



THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS: A TEXT OF THE CHURCH

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The Book of Lamentations was already part of the Septuagint, the pre-Christian Greek translation of the Jewish Bible. When the Hebrew canon was definitively determined during the early rabbinic period, Lamentations was part of it. In the community that had Jesus as its reference, it was self-evident that the Jewish Bible was the predetermined "Scripture". In the Church, it became the "Old Testament" when the "New Testament" was added as the second part of the canon. Those who rejected the Old Testament as the first part of the Christian Bible were excluded from the Church as heretics. That is why in all Christian denominational families the Lamentations are part of the Bible. But not all parts of the Bible are equally significant when it comes to their actual use in the Church. In that context, the role of Lamentations is smaller; they are hardly used. As a Protestant Christian, I shall first make some comments on how they are used in the Protestant Church in Germany.

1. On the actual use of Lamentations in the Protestant Church in Germany

a) The Agenda guidelines

In the six series of sermons, only one text from Lamentations is included, a few verses from Chapter 3. This excerpt is the Old Testament reading on the 16th Sunday after Trinitatis and the sermon text in the third series. The Gospel of that Sunday is John 11, the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and the epistle is 2 Tim 1:7-10, the last verse of which also gives the motto for the week: "Christ Jesus abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." A few verses from Ps 68 serve as the entrance, ending with V. 21, which is also the Alleluia verse after the reading: "Our God is a God who helps, and the Lord, who saves from death." So this Sunday is determined by the theme of "salvation from death". The excerpt for the sermon text from Lam 3:22-26.31-32 corresponds with this. In Luther's translation, the beginning is as follows (translated into English): "It is the kindness of the Lord that we are not completely finished, his mercy still has no end, but it is new every morning, and your fidelity is great." The expressions of trust and hope in God, which just barely flash up in the middle of Lamentations, are taken by themselves here and placed in a different context. It fits in with this other context that this excerpt from the text is foreseen as a possible reading in the sketches given in the Agenda for burials. In the Agenda of the Protestant Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck, we find a larger paragraph from Chapter 3, verses (1-16.)17-40 as a reading for the Easter Vigil. Thus this reading is unequivocally placed into a context that is determined by Christology.

b) Examples of how the text was actually used in sermons and meditations

Sermons during the immediate post-war period are based on a larger section of the text from chapter 3: verses 22-41. In these sermons, a direct identification is made between one's own situation and that of the text. "I don't need to continue, do I?" Heinrich Vogel said after he had read further verses of Lamentations to his listeners. "That is said for us! That is our situation!"¹ Heinrich Runte put it very similarly: "What is the prophet talking about here? Is this not our time, our suffering as we are experiencing it today?"² Rudolf Bultmann also mentioned "our people's distress, which we see around us, the deprivation and hardship that every day brings us".³ In these sermons held in 1946, if Israel is seen at all, it is entirely on the margins as the historical Israel of the text and thus as the supplier of the correspondence with the present, and with Bultmann not even that happens.

The question regarding one's own guilt is discernible in these sermons. But it is not possible to say that this is dealt with clearly. Bultmann said first in a rather nebulous way: "Much has happened, too much has been spoiled, too much destroyed for it to be possible to make things right again in the world in one go, as if all those terrible things hadn't happened."⁴ A little further on, however, he did note: "As if we didn't have to bear the necessary consequences of insanity, and indeed to bear them courageously, so that things can again improve!"⁵ And he continued: "Impatience forgets what we brought upon the world, what misery upon many nations",⁶ it "robs us of the vision for self-criticism".⁷ But he did not implement this self-criticism; rather, he remained in the indefinite: "We are before God, and before God not one of us is pure. Every one of us is somehow (!) a participant and responsible for the fact that it does not look like it should among the people."⁸ Runte made the call in Lam 3:39 to grumble against one's own sin to something mystical: "... his own, which only he knows and God, and he only through God. But that and how this happens remains each one's very own secret with God."⁹ And when it does happen, mercy is very quickly given, and it covers everything up. Relatively speaking, Vogel was the most explicit when he said: "God would after all have some reason to finally, finally so to speak finish with a lineage that behaves as we human beings do, and in particular with a people that is not moved by anything, really not by anything as it seems, not even by God's terrible judgments, to turn back and to turn towards the God with whom is all help! What should God say when, after everything and in spite of everything, we turn the tables around and howl in his face: Why, why does God allow this?"¹⁰

In 1957, Heinrich Vogel preached again on Lam 3 in the same place in Berlin-Schlachtensee, but this time only on verses 22-24. In this sermon – in the midst of the "economic miracle" – he obviously did not create a direct correspondence between the situations. Now, he set up a parallel between Israel and the Church in the sense of the infidelity of human beings and God's fidelity. But Israel is only looked at as a historical entity up to the Babylonian Exile – with the prospect of "a new shoot"; and thus, with reference to Jesus, the concept of surpassing is to be found: "There, there we hear in a way the prophet did not yet know: 'It is the kindness of the Lord ...'"¹¹ The

¹ Heinrich Vogel, *Das Freijahr Gottes, die frohe Botschaft in Predigten*, Berlin 1949, p. 158.

² Heinrich Runte, *Das Zeugnis von der Güte, Treue und Barmherzigkeit Gottes. Predigt über Klagel. 3,22-41*, in: *Glaube und Geschichte*. FS Friedrich Gogarten, ed. by Heinrich Runte, Gießen 1948, (pp. 61-66), p. 63.

³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Marburger Predigten*, Tübingen 1956, p. 202.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Vogel, *Freijahr*, p. 161.

¹¹ Heinrich Vogel, *Wir sind geliebt. Predigten*, Berlin 1957, p. 167f.

commentary on Lam 3:22f. by Hans-Joachim Kraus, which was published during those years, is along the same lines. He sees these statements as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ and exclusively bound to him: "The great certainty that is expressed in 22 and 23 ultimately is totally decided in Jesus Christ. He is the fulfilment of the Old Testament covenantal promise to the community of the New Covenant. In it, the mystery and wonder of covenantal fidelity and of the persistence of salvation is guaranteed. Through his suffering and death alone (!), the door to insight is broken down: God's graces never end, God's mercy has no end."¹² Moreover, this kind of Christological surpassing brings with it the danger of pasting over the question of guilt and the problem of the re-establishment of right and justice with the mercy that is all too rapidly present.

In a meditation during the year 2004, access to the text was sought by way of the general anthropological experience of pain – and its relationship to Israel is thereby dissolved: "Pain (through loss, fear, death and guilt) is the existential state of emergency. ... Nothing has changed in that since the Babylonian Exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. Before that too – and until today – human beings become the prey of pain and of its followers, they are taken away from the secure space of their daily lives, helpless in an interior foreign land, delivered up to these existential powers of occupation that can utterly devastate a life and that do so."¹³ In the further development of this meditation, "the political situation in the Middle East", seen from the Palestinian perspective, is then counted among the "things that one (?) has to become used to".¹⁴ The sermon ends with a theological platitude: "Whatever happens: we can trust in the fact that God loves us."¹⁵

However, there are also newer meditations in which the re-thinking of Christian theology as regards Judaism, begun in the 1960s, bears fruit. In 1998, Mechthild Gunkel asked herself explicitly "how I as a Christian make the Jewish people's central catastrophe in biblical times ... to a topic without either interpreting it as God's just punishment or placing myself on the side of the victims in a way that is adsorptive, or even by distancing myself from this history as not being my own".¹⁶ She is in favour of taking the historical context as the topic and arrives at the statement: "The shared lamentation makes it possible (to reflect) on the connection between a deed and the consequences of the deed, to recognize wrong decisions, to confess and to lament."¹⁷ Gerhard Begrich highlights very strongly that, according to biblical-Jewish tradition, we have to do in the text with lamentations of *Jeremiah*¹⁸, and in emphasizing this, he does not separate these lamentations from Israel by dissolving them into something anthropological in general. He says: "The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians can only be talked about together with the crucifixion on Golgotha."¹⁹ The expression "to talk about" must be underlined here; he is not talking about surpassing or even replacing. However, this must be looked at more precisely.

¹² Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Klagelieder (Threni)*, *Biblischer Kommentar XX*, Neukirchen Kreis Moers ²1960, p. 70.

¹³ Wiebke Köhler / Cornelia Coenen-Marx, 16. Sonntag nach Trinitatis. *Klagelieder 3,22-26.31-32: Du meine Seele singe*, in: *Predigtstudien für das Kirchenjahr 2004/2005. Perikopenreihe III – Zweiter Halbband*, ed. by Volker Drehsen et al., Stuttgart 2005, (pp. 164-171), p. 165 (Köhler).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171 (Coenen-Marx).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (Coenen-Marx).

¹⁶ Mechthild Gunkel, 16. Sonntag nach Trinitatis: *Klgl 3,22-26.31+32*, in: *Predigtmeditationen im christlich-jüdischen Kontext. Zur Perikopenreihe III*, ed. by Wolfgang Kruse, (1998), (pp. 241-248), pp. 245f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 246.

¹⁸ Gerhard Begrich, 16. Sonntag nach Trinitatis – 11.9.2005. *Klagelieder 3,22-32(33!)*, in: *Pastoraltheologie. Göttinger Predigtmeditationen 93*, ed. by Christian Möller, Göttingen 2004, (pp.437-443), p. 438.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

c) Consequences for appropriate Christian work with Lamentations

As I see it, what has been said so far leads to the following consequences: Lamentations are a text that belongs to Israel. When Christianity receives them, this may not occur as a disappropriation. How can and must this reception happen while keeping in mind that Lamentations not only was a text of Israel's when it was written, but that it *is* to this day first of all a text that belongs to Judaism? Thus in the second part of this contribution, some essential aspects of the Lamentations themselves, at least in outline, will have their say by means of examples from the text. In the third part, I want to discuss an aspect of Jewish interpretation that seems to me to be especially important, before I look for an access to their Christian reception in the fourth part.

2. Perceiving Lamentations as a text that was written in Israel

Already in antiquity, Lamentations was ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah. The lamentations refer to the situation after the destruction of the first temple and were written under the impression of this event. The distress, the suffering and the horror are described relentlessly:²⁰

The tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst;
the children beg for bread, but no one breaks it for them.
Those who feasted on delicacies perish in the streets;
those who were brought up in purple cling to ash heaps. (4:4f.)

Our skin burns as an oven because hunger is raging so.
Women are raped in Zion, young women in the towns of Judah.
High gentlemen are hung up by enemy hands;
no respect is shown to the elders.
Young men are compelled to carry millstones,
and boys stagger under loads of wood. (5:10-13)

However, the text does not limit itself simply to describing the situation. This description takes the form of prayer; lament is raised to God: "O Lord, look at my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!" (1:9) God is really being accused; for he is the one who is really acting:

Look, O Lord, and consider to whom you have done this!
May women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for with love?
May priest and prophetess and prophet
be killed in the sanctuary of my authority?
The young and the old are lying on the ground in the streets;
my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword;
in the day of your anger you have killed them,
slaughtering without mercy.
You invited my enemies from all around
as if for a day of festival;
and on the day of the anger of the Lord
no one escaped or survived;
those whom I bore and reared with love
my enemy has destroyed. (2:20-22)

But precisely because it is God who holds the reins, may he not let the enemy triumph in the end:

All my enemies heard of my trouble;
they are glad that you have done it.
Bring on the day you have announced, and let them be as I am.
Let all their evil doing come before you; and deal with them
as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions;
for my groans are many and my heart is faint. (1:21f.)

²⁰ The quotations in English are taken from the New Revised Standard Version except when this does not correspond with the author's translation.

Since the terrible situation is reflected upon before God, one's own wrongdoing that led to the dreadful state is also seen, and this brings about the confession of one's own guilt: "Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery." (1:8) She must admit: "Yes, I have rebelled against the Lord's word." (1:18) She is told:

Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes,
but have seen oracles for you that are false and misleading. (2:14)

Because lamentation and accusation are directed towards God as the one who is lord over what he does, the situation is not experienced as entirely hopeless. Thus, in the middle of the book, there are statements of trust and hope in God:

So I say, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."
The thought of my affliction and my exile is wormwood and gall!
My throat continually thinks of it and is oppressed for my sake.
But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.
The steadfast love of the Lord has not come to an end,
he has not ceased having mercy;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (3:18-23)

That does not exclude further lamentations and accusations; a few verses later it says:

That all the prisoners of the land are crushed under foot,
that human rights are perverted before the face of the Most High,
that a person is oppressed in his legal case -
has my authority not seen it? (3:34-36)

The powerful ending, which once again gathers together almost all the themes, is left open:

The joy of our hearts has ceased;
our dancing has been turned to mourning.
The crown has fallen from our head;
woe to us, for we have sinned!
Because of this our hearts are in mourning,
because of these things our eyes have grown dim:
over Mount Zion, which lies desolate, foxes prowl.
You, O Lord, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.
Why do you want to forget us completely?
Why do you want to forsake us for endless days?
Let us return, Lord, to you, and we shall return.
Renew our days as of old!
Unless you have rejected us, rejected, and are angry with us beyond measure ... (5:15-22)

Lamentations is in the form of poetry. In my translation (into German), I have tried to correspond with the rhythm of their language and the often unusual order of the words and the occasional final rhyme. Over and beyond that and above all, the songs are composed as an acrostic, meaning that the first letters of a verse follow the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The unspeakable suffering is expressed in a firm form, and thus the limitless suffering is also limited. Where theological patterns of thought are no longer effective, the poetic language opens up new space – a space for survival. The fact that in Judaism Lamentations are to this day the text that is read on the 9th of Av, the day on which the destruction of the First and Second Temples is remembered, corresponds with this. That brings us to the next point.

3. Perceiving Lamentations as a text that is used and interpreted in Judaism

Here I only want to look at two closely connected aspects in the Midrash Ekha Rabbati. This midrash clearly intensifies the lamentation tremendously by the fact that it is God himself who

laments. The phrase from Ps 102:8, “I lay awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop”, is said by God concerning the destruction of the temple and its consequences:

“The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘I lay awake, yes, I was out to let my presence (*shekhinah*) dwell in the sanctuary forever. *I am like a bird*: like a bird sits lonely at the moment when you take away her young, thus I,’ said the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘burned down my house, devastated my city, and sent my children into exile among the nations of the world – and I am sitting lonely by myself.’”²¹

A few paragraphs later it says of God faced with the destroyed temple:

“At that same moment, the Holy One, blessed be He, wept and said: ‘Woe is me because of my house! My children, where are you? My priests, where are you? My beloved, where are you? What should I do for you? I warned you, but you did not return in a return.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Jeremiah: ‘Today I am like a person who had only one son and who prepared the wedding for him, but the son died at the wedding.’”²²

God laments over Israel because his heart is attached to Israel. And even more: God himself is Israel's heart. Thus, another passage in the midrash interprets something that is said in Jer 4:18, where, in view of the terrible destiny of the city, it is said to Jerusalem: “That is your maliciousness. Yes, it is bitter; it touches you even to the heart.” Following the quotation, “it touches you even to the heart”, the midrash adds:

“That is the Holy One, blessed be He. Rabbi Chiyya said: ‘Where do we find that the Holy One, blessed be He, is called the heart of Israel? In this verse of Scripture: *God is the rock of my heart and my portion forever* (Ps 73:26).’”²³

Biblically, the heart is not the seat of feeling; rather, it signifies the centre of the person, the person in whom it is and whom it means in its striving and desiring, in its intentionality. God reveals himself as the one who he is, reveals himself in his striving and desiring in the midst of his people Israel. God identifies himself with his people and its fate. That becomes particularly clear towards the end of the introductions to Midrash Ekha Rabbati, when a conversation between God and Jeremiah follows Jer 40:1 (“The word that happened to Jeremiah from the Eternal”):

“What was this word other than that He said to him: ‘Jeremiah, if you remain here, I will go with them (into exile to Babylon). And if you go with them, I will remain here.’ He said to Him: ‘Lord of the universe, if I go with them, of what use can I be to them? However, if their King goes with them, their Creator, He can be of very great use to them.’ That is what is written: *After Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, had let Jeremiah go, he was bound in fetters* (Jer 40:1).”²⁴

God identifies himself so much with Israel that he goes with Israel into exile bound in fetters. And when he frees Israel, he also frees himself so to say, as it is said in another place.²⁵ God as it were inscribes himself in the history of his people. In what is being said here, we have what is called Incarnation in Christian tradition. If God identifies himself so much with Israel, we see here a reciprocal relationship; then God is not only Israel's heart, but Israel is also God's heart.

4. Perceiving Lamentations in the Church together with Israel's teachers

The way the midrash speaks of God as the heart of Israel reminded me of an interpretation of Jn 1:18 by Calvin. According to him, the statement in Jn 1:18, that “the Son had been *in the bosom of the Father*”, has as its aim “that we may know that in the Gospel we have as it were God's heart

²¹ EkhaR P'tichta 20 (Wilna 4d).

²² Ibid.

²³ EkhaR P'tichta 16 (Wilna 4b).

²⁴ EkhaR P'tichta 34 (Wilna 9b.c).

²⁵ Cf. e.g. MekhJ Bo 14 (Horovitz / Rabin, p. 51f.).

open before us”,²⁶ in the Gospel that subsequently tells the story of Jesus. According to this, God identifies himself with Jesus and his story, God inscribes himself therein and thus becomes recognizable there. In what this is saying, it corresponds exactly with the way the midrash sees the relationship between God and Israel. I recognize here something that I encounter over and over again in the New Testament: what is said in biblical-Jewish tradition about Israel as a whole is true here in a concentrated way of this one Jew, who in faith is eschatological new creation through the raising of Jesus from the dead.

Christianity understood that in the Gospel, in the story of Jesus, “we have as it were God's heart open before us” in an exclusive sense. Israel's story thereby became simply the prehistory that was seen to have ended with Jesus. The idea of a funnel is so to speak classical, according to which Israel's history narrows down to Jesus, who draws all promises to himself. Whoever does not follow the suction of this funnel, so does not acknowledge Jesus, is considered as standing outside. The consequence of this model was enmity towards Jews with everything terrible that this brought with it. Since the 1960s, horror over these consequences has led to a new way of thinking. The funnel model can certainly be valid if its direction is turned around: Jesus as the funnel's metaphorical narrow point is for us Christians, as people from among the nations, the point of access to the space of Scripture; this space in all its breadth opens up for us through that narrow point. The Gospel of Jesus the Anointed was written within that space, and it can only be understood correctly in it. Seen from this direction, it is clear that Scripture previously belonged to others and still belongs to them. It testifies to the one God, the Creator of the whole world, who however is anything but a hackneyed God (*translator's note: in German this is a play on words*); rather God is and remains Israel's God.

If we follow this direction, the perception of God in the Gospel, in the story of Jesus, also leads to the perception of Israel's story as a story of God with his people, which also continues after Jesus. Then Christians can listen to Jews as witnesses to the same God to whom they, the Christians, have come through the message of Jesus. If Jewish testimony is heard in this way in the Church, it is of great benefit, because it helps to discover more and to understand better the wealth of Scripture. That can also help in perceiving Lamentations as part of the Bible more and better than has so far been the case in the Church. Such a perception can protect the Church from wanting to be a triumphant Church. It can help to recognize and to lay out openly before God the suffering, the distress and one's own guilt as well, and precisely in so doing, to trust in the God who is coming and thus not to give up hope.

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*The International Jewish-Christian Bible Week is supported by
the German Ministry of the Interior on the basis of an enactment of the German Parliament.*

²⁶ Johannes Calvins Auslegung des Johannes-Evangeliums, translated by Martin Trebesius and Hans Christian Petersen, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1964, p. 27.