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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Daughter Zion and the Mississippi Delta

Jane Jensen Griesemer

Abstract: In the Book of Lamentations, Jerusalem 587 BCE is personified as the suffering and persecuted Daughter Zion.¹ The biblical Daughter Zion and the present-day Mississippi Delta are separated in time by 2,604 years and separated in distance by 7,000 miles. Despite the vast expanse of space and time between the two, interesting and noteworthy comparisons can be drawn. In this paper, I will show how contemporary afflictions and persecutions facing the Mississippi Delta can be poetically retrieved through a consideration of the afflictions and persecutions related to the fall of Jerusalem. The cry of both dramas tragically emerges from the pages of Lamentations and find further expression in the classic musical laments of the Delta, known as the Delta Blues. I will note the correlations between the Book of Lamentations and Blues music in general and then parallel the narrative of the Book of Lamentations with the contemporary history of the Mississippi Delta. I will then present relevant lyrics from the Delta Blues to reveal the common laments of both sisters in persecution: Daughter Zion and the Mississippi Delta.

Keywords: Book of Lamentations, Mississippi Delta, Legacy Blues Music, Daughter Zion, Delta Blues

¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 14.

Lamentations and the Delta Blues

The Book of Lamentations and the music of the Blues have surprising similarities and serve similar purposes. The following is a separate consideration of each medium followed by a consideration of the shared commonalities that emerge. Author Nancy Lee outlines seven common characteristics of the lament form in her book, *“The Singers of Lamentations,”* which include:

1. A direct address to the deity
2. A complaint of distress, sometimes questioning
3. An expression of trust in God and reminder of past favor
4. A plea of petition for assistance
5. A stated assurance of being heard and future fulfillment
6. A vow of praise
7. Gratitude offered

Not all of these characteristics will be present in every lament, but one or more may be featured.²

Laments are also characterized as either communal or individual; for example, the sorrow expressed by a community for a bad harvest is a communal lament and the sorrow expressed by an individual for the loss of a loved one is an individual lament. Though Jerusalem is personified as Daughter Zion, there are many other crucial voices and testimonies in the Book of Lamentations:

Each voice of Lamentations stands on its own, expresses one perspective among survivors, but no speaker dominates the other. The book leaves voices and viewpoints unresolved, unsettled and open-ended.³

Strained voices come together in the Book of Lamentations to offer testimony of trauma and fleeting hope. The book gives each voice equal space but there is no comfort or amends offered.

Lamentations reads like the cathartic breaking of an emotional dam, but scholars point out that the construction of Lamentations was a careful and studied project that took place over time, involving both individuals and groups in the process. The Book of Lamentations meticulously follows an alphabetically acrostic pattern of either 22 or 66 verses, with the exception of Chapter Five, which is not acrostic but holds to the 22-verse pattern. This attention to rhythmic detail and mnemonic device implies that the Book of Lamentations was more than an accounting of persecution; it was devised for engaged memorization, recitation, and catharsis for individuals and community.⁴

The Delta Blues can also be viewed as a cathartic process of engagement with many equal voices crying out,

² Nancy Lee, *The Singers of Lamentations: Cities Under Siege, from Ur to Jerusalem to Sarajevo* (Boston, MA: Brill, Leiden, 2007), 9-10.

³ Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 14

⁴ O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 12-15.

...the essence of the blues is rooted in human suffering, in grief, in distress. The blues was rooted in hardship, toil, injustice and bondage of African Americans. Throw in bitterness, anger, broken relationships, sex and virtually every aspect of life and you've basically got the blues.⁵

In 1902, Ma Rainey coined the name, "the Blues," after listening to a young girl who came to her tent show and sang a poignant song of love lost. Ma said, "It's the blues."⁶

When asked to define the Blues, the earliest Blues masters offer insight:

Ida Cox: "the blues was nothing but your lover on your mind."⁷

Robert Johnson: "the blues is a low-down, shakin' chill, it's an achin' old heart disease."

Son House: "the blues was something between an man and a woman."

Memphis Willie: "what a man feels about disappointment he can't do anything about."

B.B. King: "an expression of anger against shame and humiliation."⁸

These artists offer us a glimpse into the history of pain that is documented in the music of the Delta Blues and the cathartic release that arises in its communal practice. To engage in this practice, one can sing, clap, play an instrument, or simply listen and know that one's own story is being told. To engage in the writing or performing of Blues music, there is a clearly defined structure. The "twelve-bar blues" pattern, the pentatonic scale, flattened thirds, fifths, sevenths and note bending are utilized for dramatic expression.⁹

Lamentations and the Blues are written within clearly defined structures in an effort to grasp the chaos of persecution and powerlessness and apply it to a structure that can be managed, manipulated, and shared. They are tools for processing pain so that a place for hope may be made.¹⁰ Both Lamentations and the Blues use the language of survivors within a manageable structure. Both are expressed as individual and communal laments that minister to their respective people and both fulfill the communal need for evidence of the experience of persecution and pain.

Before The Fall

Before the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, the Daughter of Zion is glorious and favored by God. She is described as a leader, a princess with compassionate daughters, and a city bustling with people. She enjoys feasts, precious things, and the company of princes. After the abolition of slavery in the United States, the Mississippi Delta continued to develop within social, political and racial tensions and maintained a burgeoning economy that centered around the cotton plantations. Billy Percy, from the oldest plantation family in the Delta, describes plantation life as such:

... each plantation was like a town unto itself and we had a school, three churches. You know, the store was a commissary, really, where they could get at groceries and even clothes, even coffins.

⁵ Gary W. Burnett, *The Gospel According to the Blues* (Eugene OR: Cascade, 2014), 7.

⁶ Elijah Wald, *The Blues, A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 2010), 16-17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ Burnett, *The Gospel According to the Blues*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.* 7.

¹⁰ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 13.

So it used to be a self-contained unit in the '40s, the late '30s. More than 200 people lived on the farm.¹¹

Daughter Zion and Billy Percy of the Mississippi Delta each reflect a longing for bygone days. In the case of Daughter Zion, the bygone days were glorious times of blessing. For Billy Percy, they were ideal. He remembers the freedom of life after slavery and before extreme poverty.

Modern machinery has drastically changed life in the Delta. Only a small number of people are needed to manage a plantation. Families no longer live and work on the farm. With the exodus of manufacturing plants, work is scarce. Poverty is pervasive and the school system is broken. Both Daughter Zion and the Mississippi Delta mourn an impoverished, depleted state.

Poverty

Chapter one of Lamentations opens with the objective voice of the narrator surveying the desolate state of Daughter Zion after the destruction by the Babylonians:

How solitary sits the city, once filled with people. She who was great among the nations, is now like a widow. Once a princess in the provinces, now a toiling slave. (Lam 1).

Debra Ferguson, a photographic observer with a photographic series named, “The Vanishing Delta,” surveys the Delta today:

The buildings that were there at one time, thriving because there were plenty of people in the delta—those people have moved on, companies have closed, small towns have had closure because there’s just not the number of people living here and the incomes they need in order to keep the delta thriving.¹²

Blues singer and guitarist Memphis Minnie gets to the core of this anguish in her 1940 Blues song, *Nothing in Rambling*. Here she also takes on the role of an observer: The peoples on the highway is walking and crying; Some is starving, some is dying. All observations note the fall and abandonment of a once beloved city and its people, now scorned and persecuted.

In chapter one, Lamentations transitions from the voice of the observer to the voice of persecuted Daughter Zion herself, demanding God to look at her and see her pitiful ruin:

Look O Lord, and pay attention to how I have been demeaned! Come all who pass by the way, pay attention and see: Is there any pain like my pain, which has been ruthlessly inflicted upon me, With which the Lord has tormented me on the day of his blazing wrath? (Lam 11b-12)

NPR’s Debbie Elliott speaks on the ruined economic state of the Mississippi Delta:

Since 1970, six counties in the Delta have lost more than 20 percent of their population. The area has been hard hit by the loss of manufacturing plants. Though agriculture remains dominant, the land is concentrated in fewer hands, with machines doing most of the work and absentee corporations in charge. Today, residents of towns like Tchula, Miss., which was once a busy

¹¹ Debbie Elliott, “Mississippi Delta’s Economy, Way of Life Fading,” *Around the Nation*, NPR, June 6, 2005.

¹² Elliott, “Mississippi Delta’s Economy, Way of Life Fading,”

trading center and railroad stop, are now struggling to survive. More than half of all Tchula residents live below the federal poverty level. The town's median income is \$6,373 a year.¹³

Daughter Zion cries out for God to witness her pitiful state. In the Delta, the statistics speak for themselves. The numbers regarding the economic state of the Mississippi Delta are chilling. It is a challenge to imagine a majority population of victims and survivors with families getting by on less than \$6,373 a year.

In the Book of Lamentations, Daughter Zion cries out, the narrator observes, and the victims and survivors also have their voice:

I am one who has known affliction
under the rod of God's anger,
One whom he has driven and forced to walk
in darkness, not in light;
Against me alone he turns his hand—
again and again all day long.
He has worn away my flesh and my skin,
he has broken my bones;
He has besieged me all around
with poverty and hardship;
He has left me to dwell in dark places
like those long dead. (Lam 3:1-6)

Likewise, Mr. Tommy Lee Page, a farm worker still living in the Delta, raises his voice to speak poignantly on the process of persecution, the harsh reality of farm work, and disregard for sustaining productivity in the Delta:

I used to do farm work, and you work from sun-up to sundown, you know. And you never made overtime, no kind of benefit. You just worked. And they worked the devil out of you for minimum wage, and I had been working there, I would say all my life, ever since I was big enough to work. They provided a house; that's about all, too. Everything else you had to pay for yourself. And as my health got bad, so I moved off the farm and moved over to my mom's place. But, basically, that's about all gone right here, farming and, you know, don't seem like they want no factories or nothing to come in this area; just to keep you out here on the farm 'cause they figure they won't have anybody to work for them. So that's the reason they don't want no factories around here.¹⁴

Daughter Zion is forced to live in exile and torment. She is broken, impoverished and afflicted. Likewise, Tommy Lee Page is forced to work beyond his means, only to be abandoned when his health declines. They are both left to “dwell in dark places”.

Delta Blues singer Bessie Smith also sings of poverty, abandonment and dark places in her song, *Poor Man's Blues*:

Mister Rich Man, Rich Man
Open up your heart and mind
Give the poor man a chance
Help stop these hard, hard time
While you livin' in your mansion
You don't know what hard time means
Oh, workin' man's wife is starvin'
Your wife is livin' like a queen

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Elliott, “Mississippi Delta’s Economy, Way of Life Fading.”

Oh, listen to my pleadin'
Can't stand these hard time long
They'll make an honest man do things
That you know is wrong
All man fought all the battles
All man would fight again today
He would do anything you ask him
In the name of the you. S. A
Now the war is over
All man must live the same as you
If it wasn't for the poor man
Mister Rich Man what would you do?

If poverty was the mother that bore both the Book of Lamentations and the Delta Blues;
the father of these poor offspring would surely be violence.

Violence

Daughter Zion lives under a constant threat of violence. This constant threat leads to the suffering and anxiety that simmer at the core of the Book of Lamentations.

Violence is graphically depicted in all five chapters, from all voices:

From on high he hurled fire down into my very bones,
He spread a net out for my feet and turned me back. (Lam 1:13)
Outside the sword bereaves, indoors there is death. (Lam 1:20b)
He bent his bow like an enemy; the arrow in his right hand, Like a foe he killed all those held precious; On the tent of Daughter Zion, he poured out his wrath like fire. (Lam 2:4)
He turned me aside and tore me apart, leaving me ravaged. He bent his bow, and set me up as target for his arrow. He pierced my kidneys with shafts from his quiver. (Lam 3:12-13)
You wrapped yourself in wrath and pursued us, killing without pity.” (Lam 3:43)
“Without cause, my enemies snared me as though I were a bird. They tried to end my life in the pit, pelting me with stones. (Lam 3:52-53)
The punishment of the daughter of my people surpassed the penalty of Sodom. (Lam 4:6a)
Better for those pierced by the sword than for those pierced by hunger, Better for those who bleed from wounds than for those who lack food. (Lam 4:9)
Women are raped in Zion, young woman in the cities of Judah; Princes have been hanged by them, elders shown no respect. (Lam 5:11-12)

Wrath, dismemberment, rape, torture, starvation, humiliation, Daughter Zion bears it all. The Book of Lamentations stands as her witness to violence. In a similar way, the lyrics of the Blues document the anxiety and suffering of survivors living during times of extreme racial tension. They also lived in constant fear of persecution and violence:

Mean ole hangman waitin' to tighten up the noose, Lord I'm so scared I'm tremblin' in my shoes.
(Blind Lemon Jefferson, 1928)
Men were standin' over me, and a whole lot more with a whip. (B.B. King, 1969)
...I got to keep movin' Blues fallin' down like hail, And the day keeps on worryin' me. There's a hellhound on my tail. (Robert Johnson, 1937)
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees. (Billie Holiday, 1939)¹⁵

¹⁵ Burnett, *The Gospel According to the Blues*, 16-17.

The lyrics to Billie Holiday's recording of *Strange Fruit* are difficult to process, particularly this line: "Pastoral scene of the gallant south, the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth." This single line can leave one feeling numb and dumbfounded at the human capacity for evil. To live in constant fear of a lynching or whipping is beyond normal comprehension. Billie Holiday takes on the role of the distant observer that we met at the opening of *Lamentations*. Her tone is morose and defeated. A space for hope that has not yet been achieved.

Her Children

The despair of living in an environment of persecution and violence is made even more unbearable when one's children are the victims. *Lamentations* 1 and 2 document the disregard and persecution of the children of Daughter Zion. Her children are described as captives, desolate and collapsing in the streets. They cry and faint, wounded and starving. Their lives are poured out as the people mourn, spent with tears. In both *Lamentations* 2 and 4, references are made to the starving people of Zion consuming their deceased children. The implications of Daughter Zion's poverty are disturbing.

The implications of poverty are not only disturbing but timeless. The Mississippi Delta is one of the most financially impoverished areas of United States. Families live in abject poverty due to many circumstances; the shift in the plantation economy from farm hands to machines, the exodus of manufacturing jobs, the constant racial tensions, and the lack of jobs for young people. All of these stressors contribute to children living in compromised situations. Representatives from the Community Health Center in Tutwiler, Mississippi shared that the children from the community who do make it to college have to leave the area for work. They do not have the opportunity to give back because there is nothing left upon which to build. The public-school system maintains D ratings and is classified among the worst in the country. Only about 50% of students graduate from high school.¹⁶ In 2013, *Time* writer Sara Carr covered some of the challenges facing the Mississippi town of Friar's Point:

Most of Friars Point's residents live in government-subsidized apartment buildings clustered around the school, trailers, or run-down shacks. Many blocks have lost homes to fires; self-inflicted "burnouts" when financially destitute residents burn their own homes for whatever insurance money they can get. In at least some cases, gang members have been known to burn down houses after residents depart as an initiation rite. . . . Friars Point Elementary School has taken on outsized importance . . . It is the only public place where parents can be sure their children will be safe after school . . . get regular health care . . . and a part-time school nurse . . . it is often the only place where residents can gather to mourn their dead.¹⁷

There is little encouragement to be found in Carr's story, aside from the few individuals that it highlights who truly care about the Delta situation. Unfortunately, these people lack the means to significantly improve their communities and public policy.

¹⁶ "Chapter 2: Race and the Public Education System in Mississippi" accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/msdelta/ch2.htm>.

¹⁷ Sarah Carr, "Plight of Rural Schools Laid Bare in Dying Delta Town," *Time*, July 3, 2013,



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Processing Poverty, Violence and Pain

The Book of Lamentations and the Delta Blues revolve around their shared process of lament to God for the purposes of managing communal and individual pain and trauma. In the closing chapter of Lamentations, the survivors plead with God, “Bring us back to you Lord, that we may return” (Lam 5:21). The commitment to God is never abandoned by Daughter Zion or her people. They do not curse their God but beg to be seen and be returned to favor. Likewise, in the Delta Blues, the most common lyric found is “Oh God” or “Oh Lord.” Even when the lyrics are used without a specific intention to address the deity, the connection is there. The primal call for a return to God is established for all to see, intentional or not.

Blues pianist and singer Louise Johnson, who recorded with Charlie Patton, Son House, and Willie Brown, speaks to God as if in the confessional booth:

Lord I'm going to get drunk, and I'm going to walk the streets all night,
Because the man that I'm loving, I swear he sure don't treat me right.

Blind Willie Johnson confesses:

When my heart's filled of sorrow and my eyes are filled with tears,
Lord, I just can't keep from crying sometimes.

These Mississippi Blues singers and Daughter Zion use the language of survival and cry out directly to God. Their divine language not only expresses pain but also serves to heal, as it processes violence, injustice, poverty, trauma, and pain.

Conclusion:

Sisters in persecution, Daughter Zion and the Mississippi Delta share in a horrific experience of pain, suffering, and survival. They both undergo systematic persecution and deterioration of their former way of life, resulting in crippling poverty and shame. Daughter Zion and the Mississippi Delta are both scarred by the constant threat of cruel violence, and they both suffer the horrifying experience of watching their own children be persecuted and discarded by oppressors. Finally, these sisters in persecution maintain a connection to God, either through faith or confession, by using a highly metered and structured language that processes pain and trauma—Lamentations and the Delta Blues.

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