



## Lamentations (Part 2)

### Divine "Justice"

The book of Lamentations is a response to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (c. 586-87 BCE). Last week, we discussed how Lamentations might reflect attempts to "contain the uncontainable" within the bounds of its literary form. The effort to contain grief may also be a response to God's own lack of containment. In the world of the poem, God's uncontained anger is the ultimate cause of Jerusalem's downfall.

One explanation given for Israel's destruction is that of divine justice. God's wrath is understood as a punishment for the city's wrongdoing. Yet while the poem admits that Israel did something wrong, it also seems to say that the punishment went too far. Divine justice is cold comfort in the face of human suffering. Lines like "the Lord has become like an enemy" bring this sentiment to light (2:5). Is divine justice really just?

### Daughter Zion Speaks

Questions about divine wrath and gender are inextricable in the first two chapters of Lamentations. This is because Jerusalem becomes the female character "Daughter Zion," God's bride. God rejects Daughter Zion for her iniquities at the beginning of Lamentations. The poem continues to remain within the pain of this rejection throughout. These chapters contain disturbing images of sexual violence. Unfortunately, this kind of disturbing imagery can be found elsewhere in prophetic literature (e.g., Hosea 2). Such texts present a picture of domestic life in which God behaves like a narcissistic and abusive boyfriend. It is unnerving to read that this abusive dynamic characterizes God's relationship to Israel in these texts.

Yet Daughter Zion speaks in Lamentations for the first and only time in the Bible. In other prophetic literature, descriptions of cities that have been destroyed typically come from the perspective of onlookers. It is unusual to hear the destroyed city speak for itself—or *herself*, in this case. Daughter Zion directly addresses the voyeuristic onlookers as they bear witness to her suffering (1:11-13). She has been left without the patriarchal protection required for women's safety in this society.

### Searching for Hope

In chapter three, a male voice suddenly begins to speak: “I am the man” (3:1). This section is arguably intrusive and masculine in character. While the voice is self-pitying, its tone changes halfway through the chapter. The man declares that he still has hope and trusts that God is good (3:22). This hopeful shift may feel theologically necessary in the midst of such a bleak and desolate scene. The voice of destruction alone is insufficient; there must be an appeal to God. Yet this hopeful tone all but evaporates in the final chapters of this book. The poem speaks as a collective “we” in Lamentations 4-5. The first person plural gives voice to the people’s pain and asks God why they have been abandoned.

The poem’s conclusion is open-ended and ambivalent: “... unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry beyond measure” (5:22). Jewish readings of this text, however, repeat the slightly more hopeful appeal to God in verse 21: “Restore us to yourself, oh Lord....” Although the choice to repeat 5:21 is not precisely true to the text, it does reflect the larger reality that grief and trauma are inherently “jumbled” experiences. These readings require communities to rationalize a return to God and make sense of what such a return might mean, even in the midst of human suffering.