

Lamentations 4 in the light of Poetry therapy

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ABSTRACT

Why do we study the Old Testament? Why do we read and analyse Old Testament poems? Does our work make a difference? Does it need to make a difference, and if so, what kind of difference? A recent trend in Psychology is called Poetry Therapy, and it is described as an interface of the Arts and Psychology. The psychologist Adler (1933) wrote 'Among poetic works of art which have led me to the insights of Individual Psychology the following stand out as pinnacles: fairy tales, the Bible, Shakespeare, and Goethe.' This paper explores the interface of Old Testament poems and Poetry Therapy. In particular, some recent commentaries on the Book of Lamentations are evaluated from this vantage point, with questions whether they are just more of the same, whether they are merely a proliferation of series of commentaries for publishing houses, or whether they really contribute something new and worthwhile to Old Testament Scholarship and the readers thereof. Lamentations 4 is taken as a focal point. In short, this is a plea for scholarship with a heart.

A WHAT WOMEN (AND MEN) WANT

What women want is a great story about a man who managed to get into women's heads, hearts and the rest is his-tory. At heart a real chauvinist pig, Nick (Mel Gibson) was miraculously shocked into a mode of total understanding when his mechanistic and false attempt to understand his subjects failed dismally. And man, did his life change when he managed (or should I say womanaled) to truly feel and mirror the emotions and thoughts of the women around him.

Which made me think: what do we want? As scholars of the Old Testament, we attempt to get into the minds of the authors and audiences of the Bible. To these ends we employ the A to Z of methods and strategies: from Archaeology to Sitz, with all the tricks of our trade in between. We have to do this, because of the ghastly divide of two thousand plus years between us and the minds we want to pick. Our methods served us well for most of the time, and all the difficulties involved necessitates the rigour of our trade. But: Are we changed by what we do? Do we have fun and do we experience success?

I have this nagging feeling that there is always more to be done, always other avenues to be explored and discovered. If we become complacent we might just find that our rigour became rigoristic or even mechanistic, with mortifying effects. If we stop looking, even though we do not expect shocking miracles, we might just begin to look very silly in the eyes of the people of our day and age.

The call for more has already come from inside our guild. Kuntz (1999) tracked Biblical Hebrew poetry in recent research, and points to the fact that many studies of poetry focus on the necessary technical issues like what constitutes poetry, how does it differ from prose, its pervasive characteristics and its most common features (Berlin 1996:302), as well as the architecture of poetry (Fitzgerald 1990).

However, Kuntz also sees an emerging trend where scholars want more (1999:40-42). Miller (1994) asks what does it mean theologically that we have poetry in the Bible. He defines nine basic features of Hebrew poetry which distinguish it from prose, but then continues to define the theological importance as its capacity for multi-signification (1999:225). Cooper (1987:240) argues that 'structuring inevitably leads beyond the poem - creating a bond between the life of the poem and the life of the reader which permanently alters both'. Cooper wants scholars not only to describe a poem's technical characteristics, but also to let it speak in their hearing. Floyd (1990) should receive the prize for the best title (*'Falling flat on our Ars Poetica, or some problems in the recent study of Biblical poetry'*). He states that modern biblical critics lack a holistic theory of poetry. He wants poetry to be understood as rhythmic language with an expressive goal, where content, form and social conventions of the day are intimately linked (1990:127). West (1992) accuses scholars of focusing so much on linguistic matters of poetry, that its theological message is ignored. She asks for a new rhetorical criticism that takes seriously the why of biblical poetry. Stylistic features should still be researched, but attention should be given to the persuasive content of the poem as well as to how readers of the poem experience the formation of a multiplicity of meanings in reading the poem. She is especially intent on moving from linguistic analysis alone to an interpretative enterprise of meaning in order to help make biblical poems more accessible to non-specialists (1992:427).

These calls seem to me extremely important. I take it that all of us agree that motor vehicles are carefully engineered and constructed with the goal to be driven. We will not get very far if we constantly disassemble it in order to marvel at all its intricacies. At some stage the vehicle should be used for what it was intended for – we should get into the car and allow us to be taken somewhere. In similar vein a poem should be allowed to take us places, and not to be continuously dissected.

A relevant response to these remarks is how to do it, and also why it is worth our trouble to do it.

B POETIC MINDS: WALKING THE EXTRA MILE, TALKING THE EXTRA WHILE

A step in the direction to help us answer these questions is to ask why do people write and read poems. Why not merely speak in ordinary prose? Why take the trouble of getting words to rhyme, to get lines to have rhythm, to conform to patterns, to use novel imagery, to mirror the previous line in parallelism and to use all the other features like terseness, ellipsis, symmetry, figuration, parataxis, fronting and many more? There must be a special pay-off to make it worthwhile to walk the extra mile and talk the extra while.

The easy answer is that it looks and sounds beautiful. The aesthetics of poetry makes it worth the trouble. Not enough a reason, though. Reading for pleasure does not warrant all the trouble. It also does not give a testable explanation of the effect of poetry on people. To recognise and to appreciate is necessary and important, but to be useful is better.

An understanding of the working of our minds prompts us in the right direction. Poetry mirrors what we have inside. Poetry resonates with our natural inclinations. The architecture of poetry stems from the architecture of our minds.

Karpen (1984: 125 - 146) speculates about literature and the triune brain as described by MacLean. According to Karpen, poetry seems to be the expression of some faculty beyond reason, and it seems to arise from some deep level in the mind. Readers experience literature on a level beyond the verbal and it resonates with the person's deeper faculties (1984: 134-135).

Zevit (1992:199-201) refers to Barr's (1973) distinction of historical and a-historical foci of Biblical studies. Historical studies focus on ancient Israel's institutions, ideologies and literature. A-historical studies focus on Biblical poetics, aesthetics and structures of genres. He then asks how do we know that our interpretation of poetry and our reaction to it may be similar to that of the ancient Israelite who listened to it. Fact is, up to now there was no way to be sure. However, cognitive psychology departs from the premise that the cognitive apparatus of humankind stayed the same at least since the Iron Age. Therefore it is safe to say that all humankind perceive, think and know in similar ways, even though our cultures may differ markedly. Cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics do not provide exegetical tools, but they may give explanations and confirm many of the

intuitions of biblical scholars about poetry.

In similar vein Shen (1997:35) indicates that regularities characterizing poetic language conform to cognitive rather than linguistic or contextual constraints. Poetic language mirrors our cognitive architecture, as it were. Even metaphor has an indicatable cognitive structure. Stjernfelt (1995:129) agrees with Lakoff and Turner's notion that the habitat of metaphor is not language, but thought. Metaphor is a cognitive process that finds expression in language, not vice versa.

There are clear indications that humankind has an inborn ability to create and experience poetry. Poetry addresses a much deeper need in humans than a superficial aesthetically pleasing activity. If we accept this, it has a lot to say about how we as Old Testament scholars approach biblical poetry. We are ignoring the basic character of biblical (and other) poetry if we only focus on surface features of poetry. We are ignoring basic characteristics of our human nature if we do not attend to how poetry functions in its creation and especially in the experience thereof. We should heed the call of those Old Testament scholars who ask for more. We should muster all available options and methodologies to help us understand the complex character of poetry.

Cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics are important role players mainly to understand the processes involved in the creation of poetry. An approach that may help us understand the experience of poetry that to my knowledge has not been taken into account thus far, is Poetry Therapy.

C POETRY THERAPY

Most of the time the Bible is used for devotional purposes. Poetry Therapy may enrich and broaden our views, not only on why it is useful to read the Bible and biblical poems, but also why and how we should teach the Bible and biblical poetry.

According to Reiter (1997: 169), Poetry therapy and bibliotherapy are terms used synonymously to describe the intentional use of poetry and other forms of literature for healing and personal growth.

'Developmental interactive bibliotherapy' refers to the use of literature, discussion and creative writing with children in schools and hospitals, adults in growth and support groups, and older persons in senior centres and nursing homes. In these community settings, bibliotherapy is used not only to foster growth and development, but it is used as a preventative tool in mental health.

'Clinical interactive bibliotherapy' refers to the use of literature, discussion and

creative writing to promote healing and growth in psychiatric units, community mental health centres, and chemical dependency units.

The basic goal of therapy is to promote change, resulting in increased coping skills and adaptive functions to work through underlying conflicts. The specific goals of poetry therapy may be identified as follows:

- To improve the capacity to respond to vivid images and concepts, and the feelings aroused by them;
- To enhance self-understanding and accuracy in self-perception;
- To increase awareness of interpersonal relationships;
- To heighten reality orientation;
- To develop creativity, self-expression and greater self-esteem;
- To encourage positive thinking and creative problem-solving;
- To strengthen communication, particularly listening and speaking skills;
- To integrate the different aspects of the self for psychological wholeness;
- To ventilate overpowering emotions and release tension;
- To find new meaning through new ideas, insights, and/or information;
- To help participants experience the liberating and nourishing qualities of beauty (Reiter 1997:170-171).

Trained facilitators select appropriate literature that may help a client to obtain psychological health and wellbeing. The literature is used in individual or group situations. The aim is to help participants to explore feelings, thoughts, ideas and personal issues. For this reason facilitators should know the corpus of literature they work with very well, because they have to choose poems that match the feeling tone of the poem and the client's mood. The therapist also has to be very sensitive to the developmental level, cultural make-up, literacy level, circumstance and emotional fragility of the participants.

A session is an interactive process, in which four stages may be identified (Hynes & Wedl, 1990):

- **Recognition**
To begin with, participants must be able to recognize and identify with the selection.
- **Examination**
During this phase, participants explore specific details with the assistance of a bibliotherapist. Through questions and open dialogue, the group explores the significance of their reactions.

- **Juxtaposition**
This is a process that explores the significant interplay between contrasts and comparisons. Looking at an experience from a directly opposite view can provide an awareness that may become the basis for wise choices in attitude and behaviour.
- **Application to the Self**
The bibliotherapist encourages feelings to emerge and become integrated with cognitive concepts and deeper self-understanding. 'Now I understand why I was able to leave home and succeed; my parents believed in me,' or 'Now I understand why I have difficulty making decisions; I lack confidence.' It is important for the client to see the connection between the individual and the literature, and to apply the new knowledge to his/her own self in the real world.

Poetry Therapists in the USA belong to the National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT), which confers professional credentials to bibliopoetry therapists who have met its rigorous standards. The poetry therapist today is a professional who is well grounded in psychology and literature, as well as group dynamics. NAPT maintains a registry of biblio/poetry therapy practitioners in educational, medical, geriatric, therapeutic and community settings. The poetry therapist of the 1990's is a valuable professional whose work is applicable to many different and difficult-to-treat persons who do not always respond to conventional therapy.

From this short overview it is clear that Poetry Therapists take it very seriously that poems and other works of literature have been created with goals of self-expression and self-understanding in mind.. They take it equally seriously that readers or listeners to poetry may experience similar benefits of growth and healing.

This brings us to the question how we as Old Testament scholars and readers read and teach biblical poetry.

D RECENT COMMENTARIES ON LAMENTATIONS

All our endeavours as Old Testament scholars are geared towards a deep understanding of the Old Testament texts. If we really accept this statement, we should not stop short of going all the way the texts and poems themselves intended. Poems in general and Biblical poems in particular, intended to evoke a response of some sort. To exclude this from our scholarly work, may seem safe, but it is definitely not responsible and surely not objective.

To see how Old Testament scholars went about their business of understanding Old Testament poetry, I evaluate some commentaries on Lamentations that were published in 2002 and 2003. I did not try to be comprehensive or exhaustive. I just wanted to get a broad idea of where our endeavours are heading. I look at their general intent, as well as how they approach one of the poems, Lamentations 4, itself.

1 Adele Berlin

In a commentary in the Old Testament Library series, Adele Berlin (2002) voices her surprise at the little literary attention that Lamentations, a book rich in poetic attributes, have received. According to her, the meaning of the book is actually to be found in the images and metaphors. She promises to concentrate on the literary aspects of the book, not only for their aesthetic value, but to enter the conceptual world of religious beliefs behind them.

As could be expected, Berlin visits all the well-known stations of research about the book like authorship and date of composition. However, in line with her special interests, she starts off with a description of matters like the poetry of Lamentations, as well as issues like gender and suffering. Religious mourning and a theology of destruction and exile also merited her attention, as well as a section on the literary context.

a Discussion of Berlin's exegesis of Lamentations 4

After a translation, Berlin offers extensive notes about textual matters (2002: 98-102). Her commentary (2002:102-114) highlights interesting aspects of the poem, which may be useful in therapy situations.

According to Berlin, the main theme of the poem is a description of the suffering of the people brought along by starvation. Human beings, once priceless, are degraded beyond recognition. Society turned abnormal. Berlin points to some interesting aspects.

Firstly, the literary vehicle of distance creates an odd sense of detachment, and we watch in horror from a distance. Secondly, she points to the use of colour in the poem: gold, scarlet, white, red, sapphire, black. The bright colours of the past are replaced by the dullness and blackness of the present. Thirdly, the experience of heat

is vividly described, and she calls it a siege of summer. Fourthly, she mentions that the poem ends with a ray of hope mixed with the desire for revenge. Their punishment will draw to an end, and then their enemies will be next in line.

Berlin's commentary on the poem is useful, but fails to drive many fruitful points home. She stopped short of helping readers and teachers to use the poem to its full potential.

The suffering was about famine and in a deeper sense the destruction of the community. However, what is the effect of this on people? What does this do to their sense of being and their view of reality? Furthermore, why is it so pertinent that there is a detached feeling to the description?

It is a well-known technique in therapy to bring in a sense of distance for the sake of healing and perspective. Therapies often have elaborate rituals to help people view their problem or themselves in a troublesome situation from a distance and therefore smaller and less threatening.

The description of sensory experiences like the sight of colours and the feeling of heat is serving a greater purpose than merely vividness. It is putting people back in the situation, for the sake of coming to terms with the experience, and then to put it at a distance behind them.

Lastly, it is extremely important that the poem ends with a ray of hope. Many children that commit suicide leave behind poems. The upside of the writing of a poem is that it helps one to sort out feelings. The downside of it is that someone may feel that as the poem is solidified on paper, so is his or her situation or emotions, with no hope of change, and therefore the only way out is to make an end to their lives. The fourth poem in Lamentations hints at hope in such a way that it does not outrun its audience.

Berlin laid the table beautifully but did not invite us to join for the meal.

2 F W Dobbs-Allsopp

Dobbs-Allsopp's commentary on Lamentations was published in the series Interpretation, with the declared intent of the series as being a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching. The purpose of the series is not to replace historical-critical commentaries, nor replace homiletical aids to preaching, but rather to provide a third kind of resource: a commentary which presents the integrated result of a historical and theological work with the biblical text (2002:vii).

Dobbs-Allsopp himself also hopes to be overheard by the Jewish community and the public in general. He wants the church to engage and interact with the larger

world of which it is part if it is to survive the 21st century (2002:ix). He calls his reading of the poems about the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC a post-holocaust reading, recalling two other catastrophes. One is *al-Nakba*, the Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948 in which 750,000 Palestinians lost their land and were displaced, and which continues to this day. He wishes these poems may be read by both Palestinians and Israeli's in order to facilitate a better understanding of each other's suffering. The other catastrophe is the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. The opening lines of Lamentations were the first words read from a pulpit in New Jersey in a prayer and mourning service the day after the events. According to Dobbs-Allsopp, grief as voiced in Lamentations is still with us today and needs our attention.

His introduction covers the date, place of composition and authorship, and then moves to literary features like genre, Lamentations as lyric and the unity of Lamentations, and concludes with its Theology: Consequences of style, anti/theodicy, suffering and language, grief, complaint, anger, fidelity, the face of suffering, divine violence, and fragments of hope. However, every aspect is discussed with the knowledge that these poems exude a remarkable and compelling will to live through suffering. In this sense Dobbs-Allsopp describes the poems as 'a linguistic balm capable of salving – if not removing – the scars and wounds of the suffering they so painfully figure. In doing so they create the capacity to be otherwise and the possibility for survival, for remembering the tomorrow that Zion so tragically neglected ..' (2002:3).

a Discussion of Dobbs-Allsopp's exegesis of Lamentations 4

Dobbs-Allsopp mention the fall-off in emotional intensity, a less engaged style of third person reportage, a deliberate and carefully thought out sense of exhaustion and remoteness, and matter-of-factness seen by Hillers (1992:145) in Lamentations 4. The torrent of tears of the first three poems is spent. However, he feels that the line of thought is scattered and fractured, and that it is only held together by the acrostic form. The rest of his discussion is thorough, and proceeds along the lines of known Old Testament exegesis.

What is very illuminating and interesting, though, is his excursus on Lamentations as choral lyric. According to Dobbs-Allsopp, the poems facilitate a recovery of voice that is life giving and life sustaining (2002:134). In our times poetry is seen as a genre of the individual about inward emotions. It is valuable, but not the one and all of poetry. Lyric poetry has a communal origin in ritual, liturgy and theatre. Lamentations is an example of communal lyric poetry. It helps the

readers to articulate personal hurts and fears in a common voice during a communal performance. We expect Lamentations to be bookish, unsung and undanced. We need more if we want to understand and experience the poems, according to Dobbs-Allsopp. Therefore he says the poems of Lamentations 'provoke us to a renewed appreciation of liturgy as a powerful force for shaping, maintaining, and mending community. ... I want to urge the church to explore creative and appropriate ways of carving out liturgical space for the voicing of pain, lament and complaint, and of reintroducing biblical texts like Lamentations, the psalmic lament, and Job into the worship life of congregations' (2002:135).

Dobbs-Allsopp certainly heeded the call of members of our guild to recreate the bond between the life of the poem and the life of the reader (Cooper 1987:240). He also recognises the similarity in human experience that spans the 'ghastly divide' of the two and a half millennia between 586 BC, 1948 and 2001, which is understandable in the light of the Cognitive Sciences' premise that the cognitive apparatus of humankind stayed the same at least since the Iron Age. Similarly, his view on poetry as choral lyric that belongs in spaces and places where groups of people gather, opens possibilities for the creation and experiencing of multi-signification, and therefore opening up new modes and avenues of thought conducive to healing.

His specific handling of Lamentations 4 lacks one insight, though. According to Dobbs-Allsopp, the line of thought in Lamentations 4 is scattered and fractured, and the poem is only held together by the acrostic form. To my mind, this is quite implausible. No ordering principle leads by definition to a hampering of the logical flow of thought. Poets have to cope with many restricting features like rhyme, rhythm, parallelism, terseness, ellipsis, symmetry, parataxis, fronting and many more, and none of this per definition need to hamper logical flow of thought. The same applies to the acrostic form, which in any case does not impose such a major rigid form, in this case needing only one word at the beginning of every second line to begin with a particular letter of the alphabet.

It is almost fashion in scholarly discussions of Lamentations to describe the poems as lacking a logical flow of thought. However, Brandscheidt (1983), Renkema (1983) and myself (Gous 1988, 1996) indicated that a form of concentric parallelism can be demonstrated in this and the other poems of Lamentations. The acrostic form is thus not necessarily a bad poetic choice that the poet had to live with, but a meaning carrying element in itself – an aspect I will come back to later.

3 Kathleen M. O'Connor

O'Connor gives a personal context for the writing of the book when she mentions that she wrote many parts of it in waiting rooms and hospitals while her husband was receiving oncology treatment. She also puts it in a communal context in the USA after the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, as well as the general situation in North America. With this in mind, she discusses the usual questions like date, authorship and the like in a creative manner.

a Discussion of O'Connor's exegesis of Lamentations 4

O'Connor sets the tone of her discussion by a description of the emotive character and content of the poem. According to her, Lamentations 4 communicates feelings of exhaustion and hopelessness. There is a diminishment to be seen, in the sense of a shrivelling of feelings and a closing of horizons (2003:58). She even describes the poetic structure as reflecting exhaustion, in the sense that the shorter form (only two lines per stanza) reflects the famine of food and the famine of hope (2003:58).

The poet takes the listener and reader on a city tour, and show that every aspect of communal life has been destroyed by the conquest. However, the tone of the narrator is observational and detached, a tired witness, as it were (Lm 4:1-16; 2003:59). The people also speak (Lm 4:17-22). However, neither the narrator nor the people address God or ask anything of Him. They have lost any capacity to reach for help, and resignation and despair have triumphed over anger and resistance (2003:59).

O'Connor then proceeds to discuss the content of the poem in four thematic units. In the first two units the narrator describes the fading life (everything grows dim 4:1-10, and their sin as the reason thereof 4:11-16}, and in the last two the community remembers and looks to the future (retelling the invasion 4:17-20, and future reversals 4:21-22).

The horrible fate of children signifies the utter destruction of societal structures. O'Connor discusses various possible interpretations of the fact that mothers ate their own children. It might be a fulfilment of the curse in Deuteronomy 28:53-57 that describes what will happen when Israel violates the covenant with God. However, the absence of reference to men is difficult to explain. In the end O'Connor theorises that it may point to utter chaos, or moral decay in the society for which there is no hope (2003:63-64).

The reason for the suffering is sin, especially committed by the leaders. What remains, is despair, and even a feeling that survival is so bitter, it is better to be dead (2003:66).

In the last section O'Connor discusses the call for vengeance, and says it is a normal response to trauma, catastrophe and subjection. It only becomes an ethical dilemma when people begin to act on these feelings. The fact that the poem brings the community's response into the open, creates psychic and spiritual space to expect a different future (2003:69).

O'Connor agrees with other commentators about the detached character of the poem, which is according to her even reflected in its length. It seems to her we have a tired witness. However, there may be other possibilities to explain the phenomenon. It is almost impossible to instil hope in any situation if the people involved feel themselves still in or very near to the situation. Distance is necessary to create space in order to see more than just the issue at hand. According to my understanding, the theme of this poem is hope in various formats. The first sixteen verses describe their lack of hope, or their despair. Verses 17 – 20 describes their false hope on their allies, their city and their king. Verses 21 – 22 describe the first tentative steps towards new hope. What we have is not a tired witness, but a skilled guide walking slowly very near to his audience in order to allow them to keep up, but at the same time putting some distance between the audience and the events. .

In similar vein, the call for the punishment of Edom is to be understood. On the surface it might look and sound like vengeance. However, if it is merely a call for vengeance, it creates an ethical dilemma, which needs to be addressed. O'Connor attempts to soften the dilemma by offering the excuse that it is to be expected that people who suffer might call for vengeance. In itself it is true that people react this way, but we have to ask whether it is the case in Lamentations 4, and thus whether the author composed this song with the sole intent of airing feelings of vengeance.

The way I understand it, is that the call for Edom to be punished, is not merely a call for vengeance. It is rather a statement that expresses the belief that the horrors they experienced were not signs that chaos triumphed over order and predictability, but their fate was the result of an orderly chain of events where God punishes each and everyone that transgresses. There is no getting away – rich and poor, young and old, layman and priest, the chosen people of Israel and Edom. In the light of the line of thought, it is actually not a call for vengeance but an uttering of hope that order, stability and predictability might just return to their lives. As they themselves were punished for their sins, so will be their enemies. God has unexpectedly punished them, but He has not been conquered, He did not make a mistake and He is even-handed towards all people.

Seen in this way, the poem addresses a real problem, namely the loss of people's sense of security. A call for vengeance is no real help, even if it is understandable, if it is to be expected and if it happens. Restoring a sense that the world is still predictable creates long-term help, because it opens up healing space.

4 Dianne Bergant

In the foreword to the commentary, Patrick D. Miller, the general editor of the Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, offers the series as designed and written to provide compact, critical commentaries on the books of the Old Testament for the use of theological students and pastors, as well as for service to upper-level college or university students and to those responsible for teaching in congregational settings. Although the Old Testament comes from times and circumstances very far removed from our times, Miller believes contemporary communities of faith and other interested readers can continue to find the old texts meaningful and instructive. This is made possible if one engages them with all the critical and intellectual faculties available to us (2003:9). All the well-known aspects of Old Testament textual analysis are to be attended to, as well as a theological and ethical analysis. These sections should provide a basis of reflection on contemporary issues of faith and life, even though they are not aimed primarily to discuss them (2003:11).

True to the approach of the series, Bergant pretty straightforwardly discusses literary characteristics like acrostics, voice, genre, poetic features and metaphor, as well as the canonical placement and historical considerations. Her approach is primarily literary, and context is only alluded to when there is explicit mentioning of it in the poems itself.

a Discussion of Bergant's commentary on Lamentations 4

Bergant sees the main theme of the chapter as about a society that has collapsed. Her literary analysis results in her understanding the poems as more restrained than the first three poems, but she says that it fits well in the overall *qinah*-like structure of the whole book.

Her exegetical analysis is thorough and clear, but run-of-the-mill. In her theological and ethical analysis she discusses interesting aspects. In reaction to Lm 4:1-16 she touches upon how people think about God's involvement when they experience suffering, which may either be that God is using it as punishment, or that He is only involved in helping people that suffer. Then she discusses the problem of

suffering children and how horrible it is. She concludes by mentioning the widespread effect on society when religions and other leaders fail morally.

The theological and ethical discussion of Lamentations 4:17-20 focuses on the question of trust. All religious societies stress human fallibility and untrustworthiness, and prompt people rather to trust in God alone. This is very difficult, and hopes are dashed.

The theological and ethical discussion of Lamentations 4:21-22 focuses on two aspects. The first is that humans cling to even the smallest ray of hope. The second is that there is a very thin line between justice and wrathful revenge, about which she just concludes that there are no easy answers to such ethical predicaments.

The foreword to Bergant's commentary promises real-life involvement, but the actual exposition reflects very little of it. Seen from this vantage point, it is the most traditional of the four commentaries evaluated.

E POETRY THERAPY AND LAMENTATIONS 4 – A FINAL WORD.

My understanding of Lamentations 4 is that there is an interesting and intentional juxtaposition of form and content. The question that the poem addresses is the loss of hope by the survivors of the catastrophe of 586 BC. Up to then, they pinned their hopes for a secure future on their belief in the Zion Theology that stated that God will always provide for them. They saw temple, city and a Davidic king on the throne as signs that this is true. When they lost these symbols, together with the most horrendous suffering one can imagine, they lost even their basic trust. All the social and cultural ordering principles were in ruins – rich became poor, holy became unclean, and the chosen were rejected. Even worse, the most basic ordering principle of societal order was broken, when mothers ate their own children. They experienced total chaos and had no hope (Lm 4: 1 – 16).

They had no one to turn to. They expected help from Egypt, but the pharaoh never turned up. Their inviolable city failed to give them safe shelter. Their Davidic king that was to rule for ever fled but was overtaken and the ruler became a prisoner. They felt they were totally on their own. They realised it was futile hope (Lm 4 17 – 20).

The last two verses, like the rest of the poem, also talk about unexpected reversal of expectations. However, up until now all reversals were to the detriment of the people of Zion. Now things are changing for the better. Edom is to be destroyed; while Zion's unfathomable suffering is to come to an end. There is a faint shimmering of new hope (Lm 4: 21-22).

The new hope is based not on their old societal, cultural and dashed theological orientational beacons, but on the most basic ordering principle, namely God himself. He is the originator of order, and his justice and fairness form the building blocks of order and predictability.

This notion is echoed in the form of the poem. The flow of thought is packaged in a form of spiralling parallelism.

- 1-2 Rejection
- 3-4 Distress caused by incompetent mother
 - 5-6 The heavy penalty
 - 7-8 Chaos
 - 9-10 Chaos
 - 11-12 The heavy penalty
- 13-14 Distress caused by incompetent leaders
- 15-16 Rejection

- 17 Futile hope on allies
 - 18 Foiled by enemy
 - 19 Foiled by enemy
- 20 Futile hope on king

- 21 Imminent punishment of Edom
- 22 Concluded punishment of Zion

The skilful poet echoes all the emotions of his listeners, walks with them the extra mile, talking the extra while. However, he is not talking them downward further into despair, but upwards towards a glimmer of new hope, back to the basics of order, predictability and trust. This is echoed by the basic ordering principle of the poem, namely the acrostic form. The alphabet is the basic building blocks of words and language, and there is order and predictability as it progresses from beginning to end. The skilful poet is not giving answers, because his audience was still too distressed to hear it. However, he is laying the foundation upon which a new beginning can be built.

This poem is intended for people in distress, feeling hopeless and abandoned, with nowhere to go. In circumstances like these elaborate answers and explanations just add to the confusion. What is really necessary and helpful is just being there with them, listening to and understanding their emotions, clearing up the rubble and helping them back to the basics that are left. The skilful poet of Lamentations 4 did just this, and we can follow suit when we experience loss ourselves or are

accompanying other people through it.

Old Testament interpreters should aim to get into the minds behind the texts, using all the tools of our trade skilfully and creatively. The insights and aims of Poetry Therapy should be added to our arsenal to continuously remind us that poems were composed with expressive goals, persuasive contents, and intent to change the minds and outlooks of poet and audience. If we are not touched and changed, we have not done our work well enough.

Maybe it is time to do even more.

F BIBLE THERAPY GUILD

The Bible is used every day as a devotional tool. People read it individually, and they gather in groups to study it. However, it is not often used as a personal growth tool. Maybe it is time to consider what do we train people for. We train ministers and church leaders. We should also consider training Bible Therapists, who can use the Bible skilfully in group and individual therapy for personal growth as well as healing. This call should not startle the Old Testament fraternity, because that is what women and men want when they read the Bible every day – not only to get into the minds behind the texts, but also to get to the minds and hearts of the current readers thereof. That is true science.

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