, as there is no clarity concerning the nature of the sin, this statement “should not be understood, therefore, as a fully rational justification of YHWH’s punitive action.” The confession is an expression of pious awareness that Yahweh is always in the right, but “cannot function as a sufficient explanation for His actions.”<sup>14</sup>

Renkema's conclusions draw on an understanding of theodicy which is tied to rational theology.<sup>15</sup> This type of definition would seem to preclude the identification of theodicy in ancient texts given its link with the modern, post-Enlightenment, period. Recent discussion as to the applicability of the term theodicy to ancient texts argues that although evil has occasioned religious response through all ages, it is only within the modern period that the question of evil becomes a reason for questioning faith itself, thus giving rise to the field of theodicy.<sup>16</sup> This questioning of faith is linked with the rise of eighteenth century concepts of rationality. Theodicy, so understood, is a rational argument, defined as "any theistic response to questions about how theism can be true in view of the existence of evil."<sup>17</sup>

A case can, however, be made for applying the term theodicy to pre-Enlightenment texts. The term has always had a multifaceted meaning and, since its inception, has never been limited only to the discussion of modern texts.<sup>18</sup> The applicability of the term theodicy to pre-Modern texts hinges, at least in part, on its definition. Weber argues that theodicy is any attempt to render suffering and evil intelligible.<sup>19</sup> Within Weber's use of the term, theodicy represents an existential problem which arises in the light of a confrontation with evil and suffering.

It is this notion of theodicy as an existential struggle against the practical realities of lived experience which most often lies behind the discussion of theodicy in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>20</sup> For example, in his article "Some Aspects of Theodicy in Old Testament Faith," Walter Brueggemann identifies two notions with regard to theodicy in the Hebrew Bible; that of a theodic settlement, and that of a theodic crisis. A theodic settlement represents a time "of consensus in the community about the kinds of actions that produce (and deserve) good outcomes (according to God's good pleasure) and bad outcomes (according to God's displeasure)."<sup>21</sup> A theodic crisis, by way of contrast, occurs in times of extremity and crisis in which some (or all) members of a community "find the old settlement out of kilter with lived reality that cannot be denied or explained away."<sup>22</sup>

The definition of theodicy as an existential need to explain suffering and evil is far removed from both the stated and implied definition used by Renkema, and offers a wider possibility for recognising the presence of theodicy within ancient texts, and

specifically within the book of Lamentations. Given that Lamentations is a text which emerges out of the lived experience of a community in the midst of its suffering it seems unrealistic to expect a rational, theoretical defence of God. From a practical perspective, however, we are able to seek and identify the theodic questions and explanations voiced from within the community.

### **Theodicy in Lamentations**

Two types of evidence can be sought with regard to the theodic content of Lamentations: evidence of the theodic crisis – that is the questions being posed; and the possible theodic solutions explored. A number of assumptions stand behind the analysis which follows. Lamentations is not an abstract, theoretical treatise on the relationship between God and suffering/evil, or even a text in which a unified, single theological voice is heard. The text does, however, provide a window into the lived experience of the community as it seeks to construct meaning in light of the crisis being faced. Lamentations is approached as a polyvalent text in which competing voices and theological viewpoints exist in tension with each other.<sup>23</sup> The consequence of this underlying assumption is that while elements of theodicy may be identified in the text, no single statement can be made about a unifying theodicy which underpins the entire text.

### **The Theodic Crisis**

That crisis lies behind Lamentations need not be debated. That this crisis is theodic in nature is also relatively clear. In the expressions of pain and suffering, in the protests and in the questions, the breakdown of meaning and theology are evident throughout.

The expression of pain and suffering is the most dominant feature of the text, with vivid descriptions of the plight of the city and individuals within the city occurring. Inherent in this expression is the struggle to come to terms with the extent of the suffering, and to grapple with this before God. That this is a struggle to construct meaning is evident in a number of ways.

These poems are lament-like in form. Although only chapter v conforms to the typical form-critical category of communal lament, lament elements occur throughout all the poems.<sup>24</sup> As laments, the poems are representative of the breakdown of meaning. In his discussion of the national lament form, Westermann states,

Even at its lowest moments the nation experienced its own history as a context that had meaning – or at least ought to have meaning. It took on meaning in that God was at work in it. Yet the nation experienced the plight it was in as an absurdity that confronted God with the question, “Why?” How can God bring such profound suffering upon people – if indeed they are his people – when he has previously done such great things for them? Insofar as the absurd is laid before God, the lament of the nation contains a dimension of protest, the protest of a people who cannot understand what has happened or has been done to them.<sup>25</sup>

The lament itself, with its cry to God and its element of protest, speak to the theodic crisis of meaning within the community.

The breakdown in meaning comes from two avenues; the divine causality behind the events, and God’s ongoing silence in the face of the current suffering. Divine causality is expressed in all chapters (i 5, 8, 12-22; ii 1-8, 17, 21-22; iii 1-18, 27-39, 40-66; iv 6, 11, 16, 21-22), with the crisis this engendered perhaps best highlighted in the cry “Look, O Lord, and consider! To whom have you done this?” (ii 20). That such a crisis should have befallen Jerusalem defies understanding.

Compounding the crisis is the ongoing nature of the suffering. Yahweh is both an oppressive presence within Lamentations (e.g., ii 1-8) but is also silently absent. The silence of Yahweh is represented in the petitions for Yahweh to look and notice the suffering (e.g., i 12, 20; ii 20; v 1) and for Yahweh to act against the enemy (i 21-22; iii 64-66). Lam. iii 42-51 voices this crisis. The people have confessed but God has not forgiven (iii 42). The narrator laments the destruction of the people, and vows that lament and weeping will continue “until God from heaven looks down and sees.” (iii 50). The final words of the book point most poignantly to the crisis, raising the fear and possibility that the God who has always been known as the protector of God’s chosen people may have abandoned them.

## **Possible Theodic Solutions**

Having identified the crisis, the path is open to explore possible theodic solutions ventured in Lamentations.

Drawing on the work of R. Green,<sup>26</sup> Laato and de Moor note that there are a number of typical/universal theodic responses to questions concerning the relationship between God and evil/suffering.<sup>27</sup> They identify six common theodicy types

1. Retribution theodicy
2. Educative theodicy
3. Eschatological theodicy
4. The mystery of theodicy
5. Communion theodicy
6. Human determinism<sup>28</sup>

As a means of approaching Lamentations from a fresh perspective, the poems will be considered for evidence of these different theodic explanations.

### **Retribution Theodicy**

Retribution theodicy is premised on an understanding that God's justice operates on the moral principles of reward and punishment. Rooted in the covenantal and legal traditions of Israel, retributive theodicy explains suffering as just punishment for human rebellion against God.<sup>29</sup>

As has been long identified, the interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for sin is evident within Lamentations.<sup>30</sup> Sixteen verses make direct reference to sin (i 5, 8, 9, 14, 18, 20, 22; ii 14; iii 39, 42, 64; iv 6, 13, 22; v 7,16), with thirteen of the sixteen referring to the sin of Jerusalem and/or the people. Lam. i 22, iii 64 and iv 22 refer to the sins of Jerusalem's enemies. Do these references, however, constitute a theodic explanation for the fall of Jerusalem?

A link between sin and God's action is made in those references which petition God to act against Jerusalem's enemies (i 21-22; iii 64; iv 21-22). In each, an act-



consequence correspondence is established, with Yahweh petitioned to act against the enemy in accordance with their action against Jerusalem. This correspondence between sin and punishment is identified in various ways.

In Lam. i 22 a chiasmic structure is used which parallels the sins of Jerusalem and the sins of her enemies, describing God's actions as a response to sin.

A *tb' kl r'tm l'pnyk* let all their evil come before you

B *w'wll lmw* and deal with them

B1 *k'sr 'wllt ly* as you have dealt with me

A1 *'l bl pš'y* because of (in accordance with) all my transgressions

Lam. iii 64 and iv 21-22 use specific vocabulary to establish a sense of correspondence. Lam. iii 64 calls on Yahweh to act in accordance with the nature of the deeds perpetrated by the enemy, using the verb *šwb* which implies that the sins be visited back on the enemy (*tšyb lhm gmwl yhwk km'sydyhm*). Similarly, iv 21-22 uses the verb *pqd* in the petition that Edom's iniquity be visited upon her (*pqd 'wnk bt 'dwm*).

These three references point to an underlying assumption that God acts against sin in a way that corresponds to the severity of that sin, and that God acts from a retributive moral framework in which the consequences of the sin are brought to bear upon the perpetrators.

In the petition for Yahweh to act in a way which corresponds to the sins of the enemy, an implicit theodic response to the current plight could be argued. Yahweh acts against transgressions, therefore the current plight is an act of Yahweh against sin, an assumption spelt out in i 22. Caution needs to be exercised, however, in reading from the petition to the remainder of the text. As is often noted, there is a lack of specificity as to the nature of Jerusalem's sin within Lamentations, making it difficult to fully substantiate correspondence between sin and punishment.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the overriding emphasis in the poems is on the experience of suffering not on confession of sin. This itself subverts the notion of correspondence between sin and punishment. The very fact of a petition for Yahweh to act against the enemy because of their

treatment of the city also suggests that for Jerusalem there is a sense that the suffering defies justification given the extent of pain experienced.<sup>32</sup> The theodic response, while arguably present, is, at best, ambivalent.

The remaining references to sin concern either the sin of the collective community (Jerusalem/the people) or specific groups within the community. These references do suggest that one of the responses to the theodic crisis engendered by the destruction of Jerusalem was a recourse to retributive theodicy, although this solution is neither fully articulated nor fully accepted. It exists as one expression amongst a number of viewpoints.

The majority of the references to sin occur in chapter i (vv. 5, 8, 9, 14, 18, 20, 22), and do, on the whole, support the view that the destruction of the city was a consequence of sin. In vv. 5 and 18, direct reference to Jerusalem's sin as the cause of Yahweh's action is made.<sup>33</sup> Alongside this, v. 8 refers to Jerusalem sinning grievously (*ḥt'ḥt'h yrwšlm*), v. 9 to Zion's impurity,<sup>34</sup> v. 14 to Jerusalem's transgressions (*pš'y*), v. 20 to Jerusalem's rebellion (*mrw mryty*) and the previously mentioned vv. 21-22 calls on Yahweh to deal with the enemy in the same way Jerusalem's transgressions have been dealt with.

Despite this frequent mention of sin in chapter i, and the causal link between sin and destruction, this theodic response is not made without reservation. Several features of chapter I subvert this seemingly dominant viewpoint.

The reference in Lam. i 8 occurs within a larger section rife with ambiguous language. Although Lam. i 8 opens with a clear reference to Zion's sin, a reference emphasised by the infinitive absolute construction (*ḥt'ḥt'h yrwšlm*), the surrounding verses employ the language of sexual abuse and violation, portraying Zion as a victim rather than as a perpetrator.<sup>35</sup> The emphasis of the passage is on the pain and humiliation of the city, effectively subverting the reference to sin.

In a similar way, the references to sin are subverted within the context of the wider chapter. Throughout chapter i the emphasis lies on the pain of the city, her humiliation and the lack of a comforter for her. The city is personified as a female figure, and

while she is spoken of by the narrator in vv. 1-11 (interrupted by Zion's voice in vv. 9c and 11c), Zion herself speaks in vv. 12-21. This personal voice of the city emphasises the pain and suffering. Taken with the portrayal by the narrator of the city as a grieving and violated woman, the text elicits from its audience a sense of empathy and compassion – a reaction at odds with the rational equation of sin and suffering.

As argued, a further counter-voice to the retribution theodicy is the lack of specificity in relation to the sin of the city. Common terms for sin are used (*pš'* vv. 5, 14, 21-22; *ḥt'h* v. 8; *mrh* vv. 18, 20), however no mention is made of the specific sins, which subtly subverts any sense of correspondence. So while retributive theodicy is voiced as a response to the existential crisis, it is neither the only voice, or a voice that is fully accepted.

Beyond chapter i, the reference to sin being causal in the destruction becomes less frequent and more ambivalent.

Chapter ii contains only one reference to sin. Lam. ii 14 refers to the failure of the prophets (whether past or present) to expose the sins of the city/people ('*wn*').<sup>36</sup> Within the wider flow of the chapter, ii 14 follows an extended description of the actions taken by Yahweh against the city (ii 1-8), a description of the plight of various groups within the city which leads to a lament of by narrator (ii 9-12) followed by a series of rhetorical questions highlighting the absence of a suitable comforter for the city (ii 13). The prophets are excluded as potential comforters for the city on the basis of their failure. While this statement does not deny the sin of the people, it does not directly link sin and God's actions.

That God's actions are not linked to the sin is significant in light of Lam. ii 1-8, which uses a series of active verbs to describe a Day of Yahweh enacted against Jerusalem. No mention is made of sin being the causal factor behind Yahweh's actions, which stands in marked contrast to references to the Day of Yahweh within the prophetic literature.<sup>37</sup>

Alongside the reference to the sin of the enemy in v. 64, two references to sin occur in Lam. iii. Verse 39 does link sin with Yahweh's actions, while v. 42 functions as an introduction to a lament which protests against God's silence and unresponsiveness.

Lam. iii 39 is the conclusion of a larger unit (vv. 34-39) and contains an admonition to cease complaining over the punishment of sins (*h't'w*). The thought progression of vv. 34-39 is difficult, and the translation of v. 39 is problematic.<sup>38</sup> The tone of vv. 34-39 is wisdom-like and didactic. Verses 34-36 describe a scene of injustice, often understood as the injustice experienced by the speaker. I have argued elsewhere, however, that the injustice could equally be understood as a reference to the sins being punished in v. 39 (i.e., the sins of the speaker/speaker's community). The focus is injustice in the social domain, and the assertion is made that Yahweh sees those injustices.<sup>39</sup> Verses 37-38 emphasise the omnipotence of Yahweh, including the statement that both good and evil come from the mouth of the Most High.<sup>40</sup> This then leads to the admonition of v. 39. The unit, then, delineates the sins being punished (vv. 34-36), describe Yahweh's attributes (vv. 37-38), which incorporates punishment, and concludes with the admonition to cease complaining over that punishment (v. 39). This, then, can be interpreted as a clear theodic statement asserting that the present suffering is a form of retributive justice.<sup>41</sup>

Lam. iii 42 contains another statement about the behaviour of the people, however, the theodic nature of the statement is more ambiguous. In a confession of sin, the communal voice states "We have transgressed (*pš'*) and rebelled (*mrh*)." Flowing from this, however, the text moves immediately into complaint against Yahweh, stating "But you have not forgiven (*'th l' slht*)." The confession functions as an introduction to a communal lament which protests about God's inaccessibility and the action of the enemy (vv. 43-47). The movement from confession to complaint makes it difficult to see v. 42 as theodic.

Retributive theodicy is evident in chapter iv, but is again ambivalent. Verse 6 is traditionally understood as a reference to the causative nature of the people's sin in the destruction of the city.<sup>42</sup> Both *'wn* and *h't't* are used of the city, and while it is possible to translate both words as reference to sin, the context would suggest that they are better understood as references to punishment and chastisement.<sup>43</sup> Within the

verse a comparison is made between Jerusalem and Sodom. The fate of Sodom is described in terms of the speed of its downfall. In the surrounding verses, the slow and protracted nature of Jerusalem's suffering is emphasised, suggesting that v. 6 is also concerned with a description of the nature of the chastisement (slow and protracted as opposed to sudden and quick) rather than the sin itself. By implication Jerusalem's fate was worse than that of Sodom's. Although this translation is preferred, the use of *'wn* and *ḥt't* holds the notions of sin and punishment alongside each other.

The second reference to sin occurs in vv. 13-16, which is concerned with the sins of the priests and prophets. These verses are amongst the most difficult in Lamentations, however, they suggest that the failings of the religious leadership to fulfil their role and point out the sins of the people contributed to the downfall.<sup>44</sup> The unit links this failure with impurity and subsequent social ostracising as a result of impurity. Verse 16 attributes the scattering of the priests and prophets/people to Yahweh, making a causal link between sin and its punishment.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, reference is made to sin in Lam. v 7 and 16. Both verses occur as part of an extended description of misery, however they stand in tension with one another. Verse 7 attributes sin to the previous generation, with ambiguity existing as to whether the present generation aligns themselves with the sinners, or protests that they are unjustly bearing the consequences of that sin. Verse 7b states *'nhnw 'wntyhm sblnw* which can be translated as either emphatic - "we bear their iniquities" - or contrastive - "we bear their punishment." If read emphatically, the theology of this verse coincides with v. 16, which contains a confession of sin that identifies the downfall as a consequence of past behaviour (The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned *ḥt'nw*). The contrastive reading places vv. 7 and 16 in tension with each other. Given the emphasis in vv. 1-18 on the description of the ongoing plight of the people in the face of their enormous suffering, v. 7 does suggest an element of complaint, therefore supporting the contrastive reading. Together the two verses suggest an ambivalence in relation to the perceived causality of the present generations' sinfulness.

Elements of retributive theodicy are clearly present within Lamentations, as seen by the recurring reference to the sin of the people, and the causal linking of this sin with Yahweh's action. That is not to say that this is a fully developed or wholly accepted theodic position. Too many factors in the text subvert or contradict the theodic statements for this to be so. Amongst this are those places which name Yahweh as the causal agent behind the destruction but make no reference to sin as the motivation behind Yahweh's actions (see especially ii 1-8 and iii 1-18).<sup>46</sup> However, it can be asserted that one of the responses to the existential crisis is that the suffering is the result of an act of retributive justice on Yahweh's part.

### **Educative Theodicy**

Educative theodicy is the attempt to explain the problem of suffering through its pedagogic purpose. "The sufferer gains a better understanding of his life through his personal suffering."<sup>47</sup> Educative theodicy is linked closely with retributive theodicy, with Laato and de Moor arguing that within the Hebrew Bible this theodic solution was inspired by both the Wisdom traditions and the experience of the exile.

Wisdom-like material is present in Lam. iii (vv. 25-30; 34-39). The focus of the material is on both the nature of Yahweh and on the proper stance to be taken in the face of suffering. It is possible to argue that an educative theodicy is, at least partially, present within these verses.

The material in Lam. iii differs from that of the surrounding chapters. In vv. 1-18 the intentionally gendered voice of a male sufferer is heard (*'ny hgbr*), a voice which contrasts with the feminine voice of the city (i 9c, 11c, 12-22; ii 20-22) and the voice of the narrator (i 1-11; ii 1-19). Lam. iii 1-18 contains an extended description of the suffering of the man, which draws on images of warfare and personal attack. A transition occurs in vv. 19-21, with the man moving from description of his misery to a reasoned reflection on that misery. Hope is explicitly introduced in v. 21 (this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope). In vv. 22-24 this hope is grounded on the nature of God, emphasising the attributes of steadfast love (*hsd*), mercy (*rhm*) and faithfulness (*'mwnh*).

In vv. 25-39 the man uses wisdom-like language to explore the reasons for the suffering and to expound the proper attitude towards suffering. Verses 25-30 continue to explore the attributes of Yahweh, describing God as being good (*tb*) to those who wait and seek him (v. 25). The sufferer is encouraged to adopt a stance of patient waiting on Yahweh (v. 26), a position which stands in contrast to the lengthy lament of vv. 1-18 and 42-66. That suffering has an educative function is identified in v. 27 “it is good (*tb*) for one to bear the yoke in youth,” with vv. 28-30 further advocating silence before, and acceptance of, suffering.<sup>48</sup> The hope expressed is tentative (v. 29 there may yet be hope), grounded in the belief that Yahweh neither rejects willingly nor forever. Hope lies in God’s compassion superseding the affliction.<sup>49</sup>

Following an expression of confidence in vv. 31-33, the didactic tone continues in vv. 34-39. Although these verses contain elements of retributive theodicy, the wisdom-like tone also seeks to teach the meaning of the suffering. Here, however, it cannot be argued that the suffering itself is portrayed as being educative, or is only so in as much as it demonstrates God’s moral imperative in response to sin.

Beyond these wisdom-like units it is difficult to maintain an educative theodicy within Lamentations. Given the immediacy of the suffering being experienced within the book, this absence is in itself not surprising.<sup>50</sup>

### **Eschatological Theodicy**

Eschatological theodicy justifies present suffering through the belief that later developments will prove that the suffering had not been in vain.<sup>51</sup> There is no evidence of this type of theodic thinking within Lamentations.

### **Theodicy Deferred: The Mystery of Theodicy**

Laato and de Moor state that “In several ancient Near Eastern literary traditions we encounter the idea that people cannot make the deities responsible for unmerited suffering because the human mind is unable to fathom the mysterious working of the divine mind.”<sup>52</sup> They argue that the mystery of theodicy is evident in the wisdom traditions of Job and Qohelet, and also in the psalms. Many psalms interpret suffering

as the absence of God's presence, an absence which is not always understood by the supplicant.<sup>53</sup> Laato and de Moor interpret Renkema's statement that the author of Lamentations "did not consider YHWH to be responsible for the disaster facing the people" as an example of mystery theodicy, and thus interpret the whole book under this typology.<sup>54</sup> This interpretation, however, can be questioned.

Firstly, there are places where Lamentations does blame God for the suffering. God is named as the one who has caused both the destruction and the suffering ( i 12-13, 15, 17; ii 1-8, 17, 20-22; iii 1-18; 31-39, 42-45; iv 11, 16). Part of the pain experienced is the fact that the suffering comes from God. These references, on the whole, do not link the suffering with sin, although in Lam. i there certainly is frequent reference to the causality of sin.

As argued by Dobbs-Allsopp, this naming of Yahweh as the one who inflicts the suffering can be seen as anti-theodic.<sup>55</sup> There is a refusal to justify the ways of God and, in the complaint, God's actions are called into question. God is called to act compassionately towards the people, poignantly highlighted in the cry of Lam. ii 20 (Look, O Lord, and consider! To whom have you done this?). The closing questions similarly implore God to act with compassion, but raise the possibility that this hope may be gone.

Why have you forgotten us completely?  
Why have you forsaken us these many days?  
Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored;  
renew our days as of old.  
– unless you have utterly rejected us,  
and are angry with us beyond measure?<sup>56</sup>

Read alongside the implicit questioning of a retributive theodicy in the petitions for God to act against the enemy, this refusal to justify God implies a rejection of a simple act-consequence framework,<sup>57</sup> but is not an example of an appeal to the mystery of theodicy.

Added to this, the ongoing suffering of the community stems, in part, from a sense of divine absence ( i 11, 20; ii 9, 20; iii 42-47, 49-50; v 20-21). Within Lamentations, divine absence and violent presence stand in contrast with each other, a contrast which creates tension in the text. In passages such as Lam. ii 1-8, God is portrayed as



actively destroying the city and in Lam. iii 1-18 the divine warrior language is used to portray the infliction of the man. The presence of the Babylonians as the actual enemy is sidelined, with Yahweh portrayed as the enemy. Violent presence is a past experience of the divine, while the sense of divine absence is a present reality. The ongoing pain comes from divine absence in the wake of the active destruction.

Contrary to Laato and de Moor, the cry to God in God's absence, can not be read as an appeal to mystery,<sup>58</sup> particularly when read in association with both the refusal to justify God's actions and the implicit questioning of a retributive theodicy in the petitions for God to act against the enemy. While the suffering may not be fully comprehended in Lamentations a theodicy of divine mystery as is expressed more fully in books such as Job and Qohelet cannot be argued.

### **Communion Theodicy and Human Determinism**

According to Laato and de Moor, "the fundamental idea behind communion theodicy is that suffering can bring human beings closer to God."<sup>59</sup> Theodicy based on human determinism is premised on the notion that human beings cannot escape their fate.<sup>60</sup> Neither of these theodic solutions are evident within Lamentations.

### **Theodicy in Lamentations**

In light of the above analysis, is it possible to talk about theodicy in relation to Lamentations? This question can be answered in both the negative and the affirmative. Lamentations is not a theodicy in its own right, but does contain many theodic elements within its poems.

Starting with the negative response, it needs to be stated clearly that the intention and purpose of Lamentations is not to develop a reasoned theodicy in response to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is in keeping with Renkema's argument. We can not argue that these poems contain a rational explanation concerning God's relationship to the suffering endured. These poems are not an attempt at systematic or rational theology. To label them as "theodicy" is to lose sight of their purpose, which is to

name the suffering experienced by the community and to bring that lived reality before the presence of God.

To say, however, that there is no theodicy within Lamentations is to deny an important element within these poems. These poems do reflect a theodic crisis, that is a break down in meaning which arises as a result of an experience of suffering. In turn there are theodic responses within the poems that attempt to explain, however partially, the relationship of God to the suffering experienced. These responses are not fully developed, nor are they the only viewpoint expressed. They are, however, present.

The theodic voice is heard in those places where the destruction is named as a consequence of human sin. This is expressive of a retribution theodicy which links human behaviour and divine punishment, and rationalises the suffering as just punishment for sin. This view is most evident in Lam. i, but can also be found in all other chapters.

The theodic voice is also seen in the didactic sections of Lam. iii, which identify potential benefit for the sufferer as a result of Yahweh's affliction of that suffering (iii 25-39, especially v. 27), and in the reflection on the character of Yahweh within these verses.

These theodic responses are not the only expressions within Lamentations, and are in fact countered or subverted within the poems. The retribution theology is subverted by the emphasis on the pain and suffering, with the sheer weight of the suffering expressed shifting the reader's response to one of empathy for Jerusalem/the people, a response which undermines the rational link between sin and punishment. The subversion is further strengthened by the absence of specific content as to the nature of the sin.

The theodic explanations are also countered by those passages which refuse to explain the link between Yahweh's actions and sin. This is especially evident in Lam. ii 1-8 and Lam. iii 1-18, both of which describe Yahweh's behaviour using a series of active verbs and descriptions, but make no connection with these actions and human

culpability. The protest against the silence of God and God's inactivity is a further counter voice to the theodic elements present.

Lamentations does portray a period of great, arguably existential, crisis for the community. A time of theodic crisis. It does explore and express possible responses to this breakdown of meaning, and in this way can be seen as theodic. To push this too far, and to argue that the book is itself a theodicy, is to misread the purpose and meaning of the text, but to deny the existence of any theodic elements is to ultimately do injustice to the struggles to construct meaning within the Jerusalem community.

### Abstract

This article explores the existence of theodic elements within the book of Lamentations. Drawing on the typology outlined by A. Laato and J.C. de Moor (Theodicy in the World of the Bible. Leiden, 2003) it is identified that Lamentations explores both retributive and educative theodicy within its poems. Other theodic solutions are not, however, present. Although these theodic elements are present, it cannot be argued that Lamentations constitutes a theodicy as such. Rather, the poems raise and in turn subvert a range of possible theodic assertions in response to the existential crisis which emerged in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

---

<sup>1</sup> R.M. Green, “Theodicy”, The Encyclopedia of Religion , vol. 14 (New York, 1987), [pp. 430-441] p. 431.

<sup>2</sup> A. Laato and J. C. de Moor (eds.) Theodicy in the World of the Bible (Leiden, 2003), p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> J. Renkema, “Theodicy in Lamentations?”, in A. Laato and J.C. de Moor (eds.), Theodicy in the World of the Bible (Leiden, 2003), [pp. 410-428] p. 428.

<sup>4</sup> Renkema, “Theodicy in Lamentations?”, p. 415.

<sup>5</sup> Renkema, “Theodicy in Lamentations?”, p. 427. At this point, however, Renkema seems to contradict himself, stating “They themselves (i.e., the poets) are conscious of God’s pain on account of the fact that he did himself injury by rejecting the people he had chosen, by destroying Zion that he himself had built and by allowing oppression and affliction of human beings, something very far removed from ‘his heart’ (Lam. 3:33). Aware of this tension and pain they appeal to God against God.” (pp. 427-8)

<sup>6</sup> F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, Lamentations (IBC. Louisville, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, Lamentations, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Lamentations, pp. 28-29. Dobbs-Allsopp does note that the human causality is dramatically underscored in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, Lamentations , p. 29. Dobbs-Allsopp draws on the work of Z. Braiterman in his discussion of anti-theodicy (Z. Braiterman, [God] after Auschwitz. [Princeton, 1998]).

<sup>10</sup> Renkema, “Theodicy in Lamentations?”, p. 410. This restrictive definition is at odds with the wider collection within which his work is situated.

<sup>11</sup> J. Renkema, “Theodicy in Lamentations?”, p. 410. Italics added.

<sup>12</sup> To support this, he draws the reader’s attention to Ezek. xxii 23-31, a prophetic oracle using first person divine voice.

<sup>13</sup> Renkema, “Theodicy in Lamentations?”, p. 417.

<sup>14</sup> Renkema, “Theodicy in Lamentations?”, p. 418-419.

<sup>15</sup> The term “theodicy” was first coined by Leibniz in 1710. In his treatise, Leibniz did not clearly define the meaning of theodicy, however, historically, Sarot (M. Sarot, “Theodicy and Modernity: An Inquiry into the Historicity of Theodicy”, in A. Laato and J.C. de Moor (eds.), Theodicy in the World of the Bible [Leiden, 2003] pp. 1-26) identifies that it has been used to refer to

- 
1. the philosophical study of the relation of God and evil,
  2. the defence of the justice of God in spite of the evils in God's creation, and
  3. rational theology.

By rational theology, Sarot refers back to Victor Cousins (1792-1867) who divided philosophy into four parts: psychology, logic, morality and theodicy, a term used to designate rational theology which comprised of proofs of the existence of God, God's attributes, providence and the problem of evil.

<sup>16</sup> Sarot ("Theodicy and Modernity", p. 6) identifies that modernity affected thinking about evil in at least four ways. "(1) Before the eighteenth century the problem of evil was a problem *within* the Christian faith: the problem to account for the existence of evil, given the benevolent omnipotence of God. From Leibniz onwards, however, the problem of evil becomes a problem *about* the Christian faith. From then on, it is God's justice, and even God's existence, that is at stake in discussions of the problem of evil. (2) Before the eighteenth century, fathoming the problem of evil led man (sic) *to doubt himself*. ... From Leibniz onwards, however, the intellect of the autonomous theodicyist is no longer doubted, and this intellect leads him *to doubt God* and God's justice instead. (3) Before the eighteenth century, the problem of evil had a *practical* focus: How can we obtain happiness in spite of evil? From Leibniz onwards, however, the problem of evil became a *theoretical* enterprise: the rational attempt to show the compatibility of the existence of the Christian God with the presence of evil in the world. The theoretical project does not have any direct practical implications. (4) Before the eighteenth century, thinking about the problem of evil was aimed at winning over those within Christianity holding *false beliefs*, whereas from Leibniz onwards, theodicy is aimed at winning over *non-believers*."

<sup>17</sup> M. McCord Adams and R. Merrihew Adams. Cited Sarot, "Theodicy and Modernity", p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> In his influential "Das Problem der Theodizee" Max Weber applies the concept of theodicy to pre-Christian and non-Western religious texts, arguing that where both monotheism and morality have emerged "human beings sooner or later applied their moral norms to the one God and raised the problem of theodicy." (Cited Sarot, "Theodicy and Modernity", p. 21).

<sup>19</sup> Theodicy, p. x. It has been argued that Weber uses theodicy in at least three different ways: "(a) in its classical sense; (b) to refer to the existential need to explain suffering and evil; and, related to this; (c) to describe the resolution of these needs into statements of moral meaning." (G. Obeyesekere, "Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism", in E.R. Leach (ed.) Dialectic in Practical Religion [Cambridge, 1968], {pp. 7-40} p. 11).

---

<sup>20</sup> A range of publications address the question of theodicy in the Hebrew Bible. See, for example, W. Brueggemann, "Some Aspects of Theodicy in Old Testament Faith", Perspectives in Religious Studies 26 (1999), pp. 253-268; S.E. Balentine, "Prayers for Justice in the Old Testament : Theodicy and Theology." CBQ (51) 1989, pp. 597-616; J. Crenshaw, "Theodicy", ABD, vol. 6 (New York, 1992), pp. 444-447; J.L. Crenshaw, (ed.) Theodicy in the Old Testament (London, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> "Some Aspects of Theodicy," 255

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 257

<sup>23</sup> This view of Lamentations has found increasing acceptance over the past decade. See, for example, E.C. Boase, The Fulfilment of Doom: The Dialogic Interaction Between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early Exilic Prophetic Literature (New York, 2006); Dobbs-Allsopp, Lamentations; K. O'Connor, Lamentations and the Tears of the World (New York, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> For detailed discussion see C. Westermann, Lamentations: Issues in Interpretation, (Minneapolis, 1994); E. Gerstenberger, Psalms, Part II and Lamentations (FOTL. Grand Rapids, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> C. Westermann, Praise and Lament in the Psalms (Atlanta, 1981), pp. 270-271.

<sup>26</sup> Green, "Theodicy", pp. 430-441.

<sup>27</sup> Theodicy, p. xx. They state that "Given the fact that indignation at seemingly undeserved suffering is a universal emotion, it is only natural that attempts to justify the gods who might be held responsible for such misfortune resemble each other. This renders it possible to discern different types of theodicy, even though it should be recognised right away that all attempts at classification have their shortcomings."

<sup>28</sup> Theodicy, pp. xxx. This typology is applied by a number of contributors in the anthology, however not by Renkema.

<sup>29</sup> Theodicy, pp. xxx-xxxiii.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, N. Gottwald, Studies in the Book of Lamentations (London, 1954), pp. 67-73; J. Renkema, Lamentations (Leuven, 1998), p. 56; A. Weiser, "Klagelieder." In R.H. Ringgren, and A. Weiser (eds.) Das Hohe Lied, Klagelieder, das Buch Ruth, das Buch Esther: Übersetzt und erklärt von Helmer Ringgren und Artur Weiser (Göttingen, 1958), [pp. 39-112] pp. 304-306; W. McKane, Tracts for the Times: Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (London, 1965), pp. 53-57; R.K. Harrison, Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary (Leicester, 1973), pp.

---

200-3; W.J. Fuerst, The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 207, 262.

<sup>31</sup> Gottwald, Studies, p. 68; Dobbs-Allsopp, Lamentations, pp. 32, 61.

<sup>32</sup>J. R. Middleton (“Why the ‘Greater Good’ Isn’t a Defense: Classical Theodicy in Light of the Biblical Genre of Lament” , Koinonia IX (1997), pp. 81-113) argues in relation to the greater good argument that “If I genuinely believed that that any particular case of evil I encounter is allowed by God for some equal or greater good that could not be produced without it, why would I ask God to remove or modify this evil?” (p. 91). In a similar way, it is possible to argue that the petitionary prayers in Lamentations speak to a sense of injustice experienced, and as such subvert the notion of retributive justice.

<sup>33</sup>Because the LORD has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions (v. 5); The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word (v. 18)

<sup>34</sup> The reference to Zion’s impurity (Her uncleanness [*tm’th*] was in her skirts) is ambiguous. Is this a reference to impurity through Zion’s own indiscretion/neglect, or a reference to impurity through her violation and abuse by others? See discussion by K. O’Connor, “Lamentations.” NIB 6, (Nashville, 1994), [pp. 1011-72] p. 1030; Dobbs-Allsopp Lamentations, pp. 63-64; Boase, Fulfilment of Doom, pp. 175-177.

<sup>35</sup>F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, and T. Linafelt, “The Rape of Zion in Thr 1,10”, ZAW 113 (2001) pp. 77-81.

<sup>36</sup> The identity of the prophets is debated within this verse. See Boase, Fulfilment of Doom, pp. 182-184 for discussion.

<sup>37</sup> See Boase, Fulfilment of Doom, pp. 105-139.

<sup>38</sup> See H. Gottlieb, A Study on the Text of Lamentations (ACTA Jutlandica. Aarhus, 1978), pp. 51-52; B. Albrektson, Studies in the Text and Theology of Lamentations (Lund, 1963), p. 181.

<sup>39</sup> See Boase, Fulfilment of Doom, pp. 192-3 for full discussion.

<sup>40</sup> *mpy ‘lywn l’ ts’ hr’wt wh̄twb*

<sup>41</sup> Renkema (“Theodicy in Lamentations?”, pp. 420-427) provides an alternate reading for this passage, arguing that it is a condemnation of false prophets and thus places the responsibility for the catastrophe on their shoulders. As such, he argues no theodic element is present in this passage. Renkema’s argument is forced, particularly in the links he makes with prophetic texts. He also expresses concern that the admonition not to complain about the punishment seems to stand in contradiction with the

---

expression of lament throughout the book. This concern, however, fails to recognise the polyvalent nature of this text, and tries to force it into a unified theological expression.

<sup>42</sup> Westermann, Lamentations, p. 194; D.R. Hillers, Lamentations (AB 7A. New York, 1992), p. 135; O'Connor, Tears of the World, p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> I. Provan, Lamentations (NCB. Grand Rapids, 1991), p. 132; A. Berlin, Lamentations (OTL. Louisville, 2002), p. 99; Meek, "Lamentations" IB, vol 3 (New York, 1956), [pp. 3-38] p. 31; Boase, Fulfilment of Doom, pp. 184-185.

<sup>44</sup> See Westermann, Lamentations, pp. 198-202; Albrektson, Text and Theology, pp. 187-191; Boase, Fulfilment of Doom, pp. 185-188, for treatments of this unit

<sup>45</sup> The identity of the subjects of the verbs in vv. 14-16 is difficult. The reference could be to the priests and prophets (my preference) but also to the people themselves.

<sup>46</sup> Texts which Dobbs-Allsopp (Lamentations, p. 30) identifies as examples of the anti-theodic strain within Lamentations.

<sup>47</sup> Theodicy, p. xxxix.

<sup>48</sup> Laato and de Moor, Theodicy, p. xli. Westermann (Lamentations, pp. 176-177) similarly notes that these verses have a didactic function.

<sup>49</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp (Lamentations, p. 121) notes that the hope expressed in these verses is contradicted elsewhere in the text. That assertion that God will not reject forever is contrasted with statements about God's rejection in ii 7 and v 20, 22. Statements about Yahweh's compassion stand in tension with statements which announce that Yahweh has acted without mercy and pity (ii 2, 17, 21; iii 43). Similarly the confidence that Yahweh will see (iii 36 – itself a difficult assertion, literally "God does not see" – echoes the frequent calls for Yahweh to notice the suffering of the city/people ( i 9, 20; ii 20; iii 59-60, 63; v 1).

<sup>50</sup> That a more didactic and reasoned tone is present in Lam. iii has led a number of commentators to argue that this chapter stands at a much greater distance from the events of 586 BCE than the remainder of the book. See, for example, M. Löhr, "Threni III und die jeremianische Autoschrift des Buches Klagelieder", ZAW 24 (1904), pp. 1-16; Westermann, Lamentations, p. 105; Meek, "Lamentations", p. 5; Fuerst, Lamentations, p. 212.

<sup>51</sup> Laato and de Moor, Theodicy, p. xlii.

<sup>52</sup> Laato and de Moor, Theodicy, p. xlvi.



---

<sup>53</sup> Laato and de Moor, Theodicy, p. xlvi-xlvii.

<sup>54</sup> Laato and de Moor, Theodicy, p. xlvii.

<sup>55</sup> Lamentations, pp. 27-33.

<sup>56</sup> Lam. v 21-22

<sup>57</sup> I owe this point to J. Richard Middleton (personal correspondence).

<sup>58</sup> As Laato and de Moor (Theodicy, p. xlvii) do in relation to the motif of divine absence in the Psalms.

<sup>59</sup> Theodicy, p. xlviii.

<sup>60</sup> Laato and de Moor, Theodicy, p. liv.