A canonical-literary reading of Lamentations 5

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a canonical and literary reading of Lamentations 5 in the context of the book of Lamentations as a whole. Following the approach by Vanhoozer (1998, 2002) based on speech-act theory, the meaning of Scripture is sought at canonical level, supervening the basic literary level. In Lamentations, as polyphonic poetic text, the speaking voices form a very important key for the interpretation of the text. In the polyphonic text of Lamentations, the shifting of the speaking voices occurs between Lamentations 1 and 4. Lamentations 5 is monologic. The theories of Bakhtin (1984) are also used to understand the book of Lamentations. In this book, chapter 5 forms the climax where Jerusalem cries to God. We cannot, however, find God's answer to this call in Lamentations; we can find it only within the broader text of the Christian canon.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars usually attempt to interpret the book of Lamentations from perspectives developed under the influence of Gunkel for reading Psalms. Unfortunately, when the book of Lamentations is studied from this perspective and when Form Criticism is applied, the text is not viewed as a literary whole. The focus is rather on understanding the text from a reconstruction of the history behind the text.

This article calls into question the assumption that Lamentations can be understood only in terms of an edited collection of independent thoughts by several authors. When I read the book of Lamentations, I consider the text as a literary whole. I motivate this viewpoint by explaining my hermeneutical approach in the first part of the article. Having applied this to a reading of chapter 5 of Lamentations at the literary level, I then examine the text in its relation to the other chapters of Lamentations. Using the theory known as 'speech act', I explain the function of the speaking voices in the book, having their main focus in chapter 5.

The literary level is related to the text itself. The meaning of a text at the literary level, however, must also be carefully studied and modified by the 'fuller sense' derived from the canonical context. Vanhoozer's approach (1998, 2002) is to find the meaning of Scripture at the canonical level, supervening the basic literary level. The 'fuller sense' of Scripture associated with divine authorship emerges only at the level of the whole canon (Vanhoozer 1998:263–264, 313–314). Canonical reading is related to a unified, divine communicative act at the level of the whole canon (Scripture).

STRATEGY FOR READING THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

Speaking voices (personae) in Lamentations

One of the most important approaches to understanding the book of Lamentations is to note the poetic voices interwoven in the text. It has become customary to identify the various speaking voices present in poems. This is part and parcel of a literary understanding of poems and the perspectives that they express (Berlin 2002:6). For example, in chapter 1 of Lamentations, there are at least two voices: the anonymous speaker in the first half of the poem; and Zion, the speaker in its second half. Precisely how many speakers there are in the remainder of the book has been a matter of dispute (Provan 1991:6). Identifying the speaking voice in the poems of Lamentations is my main focus in understanding the book of Lamentations.

Lanahan (1974:41–49), on the one hand, suggests stylistic analysis as an aid to identifying these speaking voices. He has identified five voices (personae) expressing different viewpoints in Lamentations: a reporter (1:1–11b, 15a, 17; 2:1–19); Zion (1:9c, 11c–22; 2:20–22); a defeated soldier (Lm 3); a bourgeois (Lm 4); and the community as a whole (Lm 5). Provan (1991:6–7), on the other hand, finds only three voices: the main speaker (narrator); Zion; and the people of Jerusalem. According to Berlin (2002:6), there are more than five voices in Lamentations. I differ from Berlin in the number of voices identified in the text.

The speaking voices are in dialogue with each other. Provan is of the opinion that the first four poems have something of the character of dialogue and that there are hints of differing perspectives among the voices that participate (Provan 1991:7). He has decided that Lamentations 5 is in the form of a monologue. I, however, am of the opinion that Lamentations 5 also has a dialogue character. I explain this in my analysis of Lamentations 5.

Speaking voices in the created poetic world of Lamentations

The literary world of the poetic text is not some free-floating, indeterminate referent, but is directly related to what its creator – the author – said and intended. In the poetic text of the book of Lamentations, as mentioned earlier, various voices are present. The real reader looks into the created world of the text through these voices. The voices are the eyes of the narrator, depicting his perspective. The reader walks into the world of the text following the narrator. Various voices are heard in Lamentations 1 to 4. In Lamentations 5, the reader hears a first-person voice in the plural. In the previous chapters of Lamentations, the reader would have recognised two or three different voices in each chapter. The

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voices, having been directed to both God and Jerusalem in the previous chapters, disappear in Lamentations 5 and only one communal voice remains. This single voice in Lamentations 5 plays a vital role in this most important chapter of the book.

Most commentaries on the book of Lamentations identify various voices in the text. A first voice is identified in the third-person discourses and is often characterised as the narrator. Critics equate a second voice with the personified Jerusalem herself. Her voice is identified throughout in all the poems by the use of first-person discourse. The narrator, the first voice, is a dramatic speaking voice that exists within the created world of the poem (Miller 2001:393).

When we analyse the book of Lamentations, it is important to focus on the dialogic direction (direct and indirect-voiced discourse). Even though we hear God's voice in and through the prophetic voice when we read the text, we find that God's voice does not really exist in the text. It can be called an indirect voice. It is a missing voice. The second voice indicated above in the first person continually calls to YHWH and waits for his response. I believe that YHWH's silent voice together with the several other voices and several literary devices in Lamentations function together to create the meaning of the text. The voice of the narrator is directed in two ways: to God; and to his people/Jerusalem. The narrator performs the most determinate role as a mediator in the text.

Personae and polyphonic text

In order to investigate the nature and the significance of the various shifts of voices in the text and to investigate the respective theoretical problems in the study of Lamentations, we need to describe Bakhtin's helpful notion (1984) of the polyphonic text. I follow the suggestion by Miller (2001:393–408), which is based on Bakhtin's notion.

One major contribution to the study of poetry offered by the New Critics is their shift in focus away from historical and biographical concerns with the poet (for example, 'the poet said ...') to an emphasis on the role of the dramatically conceived speaker in a poem (for example, 'the speaker says...') (Brooks & Warren 1976:14–15).

Language in the poem contains two levels: the semantic level, which one equates with the dramatic speaker; and the level of the poetic artefact, which is a creation of the actual poet (Miller 1996:20). Readers imaginatively hear the words of the poem as those of the dramatic speaker. We must therefore understand the speaking voices (personae) and acknowledge the relationship between the speakers in the text and the poetic component.

According to Miller (2001:394), when one acknowledges that two separate and distinct voices do exist in Lamentations 1, one can no longer approach the poem as if it were monologic. Bakhtin (1984:188) asserts that the '...coming together of two utterances equally and directly oriented toward a referential object' is the way in which a '...weakening or destruction of a monologic context occurs'. The voices, having destroyed the monologic context, must now enter into a dialogic relationship with each other. Bakhtin suggests the following:

> *Two discourses equally and directly oriented toward a referential object within the limits of a single context cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically, regardless of whether they confirm, mutually supplement, or (conversely) contradict one another, or find themselves in some other dialogic relationship (that of question and answer, for example). Two equally weighted discourses on one and the same theme, once having come together, must inevitably orient themselves to one another, two embodied meanings cannot lie side by side like two objects – they must come into inner contact; that is they must enter into a semantic bond.*
>
> (Bakhtin 1984:188–189)

LITERARY ANALYSIS OF LAMENTATIONS 5

In Lamentations 5, there is only one voice. Unlike the previous chapters, Lamentations 5 also reflects several different features: there is no alphabetic acrostic here; it is shorter than the other chapters; there is only one voice; and the opening phrase is different to the opening word אֵיכָה found in Lamentations 1, 2 and 4. When readers peruse the previous chapters of Lamentations in sequence, they find that Lamentations 5 is indeed very different from Lamentations 4 because, at the end of Lamentations 4 (vv 21–22, especially 22a), they read about the faint hope expressed by the narrator's voice. The subject of Lamentations 5, however, switches to a focus on YHWH and, again, as in earlier chapters, contains an appeal to God to 'remember' (זְכֹר יְהוָה) what has come upon Jerusalem. All of Lamentations 5 is, in fact, directly addressed to YHWH.

The voice of Lamentations 5 in the first person plural represents the people or community of Jerusalem. This voice is already evident in 4:17–20 and, although the narrator's voice is not identified as in the previous chapters, he may be included in this plural voice. Lamentations 5 is framed by a call to God to 'remember' (זְכֹר יְהוָה) (1a) and the realisation that he continues to 'forget' (תִּשְׁכָּחֵ) his people (20a) (Berlin 2002:116). Furthermore, the Jerusalem community repeats verbs used in the previous chapters (1:9c, 11c, 20a; 2:20) in verse 1b: 'see/consider' (הַבִּיטָה) and 'look' (רְאֵה). Dealing with the framework of Lamentations 5, Heim says the following:

> *Together with the plea for restoration in verse 21, this petition (v 1) frames the lament and, together with the descriptive praise in v 19, dominates its tone. The request in verse 21 is a prayer for the restoration of the Jerusalem community to its former relationship with God, and consequently the reestablishment of its former socio-political integrity. However, the accusation of God implicit in the questions of verse 20 and the doubtful question "– or have you utterly rejected us?" in verse 22, which serve as a motivation for the Lord to grant the preceding request, remain the final word in the book.*
>
> (Heim 1999:166)

After complaining about the conditions of Jerusalem in the body of Lamentations 5 (2–18), in verse 19, 'complaint gives way to petition. Remembrance of events gives way to remembrance of the nature of God, which is the ground of the petition' (Provan 1991:133). In 20–22, however, we see an unconfident ending. It is not a happy ending, unlike the so-called communal lament in Psalms. It is difficult to conclude Lamentations 5 as a communal lament. The understanding of Lamentations 5 is not directly connected to the previous chapters; Lamentations 5 is best understood as an independent unit. In the next section, I therefore discuss the meaning of Lamentations 5 in relation to the other chapters of the book.

Function of voice in Lamentations

In order to understand the intention of the text itself, we must first look at the two perspectives (the narrator and Jerusalem) of the implied author. As I have stated before, meaning is related to the function of a text within the overall literary context. The implied author here intends to convey a message through the dialogue between the two voices; a voice in the poetic text is similar to 'the point of view' in the narrative. I recognise the existence of two different voices in alternating dialogue throughout the book of Lamentations.

In Lamentations 1, the narrator, as the first speaker, uses third-person indirect speech. The narrator informs readers about Jerusalem's situation (1:1–9b, 10–11) and about his knowledge of the reason for her desperate situation (1:17). The second speaker, Jerusalem, or Zion, expresses herself in first-person indirect and direct speech. She speaks to readers in 1:12–16 and 1:18–19 (in indirect speech) and to YHWH (in direct speech) in 1:9c, 11c and 20–22. These alternating speeches help to move the poem from description to agreement between speakers, to

confession and, finally, to pleas for relief from enemies (House 2004:365). Lamentations 1 contains the primary contents, which is dialogued between two voices in Lamentations 2 to 5. Readers are to understand the other chapters in the light of Lamentations 1.

Although these voices are not clearly demarcated in Lamentations 1, they appear again and again, chapter by chapter. The narrator, who stands outside the suffering, is gradually drawn into it from one speech to the next. From Lamentations 1, Jerusalem loudly speaks to God about her or their tribulation and distress until, finally, in Lamentations 5, we hear the humble and impassioned petition of Jerusalem to God.

The narrator, using imagery and metaphor, introduces Jerusalem, the Daughter Zion, as female. She is also pictured as a fallen and an abandoned woman. O'Connor , discerningly, refers to the two voices in the book of Lamentations as follows:

> *Although the two voices (narrator and Jerusalem) overlap and echo each other, they do not address each other, the narrator speaks to the implied reader about her, and she, Jerusalem addresses God alone. Despite the absence of dialogue between them, the two voices offer the double testimony of witness and sufferer. Together they create a geography of pain. Their discourse gives pain form and shape in a map of Daughter Zion's outer and inner world. The narrator tells what has happened to her; she reports how it feels to suffer as she does.*
>
> (O'Connor 2001:1027)

In addition to the frequent change of speakers in Lamentations, the different speeches also often shift from one addressee to another, sometimes within the same discourse. Several other addresses by two speakers are also found as embedded utterances (Heim 1999:144). For example, in Lamentations 1, the sufferer personified as Zion speaks to God (9c, 11c, 20–22), while the voices of passers-by (12) or other people are also heard (18). In Lamentations 2, the narrator has two addresses, in one, to the reader and Zion and, in the other, Zion speaks to God (20–22).

Lamentations 1 prepares the way for Lamentations 2 by vividly depicting the city's destruction, its effect on Daughter Zion and her momentous grief and shame over the loss of her children. Lamentations 2 shifts attention from Jerusalem's condition to the cause of it all, the furious rage of YHWH. Both the narrator and Jerusalem accuse God unrelentingly of overseeing, catalysing and executing atrocities against the woman (O'Connor 2001:1036).

Lamentations 2 advances the book's thematic movement. In certain ways, it builds on the description in Lamentations 1 of the lonely, sinful, devastated yet praying city by addressing the specific elements of the day of the Lord introduced in 1:12 and 1:21. In particular, 2:1–10 carefully chronicles God's activity as warrior, as Israel's enemy and as the one who planned Jerusalem's downfall. It introduces a first-person speaker who agrees with the narrator and Jerusalem's perspective on why the punishment came but who takes the step of advising Jerusalem to pray on behalf of the innocent, a prayer that he believes the Lord will answer. Lamentations 2 depicts Jerusalem accepting this advice. Jerusalem laments by describing the people's suffering and asking if such things should, in fact, occur. In particular, she prays for her little ones, the group most vulnerable and most harmed in days of punishment. Other instructions and responses unfold in Lamentations 3 to 5 (House 2004:398).

I believe that the discourses directed to God in Lamentations 1, 2 and 5 (1:9c, 11c, 20–22; 2:20–22; 5:1–22) are extremely important in understanding the text. I focus on the function of these discourses in relation to the entire text (in particular, Lamentations 5) in the interpretation of the book of Lamentations. The different addressees in these discourses (like God, the passers-by and Edom) appear mainly as negative characters. Here the question arises: why does the book of Lamentations indicate God as a negative character? In 3:34–36, YHWH is without doubt indicated as not seeing through the use of indirect speech to God and through the mention of all the prisoners of the land being crushed underfoot, of human rights being perverted in the presence of the Most High and of one's case being subverted (*cf*. New Revised Standard Version). The narrator's theological confusion between his confidence in God (3:21–33) and the affliction that he has experienced (3:1–20) is not resolved until the end of the book of Lamentations. As O'Connor (2002:52) points out, in Lamentations, 'God is blind, and does not respond'.

At the end of Lamentations 5, readers once again come upon the rhetorical paradoxes found in the statements in 3:34–36 in relation to those in 3:22–33. When readers read the whole book, nowhere do they find any response or answer from God. According to House, this poetic rhetoric device

> *offers a full-orbed approach to the problems the book addresses, for it allows readers who have sinned to state pain yet also to find a way to renew their relationship with the Lord.*
>
> (House 2004:430)

Jerusalem's voice is identified throughout the book of Lamentations by the use of the first-person (both singular and plural) discourse. One element often overlooked in the usual standard reading of Lamentations is the fact that the narrator, like Jerusalem, is a dramatic speaking voice that exists within the created poetic world. Both speakers, in other words, are personifications who are given their existence by the poet. This apparently mundane observation carries serious consequences for the reading of Lamentations.

According to Bakhtin's notion of 'the polyphony of the text', their voices are to enter into a dialogic relationship with each other (Bakhtin 1984:188–189). According to Miller (2001:395), Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogic possibilities of double-voiced discourse helps us to better understand how the two voices in Lamentations intersect with each other dialogically.

Miller (2001:397) suggests that the narrator's entire speech is transformed by the influence of Jerusalem's speech. One obvious indication of this transformation is a change in the narrator's addressee. The addressee of the narrator's first speech (1:1–9b) is an unnamed other, but Jerusalem breaks into the narrator's speech (1:9c) and addresses YHWH. When the narrator speaks again, it is not to his original addressee, but to YHWH (Miller 2001:397–408).

If we apply Miller's analysis to the rest of the chapters of Lamentations, we can understand the rhetorical devices as being paradoxical speech, as can be found in Lamentations 3:34–36 and Lamentations 5:20–22. After Lamentations 1, the narrator's monopoly of viewpoint is broken. He may choose not to respond directly to Jerusalem's speech, but he is not at liberty to ignore it totally. According to the analysis of Lamentations 1 by Miller, Jerusalem reuses words from the narrator's speech while keeping the same semantic meaning as originally voiced.Although I do not totally accept Miller's analysis of Lamentations 1, he gives us a good insight into the existence of two voices. I accept this point and apply it to the whole of Lamentations. In particular, the narrator's repeated statements of אֵין מְנַחֵם לָהּ. ('no one to comfort her') in 1:2b, 9b and 17a appear again as Jerusalem's petition, אֵין מְנַחֵם לִי, in 1:21b, and, with a small difference, in 1:16b (this is my addition, as this last-mentioned verse has the same basic meaning). In addition to Miller's analysis, 1:2, which expresses the narrator's indirect voice, has semantic equivalence with 1:16, Jerusalem's direct voice.

The narrator uses the same words to describe Jerusalem on three separate occasions (1:2b, 9b, 17a). In each of these occurrences, the phrase used is not intended to gain sympathy for Jerusalem's plight but is uttered in a context describing the depths to which she has sunk on account of her many sins (the narrator's report). Jerusalem, like the narrator, wishes to focus attention on her

lack of comforters. She does, however, place this phrase in a new context, which underlines her distress and suffering. The focus then becomes Jerusalem's troubled existence rather than any possible wrongdoing; she portrays herself as a sympathetic figure who can do no more than sigh over her pitiful situation, not even having someone to offer her comfort (Miller 2001:401). In Lamentations 5, there are many words that Jerusalem and the narrator use in previous chapters. I want to focus only on 5:1 and 5:20–21, however. In Lamentations 1, two voices are mixed together. As indicated above, the narrator's voice is heard in 1:1–9b, 10–11b and 17 and Jerusalem's in 1:9c, 11c–16 and 18–22. The narrator speaks of the disastrous scene that occurs in Jerusalem, using indirect speech (like a kind of report), while Jerusalem speaks to the passers-by (12–16, 18–19) and to YHWH (9c, 11c, 20–22).

Progressively, the narrator's voice changes from that of an observer (in Lm 1) to that of a member of the Jerusalem community (in Lm 3 and 4). At the end of his speech (Lm 4:21–22), the narrator speaks of Jerusalem's hope, which he has already mentioned in Lamentations 3:21–33, saying that Jerusalem's punishment will end, while Edom, represented as an enemy of Jerusalem, will perish. Nevertheless, even though Jerusalem constantly asks that God should see and look at his people (1:9c, 11c, 20–22; 2:20–22), God does not respond, thus she is depressed and her voice is gloomy (3:34–36; 4:17–20). Jerusalem seems to become desperate about her/their fate.

When reading Lamentations 1 to 5, the reader becomes confused because of the mixed voices presented in the text. When reading Lamentations 5, however, the reader recognises a plural speech now unifying both the narrator and Jerusalem. The narrator's voice and the voice of Jerusalem have become interlinked and intertwined and are now evident as one single, unified voice. Here, we need to pay attention to Jerusalem's petitions as they appear from 1:9c to 5:1b. This is a main aspect for understanding Lamentations.

The verbs 'see/consider' (הַבִּיטָה) and 'look' (רְאֵה), used in 1:9c and 11c, are the opening words of the Jerusalem speech. In 5:1, the acrostic pattern evident in the first four chapters is broken. Here, the author puts an impassioned 'remember Lord' (זְכֹר יְהוָה) (1a) before 'see/consider' and 'look' (1b) in the opening phrase of Jerusalem's plea to God. The first verb of 5:1, 'remember', is used twice by the narrator, first in indirect negative (descriptive) speech (וְלֹא־זָכָר, 'not remember') in 2:1 and then in direct (imperative) speech to YHWH in 3:19. When Lamentations is read as a literary whole, Lamentations 5:1 reflects these two sentences and the reader is reminded of the statements in the context of Lamentations 2:1 and 3:19.

The word 'remember' relates to 'hope' in the contextual situation of 3:19 (3:18, 21). 'We', as the unified Jerusalem and the narrator, reuses this verb in the beginning of Lamentations 5. 'We', as the Jerusalem community, does not contradict what the narrator says in 3:19 but merely recontexualises the word, in addition to the two words 'see' and 'look'. The nuance of the two words in 5:1b is different from the sphere of meaning in Lamentations 1. Even though Jerusalem constantly demands that God should see and look, God does not answer. He is silent. Finally, Jerusalem takes a negative tone of voice (3:34–36): God does not ever see any suffering and pain caused by injustice. These verbs in 5:1 have both nuances. I therefore think that it is a kind of monologic polyphonic text.

The 'we' in Lamentations 5 challenges the monologic nature of the utterances by the narrator and Jerusalem by reusing their words in a way that is different from their original intention. It (the 'we') forces the words of the narrator and Jerusalem to serve directly different aims from the original (Miller 2001:406).

According to Bakhtin (1984:88), the simultaneity and unfinalisability of Lamentations function to create a 'live event, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two...consciousnesses', which, in turn, serve to draw the reader into that dialogic event as one of the wills that clash in the confrontation of disparate perspectives. The meaning of Lamentations therefore does not ultimately reside in the viewpoint of either one of the speakers but rather in the dialogue that the two voices present to the reader, a dialogue, moreover, that rejects the binary hierarchising of 'either . . . or' and that embraces the unfinalisable interaction of 'both . . . and' (Miller 2001:407).

As I indicated above, Lamentations 5 is framed by a call to God to 'remember' (זְכֹר יְהוָה) in verse 1a and the realisation that he continues to 'forget' (תִּשְׁכָּחֵנוּ) his people in verse 20a. Semantically, the implied author intends to let the reader attach 'see/look' to 'remember' and 'not see' to 'ignore'.

The implied author relates God's seeing to his remembrance, and his not seeing to ignorance. When the narrator sees Jerusalem, there is no one to comfort her. Her suffering is the judgement of God. Whenever Jerusalem looks upon her own condition, it is the same. Finally, the 'we', with whom the narrator and Jerusalem are identified also fails to find a response from God, as formerly in Jerusalem's speech.

Although, in Lamentations 1 and 2, the narrator stands outside the events and thereby offers the reader an 'objective' perspective, from Lamentations 3 onwards he stands inside the scene. When Lamentations is read as a polyphonic text composed of two 'unmerged consciousnesses', the text is no longer read as a monologic description of Jerusalem's many egregious sins and the justification of her/their cruel punishment, in which Jerusalem's voice ultimately retreats into insignificance; instead, Lamentations becomes the locus of conflict and struggle between two equally weighted voices, where one observes both speakers using 'double-voiced' discourse to provoke an ongoing dialogue, not only between the two voices (the narrator and Jerusalem or Jerusalem's community) but also between the speakers within the poem and the reader, who stands outside it (Miller 2001:408).

The conclusion of Lamentations 5 is much more powerful than any monologic text. There is no answer to the phenomenon of 'why'; even though Jerusalem repeatedly asks God to see and remember her/their tragic disaster, there is no response from God – there is no comforting, there is no 'seeing', there is no 'remembering' by Him. Although the narrator mentions hope in Lamentations 3 and 4:21–22, in Lamentations 5, at the end of Lamentations, the sense of hopelessness returns because of the lack of response from God. In the text, readers are confronted with the phenomenon of their own existence. The text, moreover, demands that the reader takes part in an ongoing dialogue with the text itself, without any answer from God.

CANONICAL READING OF THE TEXT

Canonical function of Lamentations 5

In the previous section, I analysed Lamentations 5 as a literary whole, borrowing Vanhoozer's terms. Poetry as a text is not a historical event but a history interpreted and universalised. When reading a text as poetical literature, we are to read it as a universal truth (McKnight 1985:10).

The book of Lamentations as a universal truth contains an interpretation of a tragic history. We, as the readers, see the catastrophic scenes through the voices and eyes of the narrator, of Jerusalem and of God (God's voice is, in fact, not present but his voice and eyes speak indirectly through the narrator and through Jerusalem) in the poetic world created by the poet or implied author. The readers meet many characters (God, the passers-by, the people, Jerusalem's enemy etc.) in the text and Lamentations focuses on these speakers' feelings or emotions and attitudes, not on the logical reason of Jerusalem's catastrophe.

When we read the book of Lamentations in the way that I analysed it, the reader, who recognise the shift from a double (polyphonic) discourse (Lm 1–4) towards a monologic discourse (Lm 5), will acknowledge the 'we' as being a single voice that incorporates two voices: that of the narrator; and that of Jerusalem. This voice appears for the first time in Lamentations 4:17–20, the unexpected shift of speaker signalling the fact to the readers, as was the case in Lamentations 1:9c. It is similar to the shift in Lamentations 3:40–47, where the narrator moves from the plural form, thereby identifying himself with the 'we' as his community and appealing for a return to God with a confession of the sins of the community.

Taken as a part of the book as a whole, Lamentations 5 summarises the purpose and message of the book of Lamentations (House 2004:473). The affirmative concepts of God in Lamentations 3:21–33 and 55–57 and Lamentations 4:21–22, for example, are two of the few instances in the whole of Lamentations where there are positive sentiments. These sentiments are summarised by the statement in Lamentations 5:19: 'You, YHWH, sit on your throne forever to all generation.' To this theological statement, Lamentations 5:20–22 returns, as shown in previous chapters, indicating the main subject of Lamentations: the petition to God as a comforter, a caretaker and a renewer.

The implied author tries to share the suffering and pain of God's people by using the petition in the form of first-person speech, by shifting the speaker frequently, by repeating the same contents, by confessing sins and by asking rhetorical questions. Lamentations 5 is the place where all people, including the narrator and Jerusalem, the implied author and the implied reader, the poet and the reader, and past and present people of God, join together. The sorrow of the people presented in Lamentations, in other words Jerusalem's suffering, becomes the sorrow of the present, the suffering of the reader who reads Lamentations. Lamentations 5 therefore performs the roles that 'press the reader to cease trying to avoid the book's expressions of pain and confessions of sin' (House 2004:303).

Re-reading the text as divine communicative action: A canonical interpretation of Lamentations as a *fuller meaning*

From the Old Testament

In Lamentations, there are many types of illocutionary directive acts, such as 'see/look, YHWH', 'consider, YHWH' and 'remember, YHWH' (I refer mainly to 1:9c, 11c, 20a; 2:20a; 3:19; 5:1a, 1b), all in direct speech, like Jerusalem's first personal speech. Although the term 'covenant' does not appear in the book of Lamentations, it is a basic concept in the canonical context. The reason why demands are directed to God in Lamentations is that the people are his covenant people. The reader of the Old Testament will easily remember other events in the Old Testament where Israel pleads with God in its suffering. In the first part of the book of Exodus, Exodus 2:23–25, we read the following: 'The Israelites groaned . . . and cried out . . . to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered [וַיִּזְכֹּר] his covenant. God saw [וַיַּרְא] the Israelites . . .'. Comparing Lamentations 3 with Exodus 2:23–25, House remarks as follows:

> *Having stated that he has seen "affliction" in 3:1 and has been fed "wormwood" in 3:15, the speaker asks God to "remember" these facts (3:19). God's ability to remember His relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob results in national deliverance through the exodus in Exodus 2:23–25. Apparently the speaker desires this sort of salvation again, and the circumstances certainly call for something extraordinary on God's part. Next, the speaker professes confidence that the Lord "will indeed remember" this sorrowful situation, with the result that God will "meditate" on what to do to help (3:20).*
>
> (House 2005:14)

These two texts (Ex 2:23–25 and Lm) share the same verbal and thematic scene in several ways: groaning (Ex) and weeping (Lm), crying out and crying for help to God (Ex) and demanding God to see (Lm). Both texts are concerned about Israel's or Jerusalem's suffering but they also differ on some points: the descriptive style used (the literary form); the focus on a performer of utterances; and the final event. The form of Lamentations is that of a long poem, while the text of Exodus 2:23–25 is a short narrative. In Lamentations, the voice of the narrator and of Jerusalem or the Jerusalem community focuses mainly on Jerusalem's suffering and the lack of any response from God. However, in Exodus 2:23–25, God appears as a main character, directly looking at their suffering and remembering the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Lamentations shows the perspective of Israel or Jerusalem, while, in the text of Exodus, the perspective is that of God. Lamentations ends in the darkness of despair without hope, while Exodus 2:23–25 ends with hope and a bright prospect for the future.

Is there really no hope in Lamentations? Does this text show only the silence of God? The answer is no. This is not the fuller meaning; it is 'just thin' description. Regarding the 'thin description' of the interpretation of texts, Vanhoozer points out the following:

> *By "thin description" I mean one that offers a minimal interpretation only, one that confines itself, say, to lexical issues or to issues of historical reference. What gets lost is precisely the dimension of the author's communicative action: what one is doing in using just these words in just this way. The problem with thin interpretation is that it fails to penetrate (to pierce!) the text deeply enough to reach the theological dimension.*
>
> (Vanhoozer 2002:297–298)

When Christian readers read the Old Testament according to the arrangement of the Septuagint, they read Lamentations after reading the book of Jeremiah. In the Christian Bible, the book of Jeremiah is followed by the book of Lamentations but, in the Hebrew Bible, it is found in the third section of the Writings. When readers read Jeremiah first, they remember the image of Jeremiah's suffering and laments, and the similarities of the two texts become clear. Jeremiah 15:5–9 is very similar to Lamentations in its literary linguistic style and in its text image, except in the use of the 'speaking voice' in Lamentations. Jeremiah 15:15–18 is also similar to Lamentations as far as the speaking voice is concerned. These texts give God's answer to Jeremiah (Jr 15:19–21); in Lamentations 3:40–42 and 5:21, we find an answer of the same kind:

> *Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven.*
>
> (Lm 3:40–42)

> *Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old.*
>
> (Lm 5:21)

In some parts of Lamentations, we suddenly meet the same expressions as in Jeremiah, as in 1:18, 3:22–39 and 5:19. Strangely enough, each of these sentences appears at the beginning, the middle and the end of Lamentations. I believe that this is done on purpose to indicate the reading strategy to be followed. The reader reads the book of Lamentations, following the voices of the narrator and of Jerusalem. In the reading process, the readers find that there is no reference to the existence of God and that he does not respond to Jerusalem's complaint. All this is located just before Jerusalem's negative statements. The implied author, however, corrects the readers' reading and reminds the readers that 'God is righteous' (1:18), 'the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end' (3:22), 'Great is God's faithfulness' (3:23) and 'God sits on your throne forever' (5:19).

In the middle of speaking about Jerusalem's affliction and suffering in Lamentations 3:1–20, the narrator changes the tone of his speech. Unexpectedly, he speaks of hope based on God's character (3:21–23). Here, the reader who does a close reading

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of Lamentations is reminded of a text like Exodus 34:6–7.

When Lamentations is read intertextually within a larger context, similarities with other texts become clear. Both texts of Lamentations and Exodus use similar words. The single cause for hope is 'the steadfast love [חֶסֶד] of YHWH' (Hillers 1992:128); this is the word for God's 'covenant-type love (or mercy)'. In Exodus 34:6–7, the Lord forgives Israel and restores his covenant with Israel after the golden-calf incident and Moses' resulting intercession on Israel's behalf (House 2005:14). House says the following:

> *Exodus 34:6–7 also depicts God's judgment as nearly as thorough, or perhaps every bit as thorough as His kindness. The inevitable conclusion that the speaker must draw from this passage and from his own experience is that God's lack of kindness or covenant memory is not the problem. The problem must lie elsewhere, and in the context of the whole of the book of Lamentations it must reside in the sins of the covenant people.*
>
> *Indeed, God's covenant mercy and compassion are 'new every morning' (3:23). They cannot be exhausted, though sinners must not take them for granted. Again, as the whole of Lamentations and Exodus 34:6–7 indicate, the Lord punishes those who prove themselves unfaithful.*
>
> (House 2005:15)

This larger context helps us to understand the ending of Lamentations. The 'thin description' of this part is a petition that uses a complaining voice. Christian readers following the intention of the implied author, however, read of the hope of the coming of the Lord's salvation, linked with his covenant love. The rhetorical expression at the end of Lamentations must be read as the rightful demand of his suffering people who wait quietly upon the Lord's salvation. Therefore God speaks to his people through the narrator's voice in Lamentations 3:25–33. When his people read the text, they hear in it echoes of these sentiments ringing in their minds.

To the New Testament

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
(Mt 5:4, New International Version)

In Lamentations, there is no comforter for Jerusalem in its weeping and mourning. All through Lamentations, both voices – those of the narrator and of Jerusalem – repeatedly emphasise this condition (in the narrator's voice, 1:2b, 9b, 17a; 2:13b, and, in Jerusalem's voice, 1:21). The same sentiments are found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, 'the Beatitudes', found in the gospel of Matthew in 5:2–12. Although there is a paucity of internal textual evidence as to whether there is a direct relationship between these texts, readers easily recognise the same theme that these two texts contain.

Chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel is presented as the first of Jesus' discourses. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:11 is especially close to the emotional condition of Lamentations and to that of Isaiah 61:1–3. Understanding the Sermon on the Mount in terms of Jesus' message, he can be seen as the one who comforts those who mourn. In Christian exegesis, the calling out and petition of Lamentations are understood to be answered in Jesus. As a comforter of the people, Jesus is the answer of God to Jerusalem's demand for helping, seeing, remembering and comforting. Applied to the eschatological hope created in the New Testament, God's people, those who are saved by Jesus Christ, will be insulted and persecuted throughout their lives because of Jesus. Canonically, however, Lamentations presents to them the final salvation when the Lord returns.

Matthew's Gospel makes more allusions to Lamentations. Moffitt points out the following:

> *In Mt. 23:1–24:2, Jesus, while in the temple, pronounces a series of woes upon the religious leaders in Jerusalem that culminate in His declaration that all the righteous blood shed from Abel to Zechariah would come upon that generation. That this pronouncement of judgment has the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple behind it becomes clear when Jesus (who, in the context of Matthew, is Immanuel, "God with us" in 1:23) "laments" over Jerusalem in 23:37, claims that the temple will be left desolate in 23:38, and then embodies the departure of the Shekinah from that house by walking out of the temple in 24:1. The import of this episode is immediately explained in 24:2 – the temple, and by implication the city in which it sits, will be destroyed.*
>
> (Moffitt 2006:306)

The implied author, Matthew, alludes to Lamentations three times in chapters 23 and 27 of his Gospel (23:35; 27:34; 27:39). The fact that these allusions come from Lamentations 2, 3 and 4, that the allusion to Lamentations 4:13 resonates throughout the scenes immediately preceding the crucifixion (Mt 27:19, 24–25) and that the allusion to Lamentations 2:15 is so closely related thematically to the way in which Matthew uses Lamentations 4:13 all indicate that the allusions to Lamentations are used as scriptural warrant for interpreting certain historical events theologically and polemically, namely for understanding Jesus' crucifixion, which results directly in the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple, as the act of righteous bloodshed par excellence (Moffitt 2006:319). With regard to the death of Jesus, which eventually leads to the temple's destruction, at the instigation of the religious leaders, Matthew (the implied author) applies a theological paradigm for interpreting the destruction of the temple. In this way, Matthew, albeit in light of his conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, calls his kinfolk, like so many of the prophets before him, to repent if they are truly to possess the kingdom (Moffitt 2006:320).

When reading the New Testament, Christian readers interpret the temple as being Jesus' body. Jesus' life, crucifixion, death and resurrection determine Christians' identity. When they read the book of Lamentations, Christians identify themselves with the sufferer of Lamentations and look to find a comforter. In the New Testament, Jesus' crucified body is the temple for our salvation. If the temple is a symbol of God's presence with Israel in the Old Testament, Jesus is God's presence with his people (Immanuel) in the New Testament. Read canonically, Jesus is that comforter sought in Lamentations and the response of God's faithfulness and steadfast love (mercy).

CONCLUSION

One of the most important approaches to understanding the book of Lamentations is to note the poetic voices interwoven in the text. The poetic voices are my main focus in the understanding of the book of Lamentations. In each of the five chapters, through the voices of the narrator as mediator before God, the implied author tries to communicate between God and others (Jerusalem, Zion etc.) and with the implied reader. When we read the text, there is no utterance from God in Lamentations. It is the missing voice. Continually, the voice in the first person calls to YHWH and waits for his response. I believe that YHWH's silent voice, together with other literary devices in Lamentations, functions to create the meaning of the text.

The main theme of Lamentations is 'where is the true comfort?', 'where is God's response?'. The text presents no comfort. There seems to be no concern for the sufferers, even by their covenant God. They keep waiting for God's response and continue crying out to him. In the literary context, God keeps silent (he is non-speaking).

Canonically, however, Christian readers see themselves in terms of Exodus 34:6–7 as God's people when they read the Bible. They connect the contents of the Old Testament to Jesus Christ. Within the canonical context, they find an answer to the question on which Lamentations ends. They understand God's answer as Jesus, who is their true comforter, acting as God's response. This response is articulated in his teachings (such as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount) and in his mission (such as presenting his body as the temple, being Immanuel, God-with-us).

In conclusion, canonical reading also aims at finding God's intent with his words and the reaction that he expects from his people. What then is God's intent in Lamentations? I believe that he wants us to put him in the centre of our lives. The expected reaction is one of 'enduring and waiting' until his coming. What I imply in the answer therefore suggests an eschatological reading within the canonical context because the sufferer or sufferers depicted in the text await God's response in the form of 'renewing our days as of old'. It is an account of trusting in God's steadfast love and of confessing sins, renewing the covenant relationship between God and the sufferer or sufferers. As presented in the text, they are crying out in a time between the day of the Lord's Judgement (because of their disobedience) and the day of the renewal of the Day of the Lord (relying on his covenant steadfast love).

The Christian community following Jesus as the new Israel can use this eschatological concept to interpret Lamentations, reinterpreting it in a Christian canonical context. The community identifies with old Israel. It also lives in expectation between Jesus' first coming and his *parousia* (re-coming) as the renewing day of all creation and the day of God's judgement. Because of Jesus, the community is often insulted and persecuted during the lives of the community members living between these two parameters. They must, however, continue enduring until the day of God's final salvation and judgement, waiting and watching like their suffering ancestors of faith in Lamentations did. In this, they are to be guided by the teaching of the Lamentations text. It is necessary to keep trusting in the Lord's steadfast love because that is the only hope.

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