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This article was originally published as:

Boase, E. (2008). The characterisation of God in Lamentations. *Australian Biblical Review*, 56, 32-44.

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## **The Characterisation of God in Lamentations**

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### Abstract

One of the dominant characters within the book of Lamentations is God. God is spoken about and spoken to, although the voice of God is never heard. Various voices within the text speak of God, describing both God's actions and God's attributes. These descriptions give rise to various, and at times conflicting images: God is the violent destroyer of the city and her inhabitants; God is an absent God, whose presence is longed for; God is a God of steadfast love and mercy; God is the one in whom future hope lies. This paper analyses the multifaceted portrayal of the character of God as constructed in the book of Lamentations, exploring the implications of that characterisation for our understanding of the theology of Lamentations.

The book of Lamentations is a problematic text. Written in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE these five poems give voice to the pain and suffering of the community. The images are bold and confronting, descriptive of the plight of the people, reflecting a strong sense of anguish, hurt, deprivation, anger, protest and also hope.

Among the most difficult images we encounter in the text are those that describe God. Within the poetry of Lamentations God is spoken about and spoken to. Some of the images are comfortable – God as a God of steadfast love and righteousness, one in whom we should trust and hope. But along side this image, in descriptions which are far more numerous and graphic, God is described as a violent oppressor who has wrought the destruction of the city and its people. God is also described as an absent God, one who has withdrawn into silence, refusing to respond even when God's people call out.

The images we encounter concerning God are varied and at times contradictory. God is identified as the cause of the current suffering, but is also the only hope for the future. Given the tensions which exist in the characterisation of God, how are we to talk about God in relation to this text? Can we, or indeed should we, try to draw conclusions about the nature of God in light of the different characterisations?

This current essay explores the portrayal of God within Lamentations, followed by a discussion of the theological implications of the text. The exegesis is brought into conversation with Terrence Fretheim's essay "The Authority of the Bible and Imag(in)ing God"<sup>1</sup> in order to highlight my own hermeneutical position in relation to the tensions evident in Lamentations. Particular attention will be paid to the violent language used of God, and its impact on our theology, concluding that within this text no one characterisation of God should be privileged. The text calls us into an engagement with the complexity of encountering God in the reality of lived experience, in the midst of pain and suffering.

### **The Characterisation of God in Lamentations**

Within Lamentations the character of God is established through the speech of others. God is spoken about and spoken to.

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<sup>1</sup> Terrence Fretheim, "The Authority of the Bible and Imag(in)ing God" in *The Bible as Word of God in a Post Modern Age* (ed. T. Fretheim and K. Froehlich; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 112-126.

A variety of personae populate the text of Lamentations, each voicing their experiences.<sup>2</sup> The narrator (Lam 1:1-9b, 10-11b, 17; 2:1-20; 3:48-66; 4:1-16, 21-22), the personified city – Daughter Zion (1:9c, 11c-16, 18-22; 2:20-22), the community (3:42-47; 4:17-20; 5:1-22), and “the man”, a persona who appears in chapter 3 and is an intentionally gendered voice different from that of both the narrator and the feminine city (3:1-41). Each of these personae speak, voicing different aspects of the suffering, longing and hope experienced in the Jerusalem community in the wake of the destruction. There is no attempt to merge the variety of views expressed by the personae. The multiple viewpoints sit alongside each other, leaving a sense of unresolved tension and rhetorical confusion.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside those who speak, various characters are spoken about. The narrator speaks of Zion, the community and of specific groups within the community. Zion speaks of herself, of the community as an entity, and of specific groups within the community – women, children, the elderly and so on. The man speaks primarily of his own suffering, but does address the community, and the community addresses its own pain, highlighting the plight of subgroups within its number.

Over and above this, however, each of the different personae speaks about God. God is one of the most dominant characters in the text, but unlike the personae, never

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this essay, persona is defined as “the mask of characterisation assumed by the poet as the medium through which he (sic) perceives and gives expression to his world.” (W. F. Lanahan, “The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations,” *JBL* 93 (1974), 41-49. here 41).

<sup>3</sup> This understanding of Lamentations as a multivalent text has been highlighted in several recent publications, including Elizabeth C. Boase, *The Fulfilment of Doom: The Dialogic Interaction Between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early Exilic Prophetic Literature* (LHBOTS 437; New York: T&T Clark, 2006); F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 2002); Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (New York: Orbis, 2002).

speaks.<sup>4</sup> The absence of divine voice is significant. Although God is the subject of much of the speech, the divine silence means that no one description of God is authoritative, or in fact has more authority than any other. The audience engages with a multiplicity of viewpoints concerning God, but, in the absence of the divine voice, is not constrained to privileging one over another.<sup>5</sup>

Before examining the portrayals of God, it is important to consider the nature of this text as poetic. As poetry, Lamentations consists of a series of independent yet interrelated poems. Their essential character has been defined in terms of parataxis – the juxtaposition of poetic lines against each other - resulting in a seemingly haphazard movement between ideas and images.<sup>6</sup> This poetic form means that the characterisation of God is neither sustained nor logical in its development. Even where God is the focus of extended sections of text, there is rapid shift of focus and change in reference. This is compounded by an absence of plot.<sup>7</sup> Actions are attributed to God, but these actions occur outside the framework of plot development, further emphasising the fragmentary development of character.

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<sup>4</sup> Of the recent commentators, only Erhard Gerstenberger (*Psalms, Part, and Lamentations*. FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) finds the presence of the divine voice in Lamentations. He argues that in 2:11-13, the divine voice is heard “represented by an authorized speaker, entrusted to communicate God’s personal involvement, pain and mercy.” I have argued elsewhere, however, that this is the voice of the narrator (*Fulfilment of Doom*, p. 219).

<sup>5</sup> Narrative criticism identifies a hierarchy of authority with regard to biblical characterisation. The divine voice has ultimate authority, and the narrator’s voice more authority than that of characters within a text (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981] p 126; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* [JSOTSS; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989] 64). Given that it is argued here that the author(s) of Lamentations have constructed various persona within the text, it is not assumed that one persona has more authority than another. The narrator is as much a construct of the text as the other persona.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Landy, “Lamentations,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 329-334, here 330; see also Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 12-14.

<sup>7</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp (*Lamentations*, 12-14) identifies that as lyric poetry, Lamentations lacks “narrativizing devices” such as plot.

The current discussion focuses on three images, which are the most dominant and the most conflicting in Lamentations – God as the violent destroyer, God as absent, and God as a God of steadfast love and hope.

### **God as Violent Destroyer**

This image of God as a violent destroyer is one of the most confronting in Lamentations. In varying degrees, three of the personae speak directly of God's violence; the narrator, the man, and Daughter Zion.

Both the narrator and the man have lengthy speeches which focus on God as the violent destroyer. In 2:1-9, the narrator describes God's actions against the city, focusing on the destruction of various aspects of the physical city (dwellings of Jacob, stronghold of daughter Judah [v. 2]; palaces and stronghold [v. 5]; wall of daughter Zion [v. 8]; gates and bars [v. 9]) and of the cult (tabernacle, festival and sabbath, king and priest [v. 6]; altar and sanctuary [v. 7]). There is little concern with the human impact of the destruction, although it is mentioned in v. 5 where God is described as multiplying mourning and lamentation.

Reference is made to God's anger and/or wrath six times (anger P) vv. 1 (x2), 3 and 6; wrath רב ( v. 2; fury חמס) with v. 3 referring to God's fierce anger (P) ירעב and v. 6 to the indignation of God's anger (wp) מ(zb). God is also described as acting without mercy (למס ) l v. 2).

Over thirty verbs are attributed to God. Initially the verbs emphasise God's elevated position. God has thrown down (Kl#) from heaven the splendour of Israel. God breaks down (srh), brings down ((gn), cuts down ((dg). Verses 3-5 name God's failure to support the nation in the face of the enemy, with God described as acting like an enemy (byw) k), destroying the city ((lb) and killing (grh) the pride of the nation. These are holy war images, portraying the destruction of Jerusalem as a Day of Yahweh.<sup>8</sup>

Verses 6-8 intensify the destructiveness of God's actions, centring on the destruction of the cult. In verse 6 the verb smx is used. The general sense is the wrongful application of violence, with the difficulty of this reading emphasised by its exclusion in the LXX and Syriac texts.<sup>9</sup> Verse 8 stresses the intentionality of God's actions, suggesting a sense of deliberation on God's behalf.

The audience is left with no doubt as to the cause of the destruction. It is God who has brought about the devastation. The audience is overwhelmed by the sheer mass of violent verbs attributed to God. The relentlessness of the description is not broken by any sense of human responsibility. There is no reference to sin or transgression within this unit, although it could be argued that it is at least implied in the reference to God's anger (tyx# hl hwhy b#x Yahweh determined to lay in ruins).<sup>10</sup> It is, at best, however, only implied.

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<sup>8</sup> See Boase, *Fulfilment of Doom*, pp. 131-134 for a full discussion.

<sup>9</sup> See H. Gottlieb, *A Study on the Text of Lamentations* (ACTA Jutlandica; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1978) 27.

<sup>10</sup> Dobbs Allsopp (*Lamentations*, 81) notes such strong emphasis on anger imputes to God felt pain and a belief that that God has been wronged in a very serious way. And though such capacities elsewhere in the Bible are attributed

A similar attribution of violence to God is found in the speech of the man in 3:1-18. In v. 1 the man identifies himself as the one who has seen affliction (h) r r bgh yn) yn (). In what follows the man invokes images of physical violence against his body, much of it in the language of war (vv. 5, 7, 11, 12, 13) and of hunting (v. 11). The pursuit of the man is relentless, and he describes himself as physically and psychologically shattered (vv. 17-18).

Zion also attributes violent action to God. Much of Zion's language is more personal and has to do with the pain and suffering God's actions have brought on her. As she breaks into extended speech for the first time Zion identifies God as the cause of her suffering

Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,  
Which was brought upon (l l ()) me, which the Lord inflicted (hgy) on the day of his  
fierce anger (wp) Nwrx )<sup>11</sup>

Zion describes God as bringing sorrow and infliction, and as leaving her stunned (v. 13). Zion also draws on war imagery (vv. 13, 14, 18), but there is an underlying concern with the impact of God's actions against her as a person. Like the narrator and the man, Zion emphasises the fierce anger of God, and names the destruction as a day of God's anger (v. 21).

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to God, as biblical faith in general and Lamentations in particular steadfastly profess a God who is decisively impinged upon and affected by God's covenantal partners, they are not explicitly in evidence in this poem. That is, remarkably nowhere in Lamentations 2 are we shown any sign of God's felt pain or of God having been wronged. Thus, God's anger, as shaped by the poem's rhetoric, becomes noticeably one-dimensional, almost solely the source for hurtful action, and leaving the poem's readership, then, with the impression, as O'Connor observes, of an "out of control" and "mad deity".

<sup>11</sup> Lam 1:12



## The Absent God

Another dominant characterisation of God is as absent.<sup>12</sup> God's absence is portrayed in a number of different ways, and is voiced by all the personae.

Chapter 1 opens with the words “how lonely sits the city” (רַי (h ddb hb#y hky)). Five times throughout the chapter reference is made to the lack of comforter for Zion, three times by the narrator (vv. 2, 9, 17) and twice by Zion (vv. 16, 21). While humans or other nations may qualify as comforters (vv. 2, 12 and 19[?]), Zion herself seeks comfort from God as is evident in the pleas to God in vv. 9, 11 and 20. Zion calls for God to “look” (h) r vv. 9, 11, 20) and “see” (+bn v. 11).<sup>13</sup> The lack of God's seeing compounds the suffering which results from the physical destruction. The plea for God to look and see suggests that God is currently not looking, is not

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<sup>12</sup> There is little consensus in the literature with regard to the notion of divine absence, reflecting a tension in how it is that God can be understood to be absent. Walter Brueggemann (“Texts that Linger, Not Yet Overcome” in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* [ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt; Winona Lake: Eisenbraun, 2000] 21-41) discusses four pivotal texts (Ps 22:1; Lam 5:20; Isa 49:14 and Isa 54:7-8) in relation to God's abandoning activity. He suggests that there are five strategies evident in the literature which evade or dilute the presence of this motif in the Hebrew Bible: disregarding the texts; justifying God's action as a response to sin; arguing that God only “appears” to be or is only perceived as absent (but is in reality still present); the positing of an absence in presence (i.e., God is genuinely experienced as absent but that this experience contains within it “an assumption of cosmic, primordial presence, thus giving us a *dialectical notion of ‘presence in absence’ or ‘absence in presence’* “(29); and evolutionary supersessionism, which argues that both Israel's religion and in fact God “developed” over time. As we are drawing on the work of Fretheim, it is here worth noting his position with regard to divine absence. He argues not that God is absent from the people, but that the intensity of God's presence is, at times, diminished, that God has withdrawn an intensity of presence. He states “Thus while God's presence *to* Israel is diminished in intensity, God's presence *for* Israel remains alive and well in the world, though that may remain hidden from their eyes.” (Terrence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* [OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 66). As will be seen in the discussion which follows, although Israel does name an experience of God's absence, the very fact of voicing this experience to God still assumes an ongoing presence of God, or at least allows for the possibility of God hearing the cry. Despite this, for the voices within the text, God has withdrawn, and is for all intents and purposes absent from the people.

<sup>13</sup> The same combination of verbs is used in an appeal to the passers-by in v. 12, however, they fail to qualify for the task.

seeing – is absent. The current absence of God is held alongside the hope that God will again be present and alleviate the suffering.

The narrator's speech in chapter 2, describes God destroying (טx#§) the tabernacle, abolishing (xk#§) festival and Sabbath, spurning (C)n king and priest (v. 6), scorning (xnz) the alter in Jerusalem and disowning (r)n the sanctuary. These actions suggest that God has withdrawn from the temple, is no longer dwelling amongst the people.

Although God is said to have withdrawn from the people, in 2:18, the narrator exhorts Zion to bring supplications before the presence of the Lord (Cry aloud to the Lord!

O wall of daughter Zion! Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!<sup>14</sup>). The God who has withdrawn is still the God before whom Zion must come to bring about a reversal of the current plight.<sup>15</sup>

The communal voice further names the divine absence. The man concludes his speech in 3:40-41 by turning to the community, exhorting them to confession (Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven). The community responds “we have transgressed and

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<sup>14</sup> The initial line of v. 18 is problematic and lengthy debate surrounds it. Despite much conjecture, there is little certainty as to the sense of this opening line. However in the light of the remainder of vv. 18-19, the line should be read as an imperative, calling on the city to lament (with B. Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology of Lamentations* [Lund: Gleerup, 1963] 116; Gottlieb, *Text of Lamentations*, 36; Iaian Provan, *Lamentations* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 75; Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations* [AB 7A; New York: Doubleday, 1992] 95; Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues in Interpretation*, [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994] 143).

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Balentine (*The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983] 166-7) identifies that the cry of lament expresses the uncertainty of the suppliant. The suppliant gives voice to the reality of “life lived in the period between what has happened in the past and what is hoped for in the future.” The experience of God's hiddenness is intensified by past experience and future hope of divine presence.

rebelled, and you have not forgiven (t×ls )l ht))” (v 42). God is then described as being wrapped in anger (P) b htks), in a cloud (Nn (b) so that no prayer can pass through (hlpt rwb(m vv. 43-44).

Chapter three closes with an extended petition in masculine singular voice, calling on God to respond to the supplicant and to act against the enemy (vv. 55-66).<sup>16</sup> Again – hope is found in the possibility of God’s future presence, a contrast to the present absence.

The final chapter highlights the absence of God. Chapter 5 (v. 1) opens with a petition to God to remember (rkz), look (+bn) and see (h)r), emphasising the divine absence. Verse 20 asks if God has forgotten (xk#š) the people completely, and why God has forsaken (bz () them for many days. The closing of the chapter, and the book itself, raises the possibility that God may have permanently withdrawn

Restore us to yourself, O Lord,  
That we may be restored;  
Renew our days as of old –  
Unless you have utterly rejected us,  
And are angry with us beyond measure.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The tenses within this unit are ambiguous, here translated in the precative voice. For a discussion of the issues see Iaian Provan, “Past, Present and Future in Lamentations 3:52-66: The Case for the Precative Perfect Re-examined.” *VT* 42 (1991), 164-74.

<sup>17</sup> Lamentations 5:21-22. For discussion of 5:22 see Robert Robert Gordis, “The Conclusion to the Book of Lamentations (Critical Notes),” *JBL* 93 (1974), 289-93; Tod Linafelt, “The Refusal of a Conclusion in the Book of Lamentations,” *JBL* 120 (2001), 340-43. Linafelt’s translation of the verse as a protasis without an apodosis - that is “an ‘if’ with the ‘then’ left unstated” (p. 342) - captures the forward movement of the verse. He translates “For if truly you have rejected us, raging bitterly against us....”

The hopeful possibility of the appeal is negated by the final doubt-filled despair. The silence of God throughout the book becomes the central focus of the conclusion. God remains absent and silent.

### **God as a God of Steadfast Love and Mercy**

A third portrayal of God in Lamentations stands over and against the portrayals of the violent and absent God - God as a God of steadfast love and mercy. This view of God is implied by both the narrator and Zion in chapter 1, but is most fully expressed by the man in chapter 3, who moves from the genre of lament and complaint to a wisdom like section which extols the virtues of God (3:21-39). This wisdom speech is often given privileged position when the theology of Lamentations is discussed, seen as the highpoint of the book.<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis on God's justice and righteousness is seen initially in chapter 1. Both the narrator and Zion make reference to the sin of the city and her inhabitants, implying that God's violent action was justified in light of this sin (1:5, 8, 14, 18, 22). Zion explicitly states "The Lord is in the right (qydc), for I have rebelled against his word" (1:18), and in 1:22, Zion calls on God to deal with the enemy as God has dealt with her because of her transgressions. This linking of God's action as a justified response to sin is not, however, a sustained voice, with the sense of injustice

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<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Otto Plöger, *Die Klagelieder* (Tubingen: JCB Mohr, 1969) 128–29; Hans Jochen Boecker, *Klagelieder* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985) 15–17; Joze Krasovec, "The Source of Hope in Lamentations," *VT* 42 (1992), 221–33; Hans Joachim Kraus (cited Westermann, *Lamentations*, 35); Alan Mintz, "The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), 1-17; Hillers, *Lamentations*, 122.

emphasised through the sheer enormity of the suffering and the extent of the complaint.

The attribution of steadfast love and mercy is most strongly spoken by the man of chapter 3. In a heavily didactic voice the man reflects on the nature of God (vv. 22-24, 34-39), and on the correct stance to be taken before God in the face of suffering (vv. 25-30). Interspersed with this material are expressions of confidence which evoke the psalm traditions (vv. 21, 31-33). The inclusion of this material introduces an element of hope otherwise absent from the book.

Having concluded the lengthy lament over his affliction, in v. 21 explicit hope is introduced by the man who states “this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.” This hope lies in the recollection of God’s attributes of steadfast love (דסx), mercy (מסר) and faithfulness (חנwm), attributes which are constant (22-23).

Verses 25-30 define the attributes of God, who is good (בט) to those who wait for him and to the soul who seeks him. Having counselled a patient waiting on God in the face of suffering, the man returns to an expression of confidence, again emphasising God’s attribute of steadfast love (vv. 31-33).

<sup>31</sup>For the Lord will not  
reject for ever.

<sup>32</sup>Although he causes grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;

<sup>33</sup>for he does not willingly afflict  
or grieve anyone.

These verses do not deny the reality of the present situation, naming the rejection and grief as coming from God. The emphasis and hope, however, lies on the compassion (Mxr) and steadfast love (dsx) of God. The remainder of the man's speech focuses on the justice of God, identifying that in the course of life both the good and the bad come from the hand of the Most High and again linking the present suffering with punishment for sin (vv. 34-39).

Distinct hope is present within the speech of the man, based on the attributes of God's justice, love, righteousness and mercy.<sup>19</sup> It is in the recognition of these attributes that the man calls on the community to turn to God in confession (3:41-42). This hope filled position is, however, not maintained, with the community returning to lament genre, again naming the absence of God as their current experience.

### **The Characterisation of God in Lamentations**

These three portrayals of God – God as a violent destroyer, God as absent and God as a God of steadfast love and mercy - are the most dominant in Lamentations. These images are conflicting, and problematic, particularly the images of the violent and the absent God. The question then arises as to how we can move from the analysis of the text to using that analysis to inform our theology. How can we talk about God in light of the tensions evident in Lamentations? Can we say anything coherent about the

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<sup>19</sup> It is significant that in Lamentations there is no reference to God's past saving action as the basis of confidence in God. So also Fretheim, ("Imag(in)ing God," 121), who argues that the exile represents a gulf between past and future and that "the hope of Israel is not to be placed in its own story, but in the kind of God whom it confesses." Although Fretheim makes a relevant point here, my own reading diverges from his with regard to the weight given to the confessional statements present within Lamentations.

violent God who causes suffering and who is at the same time the God in whom hope for the future lies?

We cannot back away from the fact that there is a witness to the violence of God within the Hebrew scriptures. This witness occurs not only in poetic texts such as Lamentations, but is evident in a range of narrative texts.<sup>20</sup> The extent of the violence is particularly confronting in Lamentations as the discussion of God's violent action far outweighs the discussion of the motivation behind that action. While the sin of the people is named as one of the reasons for the destruction (1:5, 8, 9, 14, 18, 20; 2:14; 3:39, 42; 4:6, 13; 5:7,16), this is not a sustained argument. There is an emphasis on innocent suffering over deserved suffering.

In "The Authority of the Bible and Imag(in)ing God" Fretheim suggests three areas to consider when evaluating the value of the God-talk which emerges from any given reading of a text.<sup>21</sup> These are

- Point of view: i.e., whose point of view is being expressed? Fretheim notes that there are three basic points of view concerning God within (narrative) texts – the narrator's, God's own self-talk and those of other characters. Of

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<sup>20</sup> See Ulrich Berges, "The Violence of God in the Book of Lamentations," in *One Text, a Thousand Voices: Essays in Memory of Sjef van Tilborg* (ed. P. C. Counet and U. Berges: Leiden, Brill, 2005) 21-44, esp 24-7, for discussion.

<sup>21</sup> 115-117. Earlier in the essay, Fretheim asks "If some texts support traditional understandings, how does one work with these differences in any move to a biblical theology or a contemporary formulation? If there are not only multiple meanings of texts, but multiple theologies, do we let people just pick and chose the theology they like, and name it all biblical? But if we have a biblical theological pluralism, then the question of authority gets more complicated: are all such biblical theologies authoritative? Or are distinctions to be made among theologies? If so, does the Bible itself prioritize them? Are different biblical theologies pertinent for different times and places? Or is the authority of the Bible finally dependent upon its containing a univocal understanding of God?" (112-113).

these, Fretheim places higher value of those of the narrator and God (noting, however, that God's self talk probably coincides with the view of the narrator).<sup>22</sup>

- Rhetorical purpose:
- The literary nature of the text.

These criteria provide a useful framework to begin our discussion. Although I am making use of his material, my own analysis diverges from Fretheim's in places, particularly with regard to using credal statements as a normative lens through which to read the text.

In terms of point of view, I have already highlighted that no one point of view is truly privileged in Lamentations. God's character is constructed by the personae in the text, but because God does not speak, divine authority is not given to any of those points of view.<sup>23</sup> In the history of interpretation, authority has been given to some of the personae over others.<sup>24</sup> The man of chapter 3, who makes propositional statements about the character of God is often seen as the voice which expresses the theological heart of the book. At other times the narrator's voice is given precedence – especially where he identifies a causal link between God's action and Jerusalem's sin. Rarely is the feminine voice of the city given precedence.<sup>25</sup> I would argue, however, that this is

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<sup>22</sup> "Imag(in)ing God," 115.

<sup>23</sup> Against Fretheim ("Imag(in)ing God," 115). In relation to Lamentations the narrator has no more authority than the other personae in the text. All the speaking voices within this text are personae, constructed to give voice to multiple viewpoints on the destruction.

<sup>24</sup> See note 18 above.

<sup>25</sup> An example of the undervaluing of the feminine voice is found in the work of Mintz ("Rhetoric of Lamentations"). He states

To deal with this threatened loss of meaning - what amounts to a threat of caprice, gratuitousness, absurdity - Zion as a figure is simply not sufficient; a woman's voice,



a false move within this text. All the voices are literary constructs, and all, at one point or another, characterise God in each of the images discussed. There is no privileged or authoritative voice.

In terms of rhetoric, that these poems are primarily lament must be taken seriously.<sup>26</sup> Their purpose is to give voice to the pain and suffering at the limits of experience, in the midst of an almost unimaginable crisis. All the structures that held the community together, political, social and religious, had been shattered. Meaning had collapsed, and the poems give strong voice to the resultant confusion. These poems are not carefully formulated statements, are not systematic doctrines, are not reflections on the ontological nature of the divine, but the pouring out of human experience.<sup>27</sup> The poems tell us of the experience of God, but do not tell us all there is to know about God.

In his discussion Fretheim argues that we need to consider the literary nature of the texts we are dealing with, and in particular that biblical characters, here God, are literary constructs. Fretheim suggests that there are two dictums which need to be avoided when talking about the character of God on the basis of biblical texts. One is

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according to the cultural code of Lamentations, can achieve expressivity but not reflection. And now acts of reasoning and cognition are the necessary equipment for undertaking the desperate project of understanding the meaning of what has happened.

The solution is the invention of a new, male figure, the speaker of chapter 3 ... whose preference for theologizing rather than weeping is demonstrated throughout (9).

<sup>26</sup> Fretheim raises the issue of the authority of lament texts when he asks “What about the theology of, say, the lament psalms? Inasmuch as they are spoken in situations of deep distress, is their understanding of God comparable to what moderns might say in a tight spot, but would never say in a carefully formulated statement?” (“Imag(in)ing God,” 116).

<sup>27</sup> Claus Westermann (“The Complaint Against God,” in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* [ed. T. Linafelt and T. K. Beal. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998] 233-241) argues that within lament “the sufferers are encountering something about God which they cannot comprehend and that they have reached the limits of their own intellectual capacity. The sense of awe before the majesty of God prevents any attempt at rationalization.” ( 239)

that we identify the real God with the God who is embodied in the text – i.e., by suggesting that God does not transcend the text. The God of the text is a metaphorical God, and as metaphor, we are called to question the is and the is not – the yes and the no – of the representation. The text calls us to engage with the portrayal, but not to assume that this text, or any text, says all there is to say about God.<sup>28</sup> Lamentations itself opens us up to this type of engagement. We have seen that the characterisation of God is not univocal. God is both the problem and the solution, is consecutively a violent presence, an absent figure and a God of steadfast love. The very nature of the text draws us into a dialogic interaction, shifting our focus constantly between different experiences of God, but never finally concluding or validating one over another.<sup>29</sup>

While we need to avoid the trap of equating the actual God with the textual God, we equally need to avoid completely dissociating the textual and the actual God. While God may transcend the text, God is still mediated through the text.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Lamentations, that includes the God of violence who is experienced as one and the same God as the God of steadfast love and mercy. As audience, we need to look beyond the text to the God who transcends the text, but also mediate God through the witness of text. God both is and is not the character portrayed, includes but is not limited to the characterisation.

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<sup>28</sup>“Imag(in)ing God,” 117. So also Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Dianne Bergant (“Violence of God: A Bible Study” *Missiology: An International Review* 20 [1992], 45-54) states that the Israelite “religious language was imaginative and paradoxical, attesting to personal experiences of God and using whatever forms best communicated the revelatory character of that experience. Its metaphorical character continues to open us to possibilities of expansion and insight that precise philosophical or descriptive discourse cannot provide. It generates impressions rather than propositions.” 946).

<sup>30</sup> “Imag(in)ing God,” 117-118.

But again, we are left with the question of mediating between the different characterisations of God within this specific text. Even if we identify the metaphoric nature of God's characterisation, do we, or should we, give more weight to one image over another.

Fretheim would, perhaps, argue that yes, we should. In dealing with the issue of characterising God, Fretheim calls for the recourse to confessional claims about the character of God as a hermeneutic guide in mediating between differing portrayals. He argues that we can identify credal statements such as that found in Exodus 34:6-7 as a ruling metaphor.<sup>31</sup>

'The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty.

This metaphor of God, this image, is pervasive and reflects well the tradition. In addition, it occurs in a credal or confessional statement which has "high value" for the community of faith. Essentially, these credal like statements are propositional not experiential. While this confessional statement may have its roots in the experience of Israel's history, with its essence drawn from salvation history, this truth claim cannot be reduced simply to the narrative of God's salvific acts. The confession focuses on the nature of God not the action of God. While the narrative of Israel's history may describe the God who saves, the narrative alone does not tell us about the *type* of God

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<sup>31</sup> "Imag(in)ing God," 120.

who saves. The truth claim moves beyond the experiential to the propositional, and Fretheim would argue that all portrayals of God should be read through the filter of this truth claim, in this way delimiting the possibilities of meaning when we move from the characterisation of God in the text to theological claims about God.<sup>32</sup>

But is this valid for Lamentations? Should we limit the value of the different and contradictory characterisations by filtering the difficult ones of God's violence and God's absence through the image of the God of steadfast love? If so, the voice of the man who expresses hope on the basis of the steadfast love and mercy of God is the voice which should be privileged, as has happened in the past. It is this voice which opens the door to future hope in Lamentations, and it is this confessional statement which allows the contrasting views of God to be held together within the confines of this text.

While this hermeneutic move may well allow the different voices to be held together, we need to be very careful in taking this step, because to do so actually denies the nature of the text itself. Theologically and propositionally we may want to draw certain claims about God from Lamentations, but that is our concern not the text's. Lamentations resists this type of interpretation. We need to take seriously the genre of

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<sup>32</sup> "Imag(in)ing God," 121-122. Fretheim in fact draws on Lam 3:20-32 to support his argument. He states "The God confessed by Israel remains constant across the story's interruptions, especially the chasm of the exile. The book of Lamentations, which never appeals to God's actions in Israel's past, makes this kind of confession (3:20-32). In the midst of the great gulf between past and future, the hope of Israel is not to be placed in its own story, but in the kind of God whom it confesses. Hence, the God who is the subject of sentences in the narrative is to be understood fundamentally in terms of those generalizations." A differently nuanced understanding of this section of text is articulated in Berges ("Violence of God," 41-42) who states "The biblical protest against Jhwh, who acts in contradiction to his own ethical standards, is not rooted in a cultural disapproval of a violent God, but in a hope to experience his benevolence again. The sapiential reflection of the geber in the center of Book of Lamentation (3:22-24), does not present the solution to the problem of divine negativity, but the internal motivation to protest against it." This reading of Berges, it seems, allows the voice of protest to maintain its integrity.

the text as primarily lament, and allow the expressions of pain and anguish to be voiced, without trying to reduce them down to propositional statements about God. Lamentations is not propositional, it is experiential, and for Israel at this time in her history, God was contradictory. God was both problem and solution, violent, absent and the longed for future hope.<sup>33</sup> The text invites us to grapple with these different experiences of God, not necessarily asserting that one experience is universally and always true, or even propositionally valid. That is not the purpose of the text. The text is an invitation to engagement with the complexity of experiencing God in the reality of lived experience, in the midst of pain and suffering. It is an invitation to a dialogue that ends on a question, leaving hope only in the possibility of finally hearing a response from the God who is silent.

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<sup>33</sup> Berges (41) argues that “the wisdom-inspired reflection of the *geber* in Lam 3 leads into the right direction, i.e., ‘to hold and affirm conflicting and contradictory truths without eventually surrendering either.’” (Citing Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 120).