

# Introducing a re-reading of Lamentations through the lens of trauma studies: The challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic



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When the world went into lockdown (2020) due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the streets and places of socialising became deserted – much like in the opening verse of Lamentations. This prompted a desire to re-read this book in light of the pandemic. The question was asked whether this book, set amidst the calamity of the Babylonian captivity and destruction of Jerusalem, can be helpful. Can this book help us make meaning and sense in the face of a new enemy that threatens the world? The article took note of all the necessary interpretations and introductions to the book of Lamentations and concluded that it can be read as lament and, in particular, communal lament. The language of lament, sometimes lost in a world of technology and positivity, can be helpful to verbalise loss and trauma. This elicited a discussion of trauma and biblical studies, and how they interact. Much of literature that originated in traumatic circumstances became 'meaning-making literature'. It was the case with Lamentations back in the wake of 586 BCE and also in many other instances when the book was re-read. This article provided examples of these instances. The invitation was then accepted to read some of the verses in Lamentations through the lens of the trauma created by COVID-19, and many similarities were found.

**Contribution:** Although Jerusalem was destroyed by an enemy that could be seen, and COVID-19 is caused by an enemy that cannot be seen, there are many similarities between the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation in Jerusalem as lamented by Lamentations. As 'meaning-making literature', lament is sometimes the only fitting response to the incomprehensible reality of pain and suffering. Lament defies the cheap answers so often given by religion when it is confronted with mystery, doubt and despair. This seemed to be the case in Lamentations. It was concluded that Lamentations can help readers through the process of trauma therapy as it opens the wound and helps the individual to connect with the bigger community in trying to make sense of it all and to involve others in the pain. The newness of the COVID-19 pandemic and a response from an Old Testament perspective, made the scope of this article relevant.

**Keywords:** Lamentations; COVID-19; trauma studies; Bible; Lament.

## Introduction

On the 23rd of March 2020, South Africa followed the example of many European and far-Eastern countries when the president of the country, Mr Ramaphosa, announced a 21-day countrywide total lockdown to combat the spread of the COVID-19 – or as referred to in most newspaper articles as the *Coronavirus*. This lockdown was later extended for another 14 days. Images of desolated streets and places of socialising were posted on various social media platforms. Absorbing the reality of these images, the opening verse of the book of Lamentations eerily came to mind: *How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!* (Lm 1:1a).<sup>1</sup>

It is this application of the book of Lamentations to situations of loss and disillusionment that draws readers back (as will be discussed later) to these five poems of lament time after time. This article will make a case for the need in biblical studies to allow texts to be re-interpreted and show how valuable the language of Lamentations – that is lament – can be in times of utter hopelessness and desperation. Before this is argued, the critical landscape of the book will be looked at briefly. This will endeavour to establish mainly two things: firstly, that Lamentations is poetry that originated primarily as a response to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE; and secondly, that the genre of this poetry is indeed lament. In the next section, lament will be discussed and how lament can

1. All Bible references are from the New International Version (NIV).

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be a fitting response to personal and national crises. Over the years, a book such as Lamentations was re-read in many instances of disastrous historical situations. The contribution of modern trauma studies will be looked at as a possible lens through which to re-read this book. Examples of this will be looked at before a case will be made that the re-reading of these laments and the language of lament can truly provide hope to readers in this time of (inter-) national pandemic; for surely not only the city of Jerusalem 'lies deserted' due to this COVID-19 pandemic – the whole world does.

## Departure points for interpretation

### Acrostic poetry

When discussing Lamentations and recent trends in interpretation, one must start with the obvious. The book is comprised of five poems. Four of these poems are acrostic in structure which means that they all start with commencing letters of the Hebrew alphabet, starting with *aleph* and ending with *taw*.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 3 consists of 66 lines, but are acrostically structured in groups of three. The fifth poem is not acrostic, but does have 22 lines – the same number of letters as in the Hebrew alphabet. Some scholars believe that the intention of the author was to revisit it to finish the acrostic at a later stage, but never got to it (cf. Salters 1998:103). Dobbs-Allsopp (1997:58–59) suggested that the poetry and acrostic nature of Lamentations is 'healing through language' and this is achieved by the fact that the community is able to voice their pain and anger, but also through the form of the poetry. In his argument, the absence of acrostics, as well as the *Qina* metre<sup>3</sup> in the last poem, is to signal the end of the poem by altering the pattern and repetition in the poem.<sup>4</sup> The readers are taken to a point of closure as they sense, by means of poetic changes, that the end is approaching and so their healing and closure must start to realise. The first suggestion may not be more plausible, but is certainly more intriguing, for what it is worth. The poet was up until the fifth poem very consistent, and two chapters of 22 acrostic lines on each side of the 66 acrostic lines of chapter 3 would make more sense. There are also traces of an attempt at acrostics in chapter 5 that strengthens the argument for the theory that maybe the poet was still working on it or was not able to finish it. This, for me, increases the open-endedness of the book that concludes with a question: '[U]nless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure' (Lm 5:22). Sometimes at the end of a lament, there still is no answer.

2. It is to be noted that, according to Miller (2002:10), chapters 2, 3 and 4 deviate from the Hebrew alphabet by reversing the letters *ayin* and *peh*. This is also the case in the 4QLam version of chapter 1. Be as it may, it does follow an otherwise uniform acrostic pattern. Boda (2012:478) observes that 'ancient abecedaries reveals that both arrangements of the alphabet were acceptable'.

3. *Qina* metre refers to the device the poet employs in the first four chapters of Lamentations. Because Hebrew poetry is 'patterned' speech, it uses sound, metre, word and imagery to communicate. *Qina* metre is when 'the second colon of the parallel line is consistently shorter than the first. It is usually described as a 3:2 metre as opposed to the more balanced 3:3 form. The unbalanced metre has often been described as a kind of limping rhythm, supposedly appropriate for the mourners who are dragging themselves along a funeral procession' (Dillard & Longman III 1995:309).

4. In this regard, Dobbs-Allsopp borrows from Hernstein's 1968 work.

Below are some of the reasons<sup>5</sup> (without universal scholarly accord) that are given for the purpose of the acrostic form of the poems:

- It was to serve as a memory aid to learn and remember the poems.
- A pedagogic device to teach schoolboys.
- Some believe it reveals the belief in magical powers.
- It was structured in this manner for liturgical purposes.
- Most likely they may have been to show that the complete and exhaustive expression of their grief was to use every letter available.

### Setting

The employment of this poetic device, along with the metaphors and imagery in the book, undoubtedly makes it a book of poems and, more specifically, poems that lament the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE to the Babylonians (Boda 2012:477; Mandolfo 2009:237). There are scholars who are reluctant to blindly accept this historical event for the setting of these poems, but there are also many who are willing to. Dating Lamentations has become a somewhat contentious matter. A good argument was proposed by Dobbs-Allsopp (1998) trying to date Lamentations based on its use of language. He (Dobbs-Allsopp 1998) draws on the research by biblical scholars who:

[H]ave succeeded in identifying a whole range of typological features that characterise the two principle language phases reflected in the Hebrew Bible, pre-exilic or Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH) and post-exilic or Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH). (p. 2)

In his argument, he (Dobbs-Allsopp 1998) shows that the linguistic features in the Book of Lamentations are in line with the period of transitioning between two phases of the language and came to the following conclusion:

Therefore, one may conclude that the poems must have been composed in the period from 587/86 to 520 BCE (or perhaps somewhat later), confirming on a linguistic basis the opinion held by the majority of scholars, namely: that Lamentations dates to the general period following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. (p. 36)

This conclusion will also be the departure point for this article as it goes forward.

### Authorship

Moving on to the authorship of Lamentations, it is true that, for centuries, scholars proposed that Jeremiah was the author of these poems. The arguments for this hypothesis are obvious. In English Bibles, these poems follow the book of Jeremiah and this, along with the historical setting of Jeremiah's last chapter (*The Fall of Jerusalem* – chapter 52), and the fact that Jeremiah once 'composed laments for Josiah' (Chr 35:25), became an argument for Jeremiah's authorship. English Bibles as late as 1952 named the book 'Lamentations of Jeremiah' (Revised Standard Version [RSV]) and Afrikaans

5. These reasons are summarised by Gottwald (1985:541) and Huey (1993:445).

Bibles as late as 1983 also called the book '*Klaagliedere van Jeremia*' (Afrikaans 1983 [AFR83]). It must be noted that in the Hebrew Bible it features within a canon known as The Writings,<sup>6</sup> and more specifically alongside Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Esther. According to Dillard and Longman III (1995:304), in 1712, H. van der Hardt was probably the first scholar to deviate from the concept of Jeremiah's authorship. Although his reasons and proposed authorship was not probable, he started the conversation which, over the years, brought many arguments against Jeremiah's authorship that include differences in style (there are no acrostics present in Jeremiah), vocabulary (many expressions and words in Lamentations are patently absent in Jeremiah) and also statements that contradict traditional Jeremiah theology. They are Lamentations 2:9 (condemning prophets), 4:7 (a positive view of the pre-exilic rulers) and 5:7 (sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem) – something Jeremiah warned against and prophesied in detail. This, of course, is juxtaposed against statements in Jeremiah 7:25; 22:1-30 and 7:20 (Huey 1993:442–443). It is also possible that more than one author composed Lamentations, based on the different uses of acrostics in chapter 1 versus chapters 2, 3, 4, and also the absence of the acrostic pattern in chapter 5 (cf. Salters 2010:7). Determining authorship in Lamentations has up to now proved difficult, and Miller (2002:11) concludes that 'The final word has yet to be spoken regarding the author(s) of Lamentations, and several scholars claim that only an agnostic stance regarding this issue is appropriate.' The general consensus, which more or less agrees to 'an unknown eye-witness of the fall of Jerusalem' (cf. Boda 2012:477; Hill & Walton 1993:544) as author(s), is accepted in the pursuit of the argument which follows. Regarding the aim of this article and the arguments, the genre of the book is of much more importance. It is the genre of lament that invites re-readings of the Lamentations text in times of crisis or, as is in this case, a pandemic.

## Genre

Looking at the genre, one must start with the earliest Jewish tradition that these poems, part of the Five Scrolls, was traditionally read during the commemorations of the fall of the First and Second Temples on the ninth day of Ab on the Jewish liturgical calendar. These liturgical readings deemed them to be laments, lamenting the destruction of the temples. Lamentations reminds us of the elements found in some Psalms of Lament.<sup>7</sup> According to Boda (2012:478–479), Herman Gunkel, one of the fathers of Form Criticism had no doubt as to the genre of Lamentations, proposing three types of laments evident in these five poems. They are funeral dirge (song), individual lament and

6. This group of books are at the end of the Jewish canon and comprise of Psalms, Job, Proverbs, The Five Scrolls (Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and Esther), Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. The five scrolls were traditionally associated with and recited at Jewish festivals. Lamentations was specifically recited ninth of Ab on the Jewish liturgical calendar, which commemorated the destructions of the First and Second Temples 586 BCE and 70 CE (cf. Brueggemann 2003a:319–320; Mandalfo 2009:237).

7. Gunkel as early as 1933 distinguish the Psalms according to their particular types (*Gattungen*) and Lamentations reminds of the communal Lament (cf. Salters 2010:11).

communal lament. Boda (2012:479) accepts this proposal and set out to explain that many of the elements in chapters 1, 2 and 4 remind of a funeral dirge. The use of female voices and the many female personifications in the poems allude to this. In a community where men died much earlier than their younger brides due to age or war, it was customary that females usually sang these songs at funerals. Although it can be seen as a type of funeral lament (or dirge), Salters (2010:11–12) sees more traces of communal lament in the poems of Lamentations, that is the natural reaction of a grief-stricken community. The open-endedness of chapter 5 especially reminds of Psalms 74, 79, 88 and 89 – all communal laments that leave the reader hanging with a vague answer, or in some cases without an answer.

Another important contribution to understanding the genre of Lamentations is the fact that many scholars have highlighted close connections with Mesopotamian laments for ruined cities (cf. Dobbs-Allsopp 1998:2–10).<sup>8</sup> This is a difficult one to control and scholars differ on this matter. Salters (2010:14) points out that the enthusiasm in this regard was sometimes more than could be substantiated with scholars lining up on both sides of the argument. The observations of Dobbs-Allsopp (1998:6–12) are strong when he argues, not as much for the borrowing from the Mesopotamian city laments, as for the probability that the genre of city lament was well-established long before the fall of Jerusalem. This is supported by Brueggemann (2003a:335) who states that 'behind the book of Lamentations stand other examples of the genre of city lament over the city that provided the context for Israel's particular voicing of grief'. The common thread in these arguments is lament, and in further discussion, it will be the accepted genre. In the next section will be discussed, lament and the re-emergence of this form in recent times as an appropriate response to affliction, trauma and calamity.

## Re-emergence of Lament

Card (2005) stated:

All our journeys, yours and mine, began with lament, did they not? Before we uttered our first breathless cries, our mothers lamented in pain giving birth to us ... We were all ushered into a world which first sounds we heard were inevitably weeping – weeping for pain and weeping for joy, because those two are often linked more closely than we can imagine. (p. 19)

More of a popular writer and artist than a biblical scholar, Michael Card has made a valuable contribution to interpret lament in the modern context. The point he makes is that modern society has lost the language of lament and that this language needs to be rediscovered to journey through pain and suffering, and make sense of it (Card 2005:21–22). Pemberton (2014:13–27) shares this view and makes a further important observation about lament. For him, lament does

8. For an interesting and detailed discussion of City Laments in the Ancient Near East, see Jacobs (2016). In this chapter, he looks at the cycle of different cities that was born, who died due to war or some form of destruction and also the rebirth of some of these cities. These cities include, Ur and Troy to Memphis and Thebes, from Nineveh, Jerusalem and Babylon to Athens, Rome, and Constantinople to Smyrna and Sarajevo – and everywhere in-between.



not end the problem or the conversation with YHWH, but begins a journey where the one who laments, and YHWH acknowledge that there is still work to be done. It 'leaves us with hope – with much to work out with God' (Pemberton 2014:27).

When we classify Lamentations as lament in its true sense, one must take note of some of the contributions of Westermann (1980; 1981) regarding the Psalms of Lament. Scholars are forever indebted to him (and Herman Gunkell) for opening the conversation on lament that led to the emergence of contributions on this matter. Brueggemann (2003b:21) makes a remarkably interesting observation when he notes that 'it is clear that Westermann's new impetus came out of the dread reality of war and, in particular, his savage experience as a prisoner of war'. Lament and trauma will always be uneasy but necessary companions. More on this matter in the next section. A summary of Westermann's contributions is given by Brueggemann (1986:57–58):

- There is in most instances a move from plea to praise.<sup>9</sup>
- It is resolved by and corresponds with the song of thanksgiving.
- That in most cases the context of praise is 'lament resolved'.
- In these Psalms, Israel moves from articulation of hurt and anger to submission of them to God and, finally, relinquishment.

The setting of many of these Psalms remains an unresolved matter. On the one end, there are those that argue for the cultic or communal setting for these laments, but Brueggemann (1986:59) supports the theory that many of the Psalms of Lament can be seen as 'genuine pastoral activities' in a smaller setting, and argues that 'this hypothesis has great plausibility and relates the poetry to what seem to be real-life situations'. This realisation has led to the use of laments as aids in pastoral care especially from the 1980s onwards, but also the interfacing of texts such as these in times of crisis, for example the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001 in New York, also known as 9/11 (cf. Brueggemann 2003b:22–25). On this matter, and in particular the COVID-19 pandemic (crisis), the New Testament scholar, Wright (2020) again reached for the language of lament as a response to the crisis. In a *Time Magazine* article, titled 'Christianity offers no answers about the Coronavirus: It's not supposed to', Wright (2020) warns against those who would give cheap and 'silly' answers to the perplexities of the pandemic, but asks the realistic question: 'What if there is no answer for this at this stage?', and that the only advice is to 'wait without hope, because we'd be hoping for the wrong thing.' He continues:

Rationalists (including Christian rationalists) want explanations; Romantics (including Christian romantics) want

9. Beckett (2016) explains the movement in more detail as (1) from crisis to complain; (2) complain to plea; and (3) from plea to praise. This was done looking at the implications of Psalm 13 for justice and reconciliation.

to be given a sigh of relief. But perhaps what we need more than either is to recover the biblical tradition of *lament*. Lament is what happens when people ask, 'Why?' and don't get an answer. It's where we get to when we move beyond our self-centred worry about our sins and failings and look more broadly at the suffering of the world. It is bad enough facing a pandemic in New York City or London. What about a crowded refugee camp on a Greek island? What about Gaza? Or South Sudan ... It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it *is* part of the Christian vocation *not to be able* to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope. (Wright 2020:n.p., [*author's emphasis*])

The language of lament is deep and wide: deep because it can come from the dark trenches of depression of an individual, and wide because it can be the collective voice of a community. It is deep because it can be frozen in a historical event such as the fall of Jerusalem (The Book of Lamentations) or life in exile (Psalm 137), but also wide because it can sprout into relevance when planes fly into buildings (09 September 2001, i.e. 9/11), or when the streets of our cities become deserted due to a pandemic. The theology behind lament helps us to better understand the relevance of these type of texts. Again, Brueggemann (1986:60–64) brings valuable insights in this regard. Two of these insights need mentioning: firstly, to him, lament allowed Israel to address YHWH as an equal covenant partner and evokes true covenant interaction. With no lament, the only voice left for Israel was praise and doxology, and their covenant relationship gets stuck in pretence and cover-up. Secondly, bold lament questions theodicy and brings to the conversation the injustice of this worldview of Israel. This allows the poet and the reader to wrestle with things that are not right in the world instead of merely accepting it as a passive covenant partner. In another article, he (Brueggemann 2008) articulates it artistically:

Lament, in its very utterance, is an act of resistance and defiance that interrupts doxology, that asserts an alternative reality, and that believes that out of the candid embrace of pain new social alternatives may be generated. (p. 223)

When confronted with calamity as was the case in the Book of Lamentations, doxology cannot continue and must be interrupted. When facing a pandemic such as COVID-19, we need a defiant language that can fill the void left by so many things lost. Among the things lost are lives, income and livelihoods, security, freedom and the 'normal' that we once knew. With all this, our doxology gets interrupted and a new language must emerge or, shall I say, must re-emerge. This is where lament and a book such as Lamentations can be re-read and help to voice what we feel is wrong. Through the years a book such as Lamentations was read through the lens of many different traumatic events. This is what we turn to now.

## Lamentations through the lens of trauma

The insights that sociological and human sciences bring to the discipline of biblical studies have long been argued, established and accepted. Trauma studies and the study of trauma victims are some of these insights that have of late contributed immensely to our understanding and interpreting of texts, and, in particular, texts that originated during or soon after the Babylonian exile and trauma of 586 BCE. This approach to interpretation is the backbone of Daniel Smith-Christopher's *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (2002), and is cited often when trauma becomes the lens of interpretation. In this theological contribution, he insists that trauma and suffering are indeed underplayed by interpreters of the biblical books from the Babylonian Period. His use of trauma and refugee studies is indeed a fresh way of looking at these texts and worth considering (cf. O'Connor 2011:xi).

Groenewald (2018:89) gives an introduction to trauma in biblical studies and states that the ancient Greek word for trauma can be translated as 'wound' and then cites Freud who said that trauma is 'a wound that continuously cries out in a loud voice'. These voices can be heard in the texts of the Babylonian exile. In the same manner, Carr (2014:74–76) explains that the traumatised exiles in Jerusalem – all of them skilled in different trades and literate – started to write about their origins and their history. They did not write about their exile, but wrote and remembered from within their exile the traumatic events that brought them there. To him, Second Isaiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and parts of Jeremiah were born within this traumatised community and birthed by the traumatic events of exile. This is also upheld by Stulman (2014a:1) as he makes a case that this corpus of writings must be read as 'disaster and survival literature of the historical losers', subverting the 'first-world propensity to read the Christian scriptures as the story of winners'. Contributions such as these invite us to use the lens of trauma in our endeavour to better understand texts that originated from these events.

The study of trauma, in general, is a new field and, for Herman (2015:10), started only at the end of the 19th century. Maybe it is because the last 150 years were so violent in nature as wars across the globe, including two World Wars, smeared the 20th century with so much bloodshed that the study of trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) was just a logical emergence (Carr 2014:253–266; O'Connor 2011:2). This birthed new studies from different disciplines and became, according to Stulman (2014b:178), 'a major trend in fields as diverse as animal science on the one hand, and the humanities on the other'. To these new approaches, biblical studies are somewhat of a latecomer (Stulman 2014b:179). Westermann's article (1974) on lament is considered by many (cf. Frechette & Boase 2016:12) to be a landmark recognising the theological import of lament in the Old Testament. His words, '[T]he lament is the language of suffering; in it suffering is given

the dignity of language: It will not stay silent', brought the subject of human suffering and trauma to the perceived praise Psalter with a new freshness. Contributions such as these led to the birth of the 'hermeneutics of trauma' and carried promise to biblical studies in two ways: firstly, an insight into human experiences that reveals the meaning of texts in new ways; and secondly, it enlightens ancient and present contexts and can be re-read in new occurrences of trauma (cf. Frechette & Boase 2016:13).

O'Connor (2016:303) prefers to use the term *disaster theories* for this interpretive lens and believes that it can 'provide insight into Biblical texts that emerged from Israel's long history of violence, invasion, and colonisation by foreign empires'. Biblical studies have ever since flourished with new contributions on this matter, not only on how the traumatic events helped the preservation of many biblical texts, but how trauma and suffering can lead to the development of hope often found in some of the prophetic texts (cf. Esterhuizen 2017:43). Not only do these texts give us a front-row seat to war and disaster, but it also becomes 'meaning-making art' for the sake of survival (Stulman 2014b:182). This 'meaning-making' literature helps to make sense and give hope to the victims of war and exile, but also of pandemics that rock the core of societies. For O'Connor (2011:22–26) four things happen when people face and go through disaster, but in most cases this 'meaning-making' literature can help:

- It fragments their memories regarding the magnitude of the violence. Reading these texts afterwards helps to bring the memory back so it could be dealt with in a safer environment.
- There is a breakdown of language. Words seem to elude the victims on how to express their experience. This literature gives words to the wordless.
- A numbness dominates the victims' lives, but over time this literature can help victims to muster the energy to feel again, to survive and even thrive.
- Trauma causes faith and trust to crumble – be it in a Deity, the world or humankind. This literature helps to give handles to people to start to trust again, although with new boundaries.

Poems of lament, as found in the Bible, can indeed provide words to those who do not have the words, but can also help them to write and perform their own poems of lament. Dickie (2019:145) makes mention of an empirical study with Zulu women who experienced the trauma of sexual abuse. They used the form found in the biblical laments to create their own poems as means of therapy. These proved to be vital in the therapeutic process and in line with the model of trauma therapy suggested by Judith Herman. Herman's three stages (Dickie 2019:146–149) include: (1) the need to establish safety – biblical laments remind the victims of a divine power and bring a sense of stability into the disorder; (2) reconstructing the trauma story – with the help of the laments, these women were able to put words to their pain. The poetic nature of laments aids immensely in this regard; and finally, (3) reintegrating the experience of trauma into ordinary life –

this happens when the victims imagine a new life and way forward within the boundaries of the trauma that has happened. Dickie (2019:154) concludes that lament plays a part in all three stages of her trauma therapy model, in particular stage two when it helps the victim to compose 'her version of what happened in the form of a poem'.

Looking through the trauma lens while interpreting *Lamentations*, Boase (2016) builds on the work of Jeffrey Alexander in which she explores the interplay between the individual and communal voices found in the five poems. Boase (2016:49) applies his theory that texts play a role 'in facilitating a collective identity around trauma'. Her argument that a text such as *Lamentations* went a long way to unify a scattered and a traumatised community around a shared story and how *Lamentations* helped in creating a new story – a meta-narrative – while searching for meaning in the chaos, is worth looking at. She (Boase 2016:55) points out that Alexander lists four essential representations in the process of moving from individual trauma to communal trauma and eventually to this new meta-narrative:

- The nature of the pain: What happened to whom?
- The nature of the victim: Who was affected?
- The relation of the trauma victim(s) to the wider audience: the extent to which the trauma narrative prompts a wider audience that has not experienced the victim's group suffering to identify with the immediately victimised group.
- Attribution of responsibility: Who caused the trauma?

Boase (2016) further explains:

In its interplay of individual and communal voices, *Lamentations* functions as a form of social reconstruction through which a new communal identity is achieved. In the interplay of voices, there is a movement from individual experiences of suffering to the formation of a group gathered together as a traumatized collectivity. In the shift from third-person gazing at the pain of a personified city in chapter 1, through the speeches of the city, the narrator, and the man of chapter 3, and to the climactic communal lament of chapter 5, we witness the emergence of a new communal identity, one shaped by shared experience. (pp. 55–56)

Her essay then walks us through the book of *Lamentations* showing how the different voices probe the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, the relation of the victim to a wider audience and, finally, the question of attribution of responsibility: Who caused this trauma? Boase's conclusion that *Lamentations* unified and reformed the community by creating new meaning out of the trauma, is intriguing and insightful. It is, however, her (Boase 2016:63–64) observation that *Lamentations* (could have) served the same purpose in 70 CE with the destruction of the Second temple, as well as the re-reading of it by victims of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Kurdistan, Bosnia, Rwanda and many other unknown villages and cities where people were left traumatised which is indeed relevant to the scope of this article.

In a most recent article, Cataldo (2020) also experiments with modern trauma studies and its applicability to *Lamentations*, in particular chapter 1. The trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, Kai Ericson and Ruth Leys are engaged with. He (Cataldo 2020) concludes that:

*Lamentations* doesn't give its readers a completed resolution – *a fait accompli*. Instead, *Lamentations* create the space for a conversation, a dialogic context that expects reconciliation and the resumption of life. (p. 73)

This space was used on many occasions, by many different people, in different times of history when disaster befell them.

## Re-reading of *Lamentations*

As was mentioned above on more than one occasion, a text such as *Lamentations* was often re-read throughout history in times of suffering. Joyce and Lipton (2013) made a creative contribution in their commentary, *Lamentations through the centuries*, to the reception exegesis of *Lamentations*. They sought out one principal reading in history for each section of the text that may bring new insights to our interpretation. For example, they discuss the opening verse, 'How lonely sits the city' (Lm 1:1), in relation to David Shatz's essay on Jewish responses to 9/11, and explore the word *how* in this verse in relation to this disaster. 'I am a man who has seen affliction' (Lm 3:1) is read with the mystical poem, 'The dark night of the soul' of St. John of the Cross. Riches (2014), in reviewing this book, writes the following:

We are introduced to novelists, poets, musicians, theologians, midrashists, painters, psychologists, filmmakers and many other and through their eyes we view the texts with growing respect for its unflinching honesty and the way it wrestles with issues of divine justice and punishment, of hope and despair. (p. 384)

It is because trauma is such a collective human experience that trauma literature such as *Lamentations* never loses its relevance and keep on inviting re-readings in the face of suffering by all walks of life. It is indeed fitting the name, 'meaning-making literature'.

As I am writing this, we are at the beginning of 2021 and the reality is that our world is still plagued by the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Already more than a million people across the globe have lost their lives and, in many cases, as were seen in South Africa, people died alone in hospitals due to isolation protocols. Some family members had to wait out isolation periods before they could bury their loved ones, while others were buried without their loved ones allowed at the funeral, because they also were infected by the virus. Funerals were odd occasions limited to a maximum of 50 people and the mourners were forced to maintain social distancing – something unheard of at funerals where people yearn for the comfort of contact. The economies of countries are in recession and millions of people lost their jobs during this time. It is indeed a traumatic time for many, and, for the first time, the whole world feels it. In the view of all this, a re-reading of *Lamentations* is again fitting. There are many examples of this, but Table 1 shows some appropriate readings.



**TABLE 1:** Possible re-readings of Lamentations.

Reading	COVID-19 relevance
How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! (1:1)	Total lockdown of cities and towns across the world. Streets, highways, and restaurants empty.
The roads to Zion mourn, for no-one comes to her appointed feasts. (1:4)	All big gatherings and events forbidden due to the lockdown, including sporting events, church events and music and cultural feasts.
The Lord has made Zion forget her feasts and her Sabbaths. (2:6b)	
... and abandoned his sanctuary. (2:7)	
Jerusalem remembers all the treasures that were once hers in days of old. (1:7)	All the known normal was gone: things that were taken for granted; a new normal came within weeks.
All her people groan as they search for bread. (1:11)	Although street beggars were a regular sight on our streets, the number increased as mothers with babies on their backs lined the streets in search of food or money.
They say to their mothers, 'Where is the bread and the wine?' as they faint like wounded men on the streets of our city, as their lives ebb away in their mothers' arms. (2:12)	
Because of the thirst the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth; the children beg for bread, but no one gives them. (4:4)	
Zion stretches out her hands but there is no one to comfort her. (1:17)	It appears almost like there is no reprieve from this – no comfort.
I am a man who has seen affliction. (3:1)	Just as we in our country thought that we have seen it all, it turns out that there is more pain and more poverty. The poor were once again hit the hardest.
Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayers. (3:8)	Numerous religious institutions and groupings called out days of prayer and fasting, with no sign of godly intervention. It seemed as if YHWH stayed muted.
You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through. (3:44)	
How the precious sons of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now considered as pots of clay, the work of a potter's hand. (4:2)	Big companies, in particular, retail and air travel companies lost their value and some of them even closed.
Women have been ravished in Zion, and virgins in the towns of Judah. (5:11)	A new spate of gender-based violence erupted in South Africa as people were locked in and frustrated. Women and children were immensely traumatised.
The elders are gone from the city gate. (5:14)	The elderly of our societies was considered the most vulnerable to this virus and was therefore taken out of the workplace and advised to stay home. Stories of children not able to visit their parents and grandparents in old age homes, and old people committing suicide due to depression and loneliness filtered into the news.
... unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure. (5:22)	Summarising the general feeling of parts of the religious communities. A feeling of disillusionment gripped the clergy as they buried members, family, and spouses.

Table 1 shows how a traumatised world can read Lamentations and find many similarities between what Judah experienced and the COVID-19 pandemic. This illustrates the point that Lamentations can be re-read even in these times when we want to make meaning out of the pain and suffering.

To only take note of the similarities and not the differences may leave Table 1 somewhat one-sided and needs mentioning:

- The trauma, experienced by Jerusalem, was caused by an enemy that could be seen, while the Corona virus that caused the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be seen.
- In Lamentations, the trauma experienced was caused by other human beings. It set up one nation against another, while the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a sense of solidarity among the nations of the world.
- Judah's trauma was localised, while the trauma of the pandemic is global.
- Lamentations, written in the aftermath of the 586 BCE exile and destruction of Jerusalem, ends on a note of hopelessness, while the possibility and efficacy of vaccines

summons glimmers of hope to a world plagued by this pandemic.

All this said, it is the collective experience of trauma as a common denominator that makes re-readings of Lamentations relevant in the face of the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

This article attempted yet another reading of the book of Lamentations in the aftermath (although we are still in it) of another traumatic event. This time, the COVID-19 pandemic that has cast a dark shadow over most of the world. Lamentations set after the destruction of Jerusalem was treated as poetry in the form of laments. It was also established that many of these texts around the Babylonian exile can be read as trauma literature due to their setting. Many of them were trying to give meaning to this unexplainable pain and suffering. The process of telling the story of trauma and creating a meta-narrative was also engaged in relation to Lamentations. It was also shown that Lamentations was read as 'meaning-making art' throughout the darkest chapters of history.

What would the conclusions be? Firstly, there are many similarities between the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation in Jerusalem as lamented by Lamentations. This was shown in Table 1. For this reason, a re-reading seems advisable. Secondly, as 'meaning-making literature', lament is sometimes the only fitting response to the incomprehensible reality of pain and suffering. Lament defies the cheap answers so often given by religion when it is confronted with mystery, doubt and despair. This seems to be the case again in Lamentations. Thirdly, Lamentations can help readers through the process of trauma therapy as it opens the wound and helps the individual to connect with the bigger community in trying to make sense of it all and to involve others in the pain. Finally, Lamentations points to the fact that lament does not necessarily have a fairy-tale ending. The last verse of chapter 5 refuses to close on a positive note and leaves us in the dark, still with no answer: '[U]nless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure' (Lm 5:22).

COVID-19 is indeed an invitation to those who engage with Scripture to re-read Lamentations, to identify with communal lament, and to find words to express grief and suffering. These expressions can help in the processing of trauma.

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