



Daughter Zion Identifies with Syrian and Iraqi Women: A Reading in the Book of Lamentations

NIVEEN SARRAS

The Book of Lamentations was written for the survivors of the calamity of 587/6 BCE to express their mourning for the loss of the first temple. The book “is best understood as the script of a liturgy intended as a therapeutic ritual.”¹ Marvin A. Sweeney argues that “Lamentations gives voice to suffering on mourning for the loss of the temple and thereby lays the groundwork for future restoration of the temple and the people of Jerusalem and Judah.”²

Sweeney states that Lamentations is also read to commemorate other catastrophes in Jewish history, such as the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and the “Chimielnitzki massacres in Poland and the Ukraine in 1648.”³ Christians also

¹Leslie C. Allen, *A Liturgy of Grief: A Pastoral Commentary on Lamentations* (Baker Academic, 2011) 8.

²Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 183.

³*Ibid.*, 182.

Niveen Sarras, a biblical scholar with roots in the Christian communities in the Middle East, reflects on the book of Lamentations, and how the ancient situation of this book is a model for understanding the present situation of women in Syria and Iraq. She argues that the process of lamentation, both in the Bible and in the present, is a step toward these communities dealing with their pain and hardships.

read portions of Lamentations during Holy Week. The book of Lamentations can speak to any generation mourning and grieving the destruction of their society and tradition. It communicates with those who are trying to find meaning in their suffering in life and their faith in God. If Lamentations speaks to the suffering of the Jews and the suffering of Christ, then the book speaks to the suffering of the Syrian and Iraqi women. The city Zion personified as a woman, Daughter Zion, in chapters one and two, can speak to Syrian and Iraqi women's experiences of rape, desolation, losing children, and destruction of their society, since these are common themes in the text. Thus, the suffering of Daughter Zion echoes the current stories, emotions, and experiences of Syrian and Iraqi women in our present time.

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In this article, I will relate the context of the book of Lamentations with the lived experiences of the Syrian and Iraqi women living in sociopolitical realities that have inflicted pain and suffering upon them. I will explore the image of God in chapters one and two, comparing the violence that God committed against Daughter Zion with the violence that the Syrian and Iraqi women have been experiencing at the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). I will end by talking about the consolation that Daughter Zion and Syrian and Iraqi women are seeking. The consolation comes through expressing pain and grief through lamentation and opening the door for mourning and healing. Expressing oneself in times of pain can lead to closure, particularly when an entire community participates in grieving and consoling.

THE BRUTALITY OF GOD VERSUS ISIS

In the first two chapters of the book of Lamentations, God is described as a brutal and angry deity whose punishment is not equal to Daughter Zion's sin. God as an abusive deity engages in physical abuse. God does not act as a passionate protector, but God allows the enemies to violate Zion and the sanctuary (Lam 2:7). I wonder how we can trust and worship a God who is responsible for this pain.

ISIS's brutal behavior is similar to God's. ISIS is murdering civilians, including public executions, and engaging in sex-trafficking and slavery. ISIS targets religious minorities such as Christians, Shia, and Yazidis, labeling them "crusaders, heretics, and devil-worshippers." ISIS claims they are committing these brutal behaviors against all "infidels," or those ISIS believes do not accept their version of Islam. Here we can see a parallel between a God who punishes Zion because Zion does not follow God's commandments and ISIS punishing civilians because they do not follow ISIS's teachings. ISIS believes that they are acting on behalf of God to discipline and to punish those who do not obey the *Sharia*, the Islamic precepts.

According to the testimony of Daughter Zion, God slew young and old, maidens and youth by the sword (Lam 2:21). ISIS similarly kills civilians by sword. For instance, ISIS requested that Christians convert to Islam to avoid being killed by the sword as they beheaded twenty-one Coptic Christians in February 2015.⁴ As God was responsible for killing the youth, ISIS is killing civilians in a brutal manner. Syrian eyewitnesses testified that ISIS executed seven children in a village in northern Syria.⁵

ISIS is not only kidnapping and killing religious minorities, but also destroying their property and religious places of worship. This destruction again parallels God, who rejected, disdained and destroyed Zion's sanctuary (Lam 2:7). ISIS, in the city of Mosul in Iraq, seized "the buildings of the Chaldean Catholic archdiocese and the Assyrian Orthodox diocese...ISIS took down or destroyed six religious and cultural monuments in the city, including a statue of the Virgin Mary and an Islamic grave site."⁶

As a result of ISIS terror, many Syrians and Iraqis are displaced. "The UN estimates that 7.6 million Syrians are internally displaced and that 12.2 million need humanitarian assistance... over 3 million people have fled Syria."⁷ Syrian refugees are located in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, and many refugees are currently fleeing to Europe, though many are sadly denied legal status. This situation is similar to that caused by God and the enemies of Daughter Zion. Daughter Zion shares the pain of Syrian and Iraqi women who are experiencing similar suffering.

DAUGHTER ZION IDENTIFIES WITH SYRIAN AND IRAQI WOMEN

The city Zion is personified as a woman in order to make her fall more relatable and shameful. Zion is represented in Lam 1 and 2 in contrasting ways: "positively and sympathetically as a mother, a grieving woman, and an isolated widow who is a victim of rape and suffering; but also negatively and judgmentally as a promiscuous woman, and impure woman, and a rebellious sinner who is a deserving recipient of suffering."⁸

Daughter Zion is compared to a widowed mother. The lamenter makes this comparison to connote sympathy for her. The widow and her child lose their protection and became vulnerable. The image of Zion as wife who loses her husband resembles the image of Israel in the prophets' writings as wife and God as the hus-

⁴"Iraq: Isis Abducting, Killing, Expelling Minorities Armed Group Targeting Christian Nuns, Turkmen, Shabaks, Yazidis," *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/19/iraq-isis-abducting-killing-expelling-minorities> (accessed September 27, 2016).

⁵"World Report 2015: Syria Events of 2014," *Human Right Watch*, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/syria> (accessed September 27, 2016).

⁶"Iraq: Isis Abducting, Killing, Expelling Minorities."

⁷"World Report 2015: Syria Events of 2014."

⁸Mary L. Conway, "Daughter Zion: Metaphor and Dialogue in the Book of Lamentations," in *Daughter Zion: Her Portrait, Her Response*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Carol J. Dempsey et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012) 105.

band (reference to the prophets such as Hos 2:19). The book of Lamentations does not identify God as the husband, but we can understand from that text that God is the husband who is upset and angry with Daughter Zion, the wife, and thus God deserts her and she becomes like a widow. The lamenter extends the sympathy to compare her former status as princess with her current status as slave (Lam 1:1c). Daughter Zion is in great pain and bitterly weeps (Lam 1:2). The conflict in Syria and Iraq has caused lots of civilians their lives. Most of the victims are men and thus many women became widows. Like Daughter Zion who spends her nights weeping, the Syrian and Iraqi women cry over their dire situation.

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Daughter Zion is groaning and experiencing physical distress and turning her back because she was sexually violated. The text states her enemies saw her nakedness (Lam 1:8). The actual Hebrew term here (גְּלוּתָא) means nakedness and pudenda. Because Zion is groaning, I interpret the text to refer to a rape case instead of describing a prostitute who feels ashamed. Usually, an adulterous woman will not groan or mourn when her lovers expose her genitals.

Another indication of sexual violation in the text is verse nine suggesting that her uncleanness is on her skirt. Scholars interpret “uncleanness is on her skirt” to refer either to menstrual blood or sexual immorality of adulterous behavior. I argue that “uncleanness is on her skirt” refers to seminal fluid or blood that cling on Daughter Zion as a result of her rape in verse eight. I also argue against understanding “uncleanness” to refer to menstrual blood because the uncleanness of menstrual blood has ritual connotations that are not moral (Lev 15:19, 25). The lamenter extends the description of Daughter Zion suffering by stating that: “The enemies had laid hands on everything dear to her.” This statement is ambiguous, but it also seems to refer to sexual exploitation. It is also “more obviously a cipher for rape, based on the correspondence between her genitals and the inner sanctuary in the metaphor of Zion as both woman and city.”⁹ Daughter Zion experiences rape by both her enemies and allies who betray her, invade her land, and destroy her people.

The lamenter in verses eight and nine is blaming Daughter Zion for her misery. According to the lamenter, Daughter Zion is mocked, despised, and disgraced; she gives no thought to her future. This text blames the female victim for her rape by indicating that she deserves punishment for her sins. In Middle Eastern society,

⁹Miriam J. Bier, *Perhaps There Is a Hope: Reading Lamentations as a Polyphony of Pain* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) 56.

raped women are also blamed and are ostracized by their communities. Middle Eastern communities make raped women feel ashamed by accusing them of acting in a shameful way. Rape is also used by men as a tool to control women and humiliate them. In conflict areas, rape is also used to shame the victims' families.

As the internal conflict in Syria escalates, crimes against humanity increase. Sexual violence is perpetrated by government forces and antigovernment armed groups against men, women, and children.

The Syrian and Iraqi women feel disgraced like Daughter Zion because some of them are raped during conflict and war in their countries. For example, ISIS is engaging in human trafficking in Syria and Iraq. In Iraq, ISIS captured minority women including Christians, Shia, and Yazidis to sell. A 14-year-old year Yazidi girl named Adeba shared her experience. She testifies that "at each city they stopped at, some of the girls were given as gifts to ISIS fighters, ostensibly to improve their morale by allowing them to rape little girls. This was after the ISIS commander got first dibs on them to take their virginity. Others who are not given away as gifts are sold at a slave auction in cities like Mosul [Iraq], the opening bid starting around ten dollars."¹⁰

As the internal conflict in Syria escalates, crimes against humanity increase. Sexual violence is perpetrated by government forces and antigovernment armed groups against men, women, and children. Rape and sexual assault have been part of torture in official and unofficial detention centers. Using rape as a weapon against women puts women in the state of continuous fear. This fear becomes one of the main reasons they had to flee Syria and Iraq. There were cases in which raped women were divorced because their husbands could not accept the fact that their wives were raped.¹¹

It is hard to find documented rape cases because women are afraid of the backlash from their society and families. The religious and cultural beliefs of Syrians and Iraqis mean that sexually assaulted women are made to feel ashamed. Women are afraid of being stigmatized and thus unwilling to report their rape. Some women commit suicide because they are unable to live with the shame. Gina Messina-Dysert argues that "rape is an act of torture; there is no more brutal an attack upon the dignity and intimate self of a person. To invade the interior of someone's body is a form of torture by any measure. The act of rape results in physical

¹⁰Jack Murphy, "Isis Sexual Slavery and Human Trafficking," *SOFRPS*, September 8, 2014, <http://sofrep.com/36888/isis-sexual-slavery-human-trafficking/> (accessed September 27, 2016).

¹¹"Violence Against Women in Syria: Breaking the Silence," *FIDH*, September 4, 2013, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/north-africa-middle-east/syria/13134-violence-against-women-in-syria-breaking-the-silence> (accessed September 27, 2016).

pain, humiliation, and shame, as well as loss of self-respect, autonomy, and identity.”¹² In a culture that considers women inferior to men, women are seen as deserving the violence perpetrated against them.

Daughter Zion and Syrian and Iraqi women experienced rape, violence, shame, and loss. They are sharing the same plight. Just as the book of Lamentations talks about Daughter Zion’s uncleanness, raped women today are also seen as unclean by society. Daughter Zion and Syrian and Iraqi women are facing dual oppressions: they are raped by their enemies and they are ostracized by their societies.

The pain and suffering of Daughter Zion extend beyond herself to reach her children. Daughter Zion’s children have gone into captivity (Lam 1:5), her children are forlorn (Lam 1:16), the babies are fainting because of hunger and their life is poured out in their mothers’ bosoms (Lam 2:11–12, 19), hungry mothers are eating their children (Lam 2: 20). The picture of starving mothers eating their own children is the most sadistic punishment for the mothers’ crimes and sins. This hyperbolic punishment seems intended “to convey the intense reality of an emotion or idea,”¹³ but there is a possibility of interpreting the text literally, depending on Deut 28:53–57 that curses the Israelites with cannibalism when the Israelites do not commit themselves to the covenant with God.

UNICEF has warned that Syrian children inside and outside Syria are threatened by malnutrition. The Iraqi Yazidi adults and children who are fleeing from ISIS face starvation after being forced into hiding on a barren mountaintop. Many Iraqi and Syrian children are refugees. There are almost 2.26 million Syrian children out of school and exposed to child labor, early marriage, or forced to join armed groups.¹⁴ Hundreds of children were killed in Syria and Iraq during the conflict. Millions have been displaced inside their country or outside. How can we find consolation and hope in the midst of this mess?

CONSOLATION

Daughter Zion and the lamenter in chapter one and two repeated six times that no one comforts Daughter Zion. Comfort is what Daughter Zion and Syrian and Iraqi women are seeking. They are in need of many things to help them to survive, but let us focus on consolation and hope. How can troubled women be comforted? Lamentations 1–2 is about extreme pain and suffering that go beyond any description. How can women who went through this much pain and suffering find hope? Is there a way for troubled women to stand on their feet after the breakdown of all the structures of their society? Usually scholars try to find hope by connecting

¹²Gina Messina-Dysert, *Rape Culture and Spiritual Violence: Religion, Testimony, and Visions of Healing* (New York: Routledge, 2015) 66.

¹³Mary L. Conway, “Daughter Zion: Metaphor and Dialogue in the Book of Lamentations,” 116.

¹⁴“A Lost Generation? A Strategy for Children Affected by the Syria Crisis,” *UNICEF*, October, 2013, 3, http://www.unicef.org/appeals/files/Lost_Generation_Final_Draft_for_distribution_to_participants_09Oct2013.pdf (accessed September 27, 2016).

Lam 1 and 2 with Isaiah,¹⁵ such as 62:11, where Isaiah gives hope to Daughter Zion that her savior is coming. I argue that the book of Lamentations offers hope to Daughter Zion and Syrian and Iraqi women because it engages four voices in a dialogue to reflect on the experience of destruction of Jerusalem and opens the door for grief. These voices bring hope to those who lament because they lament together. Leslie C. Allen states that “Lamentations can take human suffering seriously and allow the multifaceted aspects of the human side of grief to be fully explored.”¹⁶ I imagine a scenario where four persons get together in a theater performing a liturgical lament and each character represents different perspectives on the suffering and pain that compose the book of Lamentations. We have the lamenter, Daughter Zion, the strong man, and the community. The four characters in the book of Lamentations are engaging in dialogue and responding to each other by sharing their experience and the reality of pain. Communal lamenting songs have been historically led by mostly women who participated in “a call and response style in which a soloist improvises and is answered by another.”¹⁷

The five lament songs should not be read as separate individual songs but as one song. The first two songs represent the suffering of Daughter Zion and the lamenter addresses and reflects on her suffering and grief. The third chapter represents a theology of a person called *the one* or *the strong one*, in Hebrew *geber*. The community laments in chapter four and prays in chapter five.

In chapter one the lamenter perceived Daughter Zion’s suffering as external to him, but Daughter Zion made the lamenter sympathize with her pain. In order for Daughter Zion to evoke sympathy and to invite God to consider her suffering, she uses her misery and grief as leverage by inviting the lamenter and God to cry for the forlorn lives of her hungry children who died. Daughter Zion makes room for a grieving description of a crisis and appeals to God to intervene positively. Even though Daughter Zion suffers deeply, she expressed a deep and strong faith in God. This faith led her to confront God’s brutal behavior through her lamentation and asking God to intervene. Daughter Zion is in fact encouraging others to enter into her misery and to alleviate it. According to Conway, Daughter Zion makes the lamenter move from sympathy to true empathy with her wretchedness.¹⁸ In this case, the lamenter is suffering with Daughter Zion.

The *strong man* in chapter three wants to find a way forward from defeat to hope. The *strong man* acknowledges his sins and he anticipates God’s justice and mercy. The *strong man* encourages the entire community to lament. He perceives the need “to move from lamentation to penitence.”¹⁹ According to the *strong man*,

¹⁵Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 35–61; David McLain Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 84–85.

¹⁶Allen, *A Liturgy of Grief*, 6.

¹⁷Nancy C. Lee, “The Singers of Lamentations: (A) Scribing (DE) Claiming Poets and Prophets,” in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Context* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008) 36.

¹⁸Conway, “Daughter Zion: Metaphor and Dialogue in the Book of Lamentations,” 111.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 119.

God is compassionate and cares for the humble in their distress. God does not reject forever. In chapter four, the community responds to the *strong man's* call by describing their pain and ending the chapter by responding to Daughter Zion's pain by comforting her; they state that her punishment is completed and she will not be in exile any more (Lam 4:22). In the final chapter, the entire community follows the lead of the *strong man* in praying and asking for restoration. This prayer is the product of the effort of three poems to lead the entire community to come to terms with grief.²⁰

We see in chapter four and five that “the suffering of the people achieves its ultimate expression in the persona of Daughter Zion, who represents the physical city and its inhabitants.”²¹ The consolation of Daughter Zion happens when the entire community participates in the lamentation, offers hope, and ends the lamentations with a petition. Everybody in the imaginary scenario participates in the healing and comforting process by speaking up.

Women who lament are protesting injustice by acting out traumatic memories. Lamentations offers healing release.

Expressing oneself through talking is therefore an important feature in the book of Lamentations. Daughter Zion talks with God and the lamenter, the *strong man* talks with God and the grieving community. Leslie C. Allen argues that “the purpose of talking is to articulate grief, to face up to haunting memories with the defining clarity of speech, and to talk through emotions and reduce them to words, words that still hurt, but (one hopes) at a slightly lower level on the pain scale.”²² Daughter Zion, the lamenter, the *strong man*, and the community open room for the processing of grief, and this process holds out hope of healing. Opening room for grief will lead to closure over time.

Women who lament are protesting injustice by acting out traumatic memories. Lamentations offers healing release and it is helpful because it is no longer limited as an individual burden of memory because it becomes a group act of lamenting. I argue that we do not need to go to Isaiah to find hope for Daughter Zion, who suffers in the book of Lamentations because Daughter Zion needs her community much more than Isaiah. She needs the lamenter, *strong man*, and the entire community to empathize and comfort her. Syrian and Iraqi women need their communities, too. When Syrian and Iraqi women get together to lament as a group, they are in fact protesting and resisting injustices. The communal lament connects them with each other, identifies them with a common history, and motivates them to resist. When Syrian and Iraqi women get together to share their experiences of ISIS brutality, they are protesting against ISIS's systematic oppression

²⁰Allen, *A Liturgy of Grief*, 9.

²¹Conway, “Daughter Zion: Metaphor and Dialogue in the Book of Lamentations,” 119.

²²Allen, *A Liturgy of Grief*, 1–2.

of killing, raping, torturing, and displacement of civilians, and offering themselves room to survive.

Syrian and Iraqi Christian women keep their faith in spite of their suffering. The church is their refuge and their community helps them to express themselves and open room to grief. When the Iraqi Christians ran away from ISIS, they found a refuge behind the walls of their church. They were comforted by their own community and their priests. Being in a group and sharing their pain with each other had encouraged them. They lamented, prayed, and ate together. They wiped each other's tears. When a single Iraqi and Syrian suffer alone, the pain is great, but when suffering community cries, they hear each other and console one another.

CONCLUSION

Daughter Zion identifies with the suffering of Syrian and Iraqi women. Daughter Zion is an example of resisting injustices by lamenting and expressing oneself. She confronts God's brutal behavior and encourages God to intervene to help her, and she encourages her community to lament with her. Keeping silent and avoiding lamentation in times of deep pain and grief can lead to despair. The songs of lamentation tell the story of grief for the survivor's sake. Talking and shedding tears are important parts of lamentations that will lead to healing. I argue that Daughter Zion was comforted after she broke her silence and received comfort from her community. She helped herself by speaking up and encouraging the entire community to hear her and to lament with her and to come to closure through prayer. When Syrian and Iraqi women express their grief in private and public, they put their foot on the first step of healing process. Receiving healing requires talking and sharing our emotions and thoughts and memories. There is a power in lamentation because lamentation and grief lead to healing and closure. If Syrian and Iraqi women do not lament, they will not be able to resist injustices and oppression. Lamentation helps women to be resilient to build their future and the future of their country.

The Syrian and Iraqi Christians found a refuge behind the walls of their church. The church is the community where they alleviate their suffering and relieve their stress. The Syrians and Iraqi women need each other to survive. Going to church not only to share their pain, but also to pray, is an act of resistance and advocacy. ISIS wants them to give up their faith, but their response is to go to their church to pray. Prayer is advocacy because the Syrian and Iraqi women speak to the most powerful God on behalf of the powerless advocating for mercy and change in their life. Likewise, Daughter Zion advocates for herself by asking God to change her situation. ⊕

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