

Lamentation and Suffering

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The general topic of the present consideration is the existence and role of suffering and lamentation in biblical and theological perspective. Though there are numerous places of lament and prayer in the biblical literature, I have here chosen to concentrate on the book of Lamentations. I am beginning to explore the connection between suffering in the Hebrew Bible, and suffering's verbal expression in lamentation, with discussion of these topics in constructive theology, and in particular, feminist theology. This short paper represents my initial foray into this topic, and I look forward to how our discussion will help to enhance and refine my research ideas. Please let me apologize up front for the paper's tardiness, brevity, paucity of resources, and inelegance of expression. This has been a horribly full summer and I have had to formulate it away from home and on the run, between a previous conference and this one—and with room in my suitcase to carry along a mere three books!¹

I dip my toes into the waters with the ideas of Wendy Farley, a professor of theology and ethics at Emory University. In a larger work on what she depicts as a “contemporary theodicy,” Farley addresses suffering in light of tragedy. It is the discussion of what she terms *radical suffering* that I find pertinent to the book of Lamentations. Suffering itself

¹ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990) [hereafter, Farley]; Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) [hereafter, O'Connor]; Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002) [hereafter, Berlin].

is a part of human existence; all persons experience pain and loss. There is, therefore, a general sense of suffering. Often, however, pain leads one to a greater good—allowing one to become more compassionate toward others, to reach a greater level of understanding and maturity, or to achieve a distinct and desired goal. In contrast, radical suffering brings no such reward. It is not the type of pain that makes a human being stronger, but rather, that destroys its victims. “The distinguishing features of radical suffering are that it is destructive to the human spirit and that it cannot be understood as something deserved” (Farley, 21). It is degrading, unmeaningful, and ultimately self-destructive, “penetrat[ing] through the whole person and leav[ing] only a dehumanized rag of a self behind” (Farley, 59). The pain crushes rather than redeems. Its victims see only despair and no hope. Their pain “annihilates the future, severs relationships, and withholds from suffering any possible meaning” (Farley, 58-59).

Such suffering is all encompassing. Everything else fades in the face of this type of pain. “Radical suffering defines the human being as a victim or sufferer, so she (or he) becomes a deformed creature whose *habitus* is suffering. All experience is absorbed into suffering and the sufferer is impaled upon her pain” (Farley, 58).

Moreover, its victims are often brought to a place of self-hatred and self-disgust. Radical suffering snuffs out any spark of dignity and self-respect, and indeed, this often keeps a person from initially realizing that she has been wronged. Farley gives the example of those taken to concentration camps during the Shoah, where the real goal of Nazi abuse was dehumanization, for the prisoners to begin to feel disgust and contempt at themselves (Farley, 54). In this way such persons become accomplices to their own

destruction. The abusive treatment at the hands of another person can become internalized.

Radical suffering challenges traditional Christian theology, in which punishment is meted out as a response to sin. If one has done wrong, one can expect to suffer as a result. Indeed, there is some satisfaction in such pain and suffering when it is seen as punishment and/or a purging of sin. But victims of radical suffering cannot be considered guilty in the traditional sense. Their type of pain goes against our sense of justice. It is not deserved or warranted. In fact, Farley argues that radical suffering tends to affect the least in any community, and therefore the ones least likely to warrant punishment and condemnation—she cites examples of children, pregnant or nursing mothers, the old, the poor, and young virgins as examples (Farley, 43). A victim's actual lack of guilt, however, is frequently misunderstood by others. There is an oddness, a strangeness, to such sufferers. This alterity often causes onlookers to respond to them with distaste and disgust, and then to blame them for what is befalling them.

Farley regards the existence of such suffering as no less than a “rupture of creation.” All of the capacities for which human beings are intended—love, affection, pleasure, hope, freedom, desire, and the like—are eroded. It “pinches the spirit” (Farley, 53). Pain keeps persons from enjoying what they were created to enjoy. It destroys the victim's basic humanity, his basic human dignity. Indeed, the difference between suffering and radical suffering lies in the inhumanity of the latter. Radical suffering “is a malignancy that distorts the whole of history, poisoning it at its very root. . . . If an event such as this occurred only once in the entire history of the human race, it would mar and tear the very fabric of the created order. . . . [T]hrough it the world is defiled” (Farley, 61-62).

Therefore, such suffering *must* be resisted. As ultimately a mark of injustice, we are left with no other choice, and justice will only be served by resistance. Resistance must come from two angles: those who witness such suffering, and the victims themselves.² We fail in our humanity if we do not do what we can to eliminate radical suffering.

It is this view of suffering that I see as having resonance with the book of Lamentations. Farley's concept of radical suffering helps us to understand and evaluate the grief and pain depicted in this biblical text. The book comprises five poems that represent differing voices, giving expression to the destruction of Jerusalem, in varying acrostic forms. In making this comparison I do not want to deny that one may argue that there is a distinction between the expression of suffering itself (as is Farley's focus) and the verbal expression of it (as in Lamentations)—that is, that the voicing of pain is a step removed from its immediacy. I further recognize that the very act of voicing pain, as we find in the biblical text, can itself be seen as an act of resistance, of a victim rejecting her victimhood. Nonetheless, an initial comparison may prove fruitful.

Suffering pervades the book of Lamentations. In it we find literally no other experience of life: all is pain. In this sense it resembles the all-absorbing pain of radical suffering. Zion knows nothing else; she simply cannot stop crying all throughout (1:2, 16; 2:11, 18; 3:48, 49). Expecting a negative reply, she wonders, "Is there any pain like my pain?" (1:12; all quotations are from Berlin's translation). Her distress consumes her, and "vast as the sea is her desolation" (2:13). Particularly noteworthy is the prevalence

² Actually, I find Farley somewhat inconsistent on this point. At some places she seems to suggest the necessity of resistance on the part of the sufferer, but also sometimes speaks as though the very ability to resist distinguishes general suffering from radical suffering (i.e., that it has not completely broken a person's spirit).

of somatic imagery. The language is extremely physical. Zion's pain pervades flesh, bones, and teeth; it reaches into her very core, her bowels, heart, innards, and vitals (1:13, 20, 22; 2:11; 3:4, 13, 16, 48; 5:10). Furthermore, as a personified city, Jerusalem's walls, gate, ramparts, palace, altar, and tabernacle are attacked and diseased (2:5-9). Following the primary characteristic of radical suffering, her spirit does indeed appear destroyed; groaning and grieving have replaced her festivals (1:4). Likewise does this suffering appear ongoing and habitual.³

As we read through the text, we cannot help but be struck by repeated images of the suffering of the most vulnerable. Infants and children especially are affected, lacking food, water, and even caring parents (1:16; 2:11-12, 19; 4:4, 9, 10). Likewise are young women overcome (1:18; 2:10; 3:51; 5:11), along with young men (1:18; 5:13). And of course, throughout the book Jerusalem itself is personified through figures that are typically lacking in social and political power: widow and daughter.

The sense of self-disgust representative of radical suffering likewise runs throughout the book of Lamentations. Zion describes herself as worthless (1:11); "indeed, she herself groans and turns away" (1:8). This degradation is especially shared by those who witness Jerusalem's plight. Enemies watch and ridicule (1:10; 2:16; 3:46), and passersby mock her (2:15-16). Again and again throughout the book it is repeated that no one turns toward Jerusalem, that no one will comfort her. She feels utterly and completely alone in her situation.

³ In a forthcoming article in *CBQ*, Elie Assis argues that the acrostic form in which the poems are written gives the impression of well-considered and developed speech rather than the brief and immediate outcry that some interpreters take them to be. To create an expression in such a specific and precise form requires much reflection and time; the pain is thus presented as ongoing and the experience lengthy.

At first glance it may be more difficult to see in Lamentations radical suffering's insistence on the innocence of the victim. This is true, of course, for the children and powerless ones who are harmed. But daughter Zion does admit her guilt at times; she does not pretend to be sinless (1:20, 22; 3:42; 5:7). Yet the point of the book, it seems to me, is that though Jerusalem may well have done wrong, Yhwh's punishment is far too severe. This is the perspective of the entire first part of the chap. 3 (vv. 1-20). The speakers envision a deity who is delighting in their suffering. Yhwh destroys not with restraint and purpose but "mercilessly" and "without pity" (2:2, 17, 22; 3:43). This is a wrathful deity (3:43) who scatters (4:16) and refuses to forgive (3:42). In all, Jerusalem's suffering clearly reflects a state of injustice. Her punishment does not fit her crime.

Jerusalem's suffering is ultimately not redemptive. Like radical suffering, no desired result (growth, learning, etc.) comes from it, and it is presented as serving no positive purpose. If seen as punishment, there is no stress on learning from one's mistakes. Instead, a hopelessness inhabits the various voices. The only expression of hope is from the voice of the "strong man" (*geber*) in chap. 3. Yet even there what he says gives more the impression that he is trying merely to convince himself to have hope (3:22-41). The statements are platitudes, ritualized and conventional language about God rather than real and heartfelt trust.

It is at this point that Farley's conceptions and the book of Lamentations part ways. Farley outlines tragedy and suffering in the first part of her theology. But she then moves to argue for the response of compassion, compassion on both the human level (the need for our compassion toward those who are in the midst of meaningless grief and suffering) and the divine level (God's compassion toward those human beings in pain). In

Lamentations, though, there is no compassion and no hope. No one hears, no one will comfort Zion—neither God nor human. Jerusalem’s voice is unheard in the heavens, and her suffering ultimately unredeemed.⁴ The book ends on a tragic note. Some suggest that the lack of a true acrostic structure in chap. 5 represents the continuing and final breakdown of spirit, and the voice is weakened, no longer able fully to protest but merely to describe the awfulness of the situation. The book’s final verses are utterly plaintive: “Why do you eternally ignore us, forsake us our whole life long? Take us back, Yhwh, to yourself; O let us come back. Make us again as we were before. But instead you reject us completely, you are angry with us, so very much” (5:20-22). The last word is one of complete despair.

So, how do we bring such perspectives to the concerns of the Institute? What do the biblical and theological concepts of lamentation and suffering have to do with the mission of the people of God in this present age? For a couple of decades now, Walter Brueggemann has been warning the church about the “costly loss of lament” and urging us to give heed to the “shrill voice of the wounded party.” In so doing, there is no better place to start than with the book of Lamentations, a text that depicts tragic loss. Such tragic loss is not far from us, of course, as our modern world has experienced great catastrophes in recent years—the September 11 attack, the south Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina’s devastation of New Orleans. Yet one might question how much

⁴ As I progress into this topic, I hope to explore the differences between female and male suffering in the Hebrew Bible. It seems that a distinction between redeemed and unredeemed pain falls along gender lines. In Lamentations, the book’s sole whisper of hope and comfort is a distinctly male expression. Likewise, the sorrow of female characters generally (e.g., Eve, the daughter of Jephthah, Tamar, Rachel weeping for her children) tends to remain unrelieved, in contrast to the sorrow of male characters (e.g., Job, Jeremiah, David).

attention was given in these instances to the act of lamentation. Surely there was the radical suffering of countless individuals. But rather than sitting awhile in the experience of despair, spending time in giving voice to our communal grief, our responses tended to move quickly to blame (Who could have perpetrated such “evil”? Which agency is botching the provision of disaster aid?) and to physical recovery (How can we return tourism to the area? How can prime real estate be used for both commercial ventures and a memorial site?) Though these are certainly not unimportant concerns, the book of Lamentations would suggest that we ignore at our peril time spent in simply expressing our pain at such inexplicable and catastrophic loss.

That Lamentations represents the destruction of a city is not incidental to the situations facing our modern faith communities. The suffering it expresses is a particularly *urban* suffering. Though Jerusalem is personified as an individual (Daughter Zion), she represents the entire city population. The numerous voices throughout the book report the situations of a variety of people, the voice of the individual particularly in chap. 3 balancing the communal voices elsewhere. In stereo, we hear the blending voices of both the city as a whole and the individuals inhabiting it, the wide-angle view of corporate destruction and the close-up of the effects that destruction has on individual citizens. The desolations of community and individual often exist side by side. “Speakers in Lamentations express a plurality of theologies and interpretations that yields no single understanding of their common tragedy. They are not debating or trying to refute each other; rather, their testimonies nudge up against each other in disquieting tension and conflict” (O’Connor, 83). Likewise, the pain in our modern urban environments is not necessarily experienced in the same way by every citizen, even

though they inhabit the same space. The book urges the modern faith community to give heed to the city, to the plight of many who live in the world's increasingly populous urban settings.

Modern faith communities have a mission to listen. Our simple hearing the voice of those who grieve validates their experiences. Rather than providing a quick word of comfort, perhaps it is enough merely to hear the pain. Farley speaks of the need to show compassion toward those who suffer. O'Connor argues, along similar lines, for a "theology of witness." In the book of Lamentations, more than for a solution, Zion yearns for a witness to her pain. She continually cries out to anyone—God, passersby, enemies, or anybody within earshot—to see what she is forced to endure. She wants to be seen, to be known. In O'Connor's view, the benefit of the biblical text for modern persons of faith is that it creates a framework to which community and individual suffering can be related. The text "becomes a mirror of our sorrow, loss and doubt. . . . We are no longer alone in our suffering because it is called forth, acknowledged, and named, no matter how indirectly, no matter how veiled by the text's metaphors and images" (O'Connor, 94-95).

The theological conundrum with which we are left, however, is the absence of the one who is ultimately supposed to hear. The book of Lamentations reflects the situation of divine silence in the face of tragedy. God is the one who is called to be the first witness—but God is absent. The challenge to the modern church is what to do with the uncomfortableness of divine inaction—even divine cruelty?—in the face of human need.