



## WHO ARE WE: AN EXPLORATION OF VOICE IN LAM 5:19-22

*Deborah Kahn-Harris*

Chapter 5 of the book of Lamentations presents an interesting contrast from the rest of the book. Whereas chapters 1-4 are all alphabetic acrostics likely written in the *qinah* metre and often in the first person singular, chapter 5 differs in all these essential respects. It is not an alphabetic acrostic, though it is 22 lines long, nor is it written in the *qinah* metre. Most importantly for today's presentation, however, it is not written largely in the first person singular, but rather entirely in the voice of the first person plural. To whom this voice belongs is the question to which I wish to address myself this afternoon. In addition, as vv. 19-22 comprise the end of the end, as it were – the end of both chapter 5 and the work as a whole – it is ultimately these verses to which I wish to address myself and the ways in which voice in particular functions within these final verses.

Chapter 5 is widely regarded as a 'communal lament' (or some variation thereof). Many, if not all, scholars consistently note the importance of the 'communal' or 'community' or 'choral' voice, but virtually no one explores what the use of this communal voice might mean in the context of the book of Lamentations.<sup>1</sup> Why employ this voice in the final chapter of the book? Who is included and who is excluded by the use of the first person plural? Who is or who defines the community, in this context? Ought the reader include themselves in the communal voice? What has happened to the individual voices of the previous chapters? Is God's voice part of the communal? What difference does it make if the first person plural is automatically defined as the communal? It is with these questions in mind that I begin my exploration.

In Lanahan's article, "The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations", he does address the issue of the "choral voice" and explores in a limited fashion the nature of that voice:

The chorus is not simply the reporter, the city, the veteran, and the bourgeois speaking together<sup>2</sup>; the chorus has its own character, subsuming each individual *peona* in an act of prayer which transcends the viewpoints and the inadequacies which the poet perceived and expressed through the first four chapters.<sup>3</sup>

Lanahan then analyses the content of ch. 5, describing it as 'a prayer to God to express its [the chorus's] need for relief'.<sup>4</sup> While Lanahan is not alone in identifying ch. 5 as a prayer, what is curious is that, though he is writing about voice, he does not delve deeply into why this prayer

<sup>1</sup> Mintz does discuss the use of the first person plural in relation to ch. 3, but he does not discuss ch. 5 other than in passing. Dobbs-Allsopp also has a brief exploration of the use of the first person plural in chs. 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> The reporter, the city, the veteran and the bourgeois are Lanahan's own shorthand names for the voices in the other chapters of Lamentations.

<sup>3</sup> Lanahan, pg. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 49.

should have been written in the 'choral voice' rather than in yet another individual voice.<sup>5</sup> Although he writes of the 'chorus' transcending the limited perspectives of the individual voices of the first four chapters, he does not delve deeply into the ways in which this 'chorus' might achieve such transcendence and what else may or may not be implied by or extrapolated from the use of the first person plural. As an opening of the discussion, Lanahan's comments stand as a starting point for deeper investigation.

Chapter 5 begins from the outset with the voice of the first person plural, the voice of 'we', never attempting to define to whom that voice (or perhaps voices) belongs, never overtly rooting itself in any of the other voices of Lamentations. Although the first usage of the first person plural appears in the middle of ch. 3, the use of 'we' there is completely different – it is clearly a device of the male speaking voice of ch. 3 – and I have seen no compelling evidence to suggest that the two should be identified as the same speaker(s).

A more interesting comparison is the 'we' of ch. 4. In vv.17-20 the 'we' voice is introduced once again, but this voice is resolutely not the voice of ch.3. This 'we' has more in common with the 'we' of ch. 5, in so far as the 'we' is more challenging to identify and less clear in its purpose. Re'emi suggests that this shift of voice is reflective of the author's participation in the events recounted.<sup>6</sup> Berlin posits that the shift of voice may represent "the speaker's move from being an objective observer to being a member of the Judean community."<sup>7</sup> Provan, however, concludes that the 'we' voice here is simply the people of Zion, though without any attempt to further describe who those people might encompass.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to ch. 5 specifically then, to whom might the voice of the 'we' belong? The voice might belong to an amalgam of the other voices contained in the book of Lamentations. The voice might belong to undefined others who have yet to speak in Lamentations. The voice may belong to survivors living in Jerusalem still or exiles already in Babylon. The voice may belong to a sort of Greek chorus not yet identified in the book. The voice may belong to the generations of readers. No way exists of knowing to whom the voice belongs to definitively, precisely because at one level the use of the first person plural form from beginning to end in ch. 5 with no other identifying markers has the effect of anonymizing the voice. The first person plural here is both everyone and no one at all.

The consistent identification of the first person plural voice as the communal voice is, therefore, problematic. The use of the term 'communal' already ascribes a decision by the exegete about to whom the voice belongs. Who the exegete believes the community to have been may well, however unintentionally, colour the ways in which she or he interprets this chapter. 'Communal' also will already conjure in the mind of the reader some notion of who the community was. This image will, again, colour the ways in which the reader approaches and understands this chapter. Too, the use of the term 'communal' has had the effect of turning the 'we' of ch. 5 into a sort of collective. Even I, talking today about my concerns, am using the singular 'voice' as opposed to reflecting the plurality inherent in the first person plural and using 'voices'. In framing ch. 5 as a communal lament, generations of exegetes have masked the plurality of the 'we'; they have, in effect, rendered it singular, even if the intention is in some collective sense.

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<sup>5</sup> Provan, pg. 125: "In Greek and Latin mss., the fifth poem bears the title 'A prayer' or 'a prayer of the prophet Jeremiah' ...; also Berlin, pp. 114, 116; Hillers, pg. 155; Dobbs-Allsopp, pg. 140; Re'emi, pg. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Re'emi, pg. 123.

<sup>7</sup> Berlin, pg. 112. Also see Provan, pg. 120: "It has been suggested that it is the narrator of vv. 1-16 who is still addressing us here, the plural verbs and suffixes in this case simply indicating that he is now more explicitly identifying himself with his people."

<sup>8</sup> Provan, pg. 121.

Additionally, the use of the term 'communal' wipes away any sense of the anonymity in this voice, the ways in which whoever authored this text has been able simultaneously to give voice to their own concerns while remaining stubbornly secretive about to whom the voice belongs. Authorship then becomes an issue of contention. Unlike the previous chapters where an editorial voice creeps into the text, in ch.5 nothing so overt takes place. If, however, Lamentations were indeed the product of a school or group of authors, such as the Temple singers, the first person plural would perhaps make more sense. Chapter 5's first person plural would really reflect the plurality of the authorial voice, a direct personification in the text of the Temple singers or some other form of collective authorship. Could the plurality of ch. 5 reflect a genuine plurality in authorship of the text and what would it mean if it did?<sup>9</sup>

But the use of the first person plural presents yet more vexing problems. Who is included and who is excluded in this voice? Could women have been part of this plural voice? Given the lack of gender differentiation in the first person plural of Biblical Hebrew, no way exists to tell whether women are intentionally included or excluded. Monique Wittig in her essay "The Mark of Gender" describes precisely the problem of pronouns as a marker of gender and, more importantly, in the sense 'that they represent persons'.<sup>10</sup> She writes,

... although they [pronouns] are instrumental in activating the notion of gender, they pass unnoticed. ... In principle, pronouns mark the opposition of gender only in the third person and are not gender bearers, per se, in the other persons. Thus, it is as though gender does not affect them, is not part of their structure, but only a detail in their associated forms. But, in reality, as soon as there is a locutor in discourse, as soon as there is an 'I,' gender manifests itself. There is a kind of suspension of grammatical form. A direct interpellation of the locutor occurs. The locutor is called upon in person.<sup>11</sup>

And who the locutor is in Lam 5 is specifically the question at hand.

From a semantic standpoint, of course, Lamentations clearly does contain the female voice of Zion in earlier chapters. This fact could be the basis for an argument that Lamentations is at least open to the possibility of part of the plural voice in ch. 5 belonging to women. As Wittig points out,

One knows that, in French, with *je* ('I'), one must mark the gender as soon as one uses it in relation to past participle and adjectives. In English, where the same kind of obligation does not exist, a locutor, when a sociological woman, must in one way or another, that is, with a certain number of clauses, make her sex public.<sup>12</sup>

The problem for the first person of Biblical Hebrew is the same. If the first person plural of Lam 5 does contain the voice of women, then the reader must be attuned to other signals that enable the sociological woman to 'make her sex public'. But what would these signals be? Without essentialising what it means to be female, such a task seems daunting. Conversely, were we to view the first person plural of ch. 5 as the collective voice of the Temple singers, for example, that would seem to suggest that women were definitely not included and, more so, that the collective here is

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<sup>9</sup> For example, in a contemporary essay on feminist, post-colonial Bible exegesis, Zakia Patak writes the entire essay in the first person plural, In a note at the end of the essay she writes, 'The grammatical marker of the first person throughout this essay will take the plural form – we/our/us – since the essay represents a consensual position on pedagogical practice which emerged – and was constantly being refined – in continuing discussion with my colleagues, Sawswati Sengupta and Sharmila Purkastha.' (Patak, Zakia, "A Pedagogy for Postcolonial Feminists", *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd. [Oxford: 2001], pg. 231.) Here Patak writes in the first person plural specifically to articulate a mutually arrived at position between herself and her colleagues, whom she names clearly. No confusion about who the 'we' is exists; Patak tells us clearly, empowering herself and her colleagues to speak in unison, adding the weight of numbers to their argument.

<sup>10</sup> Wittig, pg. 78.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 79. Wittig here writes regarding (and comparing) French and English pronouns. In relation to Biblical Hebrew grammar her points need slight alteration since both second and third person pronouns are bearers of gender, but her point remains true for the first person. Because the first person is the pronoun in question in Lam 5, then I believe her points hold valid for Biblical Hebrew as well.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.

a highly limited entity, deriving from an elite social group.<sup>13</sup> And yet it remains impossible to prove conclusively that women should or should not be considered part of the plural voice of Lam 5.

For the post-modern reader, another key question must be to what extent is the reader meant to identify with the 'we' of Lam 5. To what extent am I, the reader, the exegete, contained within this first person plural voice? How does imagining myself as part of this voice influence my reading of this text? Am I, personally, co-opted by this voice and if so, in what ways and to what extent?

For Dobbs-Allsopp the 'we' voice of chs. 3, 4 and 5 is linked precisely because he understands the 'we' voice to be purposefully intended to co-opt the reader, rendering the readers as what he calls the 'third embodiment of suffering' in Lamentations.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Dobbs-Allsopp understands that

This final rendition of suffering again travels over the same geography of pain as was traversed earlier. The difference is that this time it is explicitly the reader's pain and the reader's suffering, which makes all the difference. The screams and atrocities and protests that these poems figure are thus coercively superimposed on the reader so that they are felt and understood and experienced and finally voiced as the reader's own.<sup>15</sup>

For me, as a reader and exegete of Lamentations, ch. 5 feels naturally like the space to where I might belong. I find it difficult to read this anonymous 'we' and not make some assumption about my own inclusion. Particularly at the end of ch. 5 – vv. 19-22 – I am co-opted by the 'we' voice. In these final lines of both the chapter and the book, the subject moves from a description of the horrors that have befallen the people to a more direct plea to God, a small petitionary prayer that seems torn between hope and despair. In v. 19 the tone changes; no longer is the text an enumeration of the tragedies that have befallen the people, instead it is replaced by a declaration of God's eternal enthronement. Then in vv. 20-22 the tension of these final verses is revealed – the strain between this eternally enthroned God and God's unending abandonment of the people. It is in this small prayer that I find myself most present, most co-opted by the text. As a professional prayer leader, I find it difficult to read a prayer without looking for myself within it.

And the use of the penultimate verse, Lam 5:21, in the Jewish liturgy encourages an even closer connection for me to this text. I cannot read this verse without hearing the synagogue rendition of v. 21 ringing in my ears. Lam 5:21 is used as the final line at the close of the Torah service.<sup>16</sup> It is

<sup>13</sup> I can find no research to suggest that women numbered among the Temple singers. Moreover, the Temple singers appear to have been derived from or at least related to the Levite clan, making them particularly socially elite within Israelite society.

<sup>14</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, pg. 34-35.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>

ובנחה יאמר שובה יי רבבות אלפי ישראל: [Nu 10:36]

קומה יי למנוחתך אתה וארון עזך: [Ps 132: 8]

כהניך ילבשו-צדק וחסידיך ירננו: [Ps 132:9]

בעבור דוד עבדך אל-תשב פני משיחך: [Ps 132:10]

כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורת אל-תעזבו: [Pr 4:2]

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותומכיה מאשר: [Pr 3:18]

דרכיה דרכי-נעם וכל נתיבותיה שלום: [Pr 3:19]

השיבנו יי אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם: [Lam 5:21]

And when it halted, he would say: Return, O Eternal One, You who are Israel's myriads of thousands.

Advance, O Eternal One, to Your resting-place, You and Your might Ark!

Your priests are clothed in triumph; Your loyal ones sing for joy.

For the sake of Your servant David do not reject Your anointed one.

For I give you good instruction; do not forsake my teaching.

She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy.

Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths, peaceful.

Turn us back, O Eternal One, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our lives as of old.

also employed liturgically in a quite different space on Yom Kippur.<sup>17</sup> As such the use of Lam 5:21 liturgically occurs often for someone such as myself who is a practising Jew. When I say, or more often sing, the words to this verse I do so as prayer, as a line of liturgy which comes from my own lips, my own desire to communicate with God. I automatically include myself in the plural voice, which more often than not I hear as the voice of myself and my community (and often literally as the voice of the choir). I am part and parcel of the plurality when I recite this verse in the context of a service. When I read this line then as part of a public recitation of Torah or even as part of normal Bible study, I have great difficulty in not reading myself into the voice of this verse and, consequently, into the whole of ch. 5.

Indeed, the reading of the book of Lamentations in the synagogue on Tisha B'Av further reinforces the sense of inclusion that I, as a reader, feel in the voice of ch. 5. As a principle, Jews are enjoined at the Pesach Seder

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאלו הוא יצא ממצרים.

In every generation a person is obligated to regard themselves as if they went out of Egypt.

The same principle, I believe, holds true for the destruction of the Temple. This event is not intended as a distant past to which modern Jews have no connection, but rather, we should consider ourselves as though it happened really to us. In that vein the reading of Lamentations at Tisha B'Av becomes a point of personal reference, heavily influenced by the possibility inherent in the text of reading one's own self into the first person plural of ch. 5.

Should we accept Hillers's contention that 'the poems contained in it [Lamentations] may have been used in public mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem immediately after they were written ...', then a real question exists about the extent to which the author(s) of ch. 5 *intended* for the 'we' of this chapter to be read in a liturgical space.<sup>18</sup> Were that the case, then the question may no longer be who is the 'we' of the written text, but rather who is the 'we' of the oral text. In

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I have changed 'Lord' in the NJPS translation to the more common, non-gender specific 'Eternal One' now in use in progressive communities. Some contemporary movements have altered this liturgy, removing the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> lines because the references to the Temple, priesthood and Davidic kingship (as read as a messianic hope) are not in keeping with these movements' contemporary theology (or in some cases, simply to shorten the service). The practice of using Lam 5:21 for the returning of the Torah scroll to the Ark is, however, attested to in all the major rites (Sephardi and Ashkenazi) and seems to be, alongside Nu 10:36, the oldest section of this passage. For a more complete discussion see, Elbogen, I., *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, The Jewish Publication Society [Philadelphia:1993], pg. 160, section §30.2.

<sup>17</sup>

שמע קולנו ה" אלהינו. חס ורחם עלינו. וקבל ברחמים וברצון את-תפלתנו:  
השיבו יי אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם:  
אמרינו האזינה ה". בינה הגיגנו:  
יהיו לרצון אמרי פינו והגיון לבנו לפניך ה" צורנו וגואלנו:  
אל תשליכנו מלפניך. ורוח קדשך אל תקח ממנו:  
אל תשליכנו לעת זקנה. ככלות כחנו אל תעזבנו:  
אל תעזבנו ה" אלהינו. אל תרחק ממנו:  
כי לך ה" הוחלנו. אתה תענה ה" אלהינו:

Hear our voice, Eternal our God, show us mercy and compassion, accept our prayers willingly and with love.

Turn us back to You, O Eternal One, and let us come back; renew our lives as of old.

Hear what we say; understand what we cannot express.

May the words of our mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Eternal, our rock and redeemer.

Do not send us away from our nearness to You, and do not take away from us the spirit of Your holiness.

Do not send us away when we grow old; when our spirit fails, do not forsake us, Eternal our God, do not leave us, be not distant from us.

Our hopes rest on You alone, Eternal; only You can answer us, Eternal our God!

Translation adapted from *Forms of Prayers for Jewish Worship III: Prayers for the High Holidays*, Reform Synagogues of Great Britain [London: 1985], pg. 428. Translation adapted to reflect non-gender specific God language.

<sup>18</sup> Hillers, pg. 6.

other words, is the 'we' simply the people who read the text? Is the 'we', ala Dobbs-Allsopp, intentionally, purposefully, the readers, or more precisely, the reciters?

And so, what happens if these final verses of Lamentations are as imagined as a multi-vocal plurality, rather than a monolithic whole, how might they be read? In my academic work, I have been exploring the possibility of creating contemporary midrash as a modern, feminist response to the biblical text. In the midrash I have composed in reference to Lam 5:21- 22, I offer one possible reading of these verses, one that includes both the previous voices of the earlier chapters of Lamentations as well as the voices of later readers:

**ג** אלֵיךָ יי אֵלֶיךָ זִיּוֹן said: 'Return us, Eternal One, to You' but the Man-who-has-known-affliction hastily added: 'But we shall surely return'. And together: 'Renew our days as in ancient times.' But Zion in her sorrow grew anxious: 'For if you have utterly despised us, have been exceedingly wroth against us,' and the Man-who-has-known-affliction was struck down, just at that moment; thus the rabbis added: 'Return us, Eternal One, to You and we shall return, renew our days as in ancient times.'

Here I have imagined vv. 21-22 as a dialogue. In particular I was struck by the use of **נְשׁוּבָה**. In this construction the verb is used rarely in the Bible. Of the places where it has the sense of return to God it appears only three times – once here, once in Hos 6:1 and once in Lam 3:40. Both in Lam 3 and in Hosea the verb is distinctly placed in the mouth of a male voice; in both places the direct speech of a man calls forcefully to the people to return to God. For me, then, the use of **נְשׁוּבָה** here felt strongly as the call of a male voice. When I then contemplated the beginning of the verse, I realised that it was not parallelism at work – what is asked for in **הַשִּׁיבֵנו** is, though employing the same root, entirely different. In employing the causative the plea here is not a call to the people to return, but rather a call to God to enable return. I could hear within that plea the voice of anger and despair – You caused these traumas, God; You are therefore responsible for ensuring that our return is even possible. To my ear, that was surely the voice of Zion, who angrily and desperately recalls her anguish in Lam 1&2. And so **הַשִּׁיבֵנו** became her voice; **נְשׁוּבָה** became the voice of the Man of Lam 3; and the desire for a return to how things used to be, a shared voice. When, then, the despair returns, I could not hear the Man of Lam 3 at all; he is persistently the hopeful voice of Lamentations. The anguish and hopelessness of the final verse must be the final words of Zion. But why did the Man not reply? Perhaps because despite his hope, he was no longer physically able to reply. And so who is left to reply, to counter the terrifying possibility that the final verse may true? Only those who no longer reside in the text are left to reply and according to ancient Jewish tradition that reply comes in the repetition of the penultimate verse. In all public recitations of Lamentations in the Jewish community, the penultimate verse of the book is read again at the end.<sup>19</sup> We do not end on words of reproach, according to the rabbis, so it was with their words, their voices, that I ended my midrash.

These three voices – the voice of Zion, of the Man and of the post-biblical community – are the voices which I have heard in Lamentations. Are these the actual voices of Lam 5? I leave you only

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<sup>19</sup> According to Rashi in his commentary to Lam 5:23 (The text that Rashi comments from already knows this tradition and, hence, Lam 5: 23 is the repetition of Lam 5: 21.):

מפני שמסיים בדברי תוכחה הוצרך לכפול מקרא שלפניו פעם הרת וכן ישעיה ותרי עשר וקהלת:

In order that one does not conclude with words of reproof it is necessary to repeat the previous verse again and thus with Isaiah, Twelve [Minor Prophets, i.e. Malachi] and Ecclesiastes.

Clearly the tradition of repeating v. 21 at the end of Lamentations goes back further than Rashi; however, the tradition does not appear in the Talmud as a rabbinic dictum. Pesikta De-Rab Kahana, piska 13 states:

"[Returning to Jeremiah's prophecy], is it not a fact that he says therein 'But Thou hast utterly rejected us' (Lam 5:22)? Yes, but directly after he says 'Thou hast utterly rejected us,' he goes on to say comfortingly, 'Turn Thou us unto Thee' (Lam 5: 21)" (Braude, pg. 205).

Pesikta De-Rab Kahana is broadly dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> c., but it suffers from serious issues relating to its manuscript tradition, hence dating a piece such as the one quoted with any precision is difficult. It is unlikely that PRK is the original source of the tradition, in any case, but the appearance here does suggest that this tradition of repetition is ancient.

with this modern rendition of Lam 5:21 by Rabbi Shefa Gold – an aural representation of the possibility that the ‘we’ of Lam 5 is more complex, more layered, more nuanced than a mere reading alone can provide.

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