

A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis Approach to Lamentations 1:1-11 for Understanding a Biblical Hermeneutic of Grief.

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March 2026

Introduction to a Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Lamentations 1:1-11

First, the rationale for adopting a socio-rhetorical analysis (SRA) approach is to address the "why" question in our biblical hermeneutic of grief. The SRA method will enhance a proper interpretation of grief, essential to our foundation of faith, by giving focused attention to the text through its analytical techniques and interactive engagement with the original authors' world.¹ Therefore, to draw out a full biblical understanding of grief requires a proper reading of the passage selected to provide our theological meaning. To develop a proper sense of the poetry, typology, and frame of reference, so that a proper theological interpretation of grief will be framed by the speaker/s in Lamentations 1 (Lam 1).² In focusing on the socio-rhetorical analysis (SRA) of grief, Lamentations is well-suited to understanding the theme. In using the SRA in Lamentations, the process will examine the culture, society, context, ideology, and even the theology of that culture.³ In the final step, the results from the study will help to develop a pillar of pastoral theology for addressing grief.

Literary Style

Lamentations' language is Hebrew, and the literary style is poetry. The concepts surrounding Lamentations are communicated through three literary styles of lament: "individual lament, communal lament, and the funeral dirge."⁴ These three concepts are important to the

¹ Joshua D. Henson, Steven S. Crowther, and Russell L. Huizing, *Exegetical Analysis: A Practical Guide for Applying Biblical Research to the Social Sciences*. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2020) 71.

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What it Means to Read the Bible Theologically*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024). 112-128. The foundation of the sentence comes from Part Two, mainly Chapter Four.

³ Joshua D. Henson, *Exegetical Analysis*, 73.

⁴ Faithlife, *Logos Bible Software*, version 7.0 (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

author's intent and interpretation of the passage for communicating truth today. A brief analysis of who wrote it, the purpose of the writing, and the time period provides the essential backdrop for the theme of grief. Diligence must be exercised to avoid getting sidetracked; we will rely on secondary sources for our initial data. There is debate over the authorship of Lamentations; the majority say Jeremiah is the likely author.⁵ However, some scholars identify several authors based on the book's different poetic styles.⁶ Speculation in these matters is the result of historical criticism, which rightly shows that the poet does not sign his name to the poems. Therefore, the historical-critical method requires looking at external and internal evidence.

Authorial Evidence

External evidence supports Jeremiah's authorship of Lamentations: the Septuagint introduces the book by describing Jeremiah weeping over a desolate city after the exile, and the attribution is echoed in the Talmud, the Targum of Jonathan, and early Christian writers such as Origen and Jerome; Scripture also records Jeremiah's lament over Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35:25, demonstrating his practice of lament.⁷ Internal evidence further strengthens the claim, as Lamentations reflects eyewitness knowledge of Jerusalem's fall consistent with the warnings in Jeremiah and displays notable poetic similarities, and while some argue stylistic differences point to another author,⁸ variations in form may instead reflect the depth and intensity of Jeremiah's

⁵ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk through the Bible: A Unique Reference tool to help you easily understand each book of the Bible, its historical context, and place in Scripture*. (Nashville: TN, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983) 207-211.

⁶ F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1962) 5.

⁷ Bruce Wilkinson, *Talk Through the Bible*, 207.

⁸ Bruce Wilkinson, *Talk Through the Bible*, 207-211

grief, supporting the conclusion that the weeping prophet may have authored Lamentations in response to the fulfillment of his own prophetic warnings.

Cultural Background

The cultural and social practices of Israel and the surrounding nations' use of laments provides empirical evidence that an oral poetic form differs from form criticism. One such example is found in Dr. Nancy Lee's dissertation, which examines the literary, theological, and cultural dimensions of lament as a poetic response to the destruction of Jerusalem. Her dissertation integrates an oral poetic analysis and a socio-rhetorical interpretation. Lamentations 1 of her study proposes that multiple poetic voices, a prophetic figure, and a personified female voice engage in a dialogical lament over communal devastation.⁹ The voices in Lamentations 1 move from a mournful song to prayer, transforming grief into a theological protest and an oral appeal to God. The ancient Near Eastern practice is seen in cross-cultural traditions in which cities are personified and mourned through ritualized poetry and song at their destruction.¹⁰ Dr Lee's dissertation demonstrates that laments across cultures share common features, including the proclamation of loss, accusation, communal mourning, and a search for meaning after

⁹ Nancy C. Lee. 2000. "The singers of Lamentations" Order No. 9978441, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/regent.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/singers-lamentations-cities-under-siege-ur/docview/304675872/se-2>. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. 10.

¹⁰ R.K. Harrison. *Introduction to the Old Testament: Including a Comprehensive Review of Old Testament Studies and a Special Supplement on the Apocrypha*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc. 2004) 1065.

catastrophe.¹¹ Therefore, her work helps communicate an understanding of the degrees of grief found in Lamentations.

Dr. Lee's analysis shapes how lament poetry informs communal identity by giving voice to suffering and preserving memory amid destruction. Ultimately, Lamentations 1 serves as a theological and cultural model of communal grief that bridges ancient Israelite mourning traditions with lament practices across history. Mourning is crucial to our suggestion that grief is a theological act of communication, for it calls out to the transcendent God through the immanence of the pain inflicted by our sinful acts against His design, which connects to the doctrine of sin.¹² Lamentations then serves as a communal lament of humanity's transgression, as the poet calls out to the God of creation to hear humanity's cry for healing, arising from separation from God's immanence in the land. A literal, transfiguring-realism reading of Lamentations communicates the passage's theological and biblical hermeneutic.¹³

¹¹ Nancy C. Lee. 2000. "The singers of Lamentations" Order No. 9978441, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/regent.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/singers-lamentations-cities-under-siege-ur/docview/304675872/se-2>. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. 6, 10. The listing of different aspects of laments in relation to grief and the identification of a cross-cultural communal practice of laments are crucial for future scholarly research.

¹² F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Interpretation*. 36-37. Lamentations, like the Gospels, depict grieving, a grieving Jesus, witnesses to grief, and the work of grief as integral parts of biblical faith and piety. Grief is a practical aspect of human emotion within creation. It should not be medicated away, but allowed to run its course as a means of healing. We must make room and space for grief so that the transcendence of God can be revealed. Lamentations communicates the essential practice for the well-being of our faith and our communities.

¹³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What it Means to Read the Bible Theologically*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024) 168-170. Taking Kevin Vanhoozer's format from his book to apply to the reading of Lamentations 1:1-11.

Social Rhetorical Analysis Process for Interpretation

The poetry of the book of Lamentations is filled with sensory aesthetic patterns. These patterns use emotion-fused thought, self-expressive speech, or purposeful action language.¹⁴ Lamentations' sensory aesthetic reveals grief not as a process described through stages as psychology depicts it, but as a human internal response to loss, separation, and/or conflict. An example of sensory aesthetics is found in Lam. 1:1: "How lonely sits the city, that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave."¹⁵ The first and eleventh words set the tone of the lament by exclaiming "how," meaning "alas," the fear that something bad would happen.^{16, 17} The second word in Lam. 1, "lonely", has the Hebrew root בָּדַד (badad), which means "isolation" and "separation".¹⁸ A point of clarification concerning the addition of punctuation in the second and third centuries: one is not reading with excitement, joy, or jubilation like most punctuation using an exclamation point would require. But rather, these words are to be read with a feeling of fear and separation, crying out because of the word בָּדַד (badad). The typology of the word lonely in Lamentations connects the authorial frame of sense,

¹⁴ Joshua D. Henson, *Exegetical Analysis*, 94.

¹⁵ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Lamentations 1.

¹⁶ Faithlife, *Logos Bible Software*, version 7.0 (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

¹⁷ F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Interpretation*. 54. The commentator of the commentary series connects the opening word 'how' in Lamentations to Isaiah 1:21, Jeremiah 48:17. Isa 1:21: How a faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Jer 48:17: Grieve for him, all you who are around him, and all who know his name; say, 'How the mighty scepter is broken, the glorious staff. These verses connect with the opening statements in Lamentations and convey a tone of foreboding malevolence.

¹⁸ Faithlife, *Logos Bible Software*, version 7.0 (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

communicating a hermeneutical understanding that the fear of grief is inevitable, as everyone will experience some form of it.¹⁹

As the speaker conveys ‘how lonely the city is,’ he/she likens it to a widow. A picture of a grieving widow sitting all alone in pain over being separated from the love of their life. The imagery seeks to capture the emotion of grief. The author builds our understanding of the tragedy by giving the widow the status of a princess who has fallen from their royal position and is forced into labor to sustain their own life. Again, separation and fear of great loss of status (wealth, security, and favor) describe what grief looks like. The author paints a very grim picture of separation and grief, allowing onlookers to survey the destruction of a nation, a people, or an individual who has fallen on hard times.²⁰

In verse two, the plot thickens as the widow is described by her ‘bitter weeping in the night, with tears flowing down her cheeks, and none of her lovers comforted her.’ Bitterness describes the taste of the emotion that can surround an experience with grief. The speech is self-expressive speech.²¹ Lemons are bitter; sometimes coffee can be bitter. The word "bitter" conveys what grief feels like. It is not pleasant. Having no one to comfort her, bitterness is even nastier as it seems to linger. The event happening at night conveys a sense of darkness and an untimely experience.²² As friends, they turned against her and dealt treacherously with her; a

¹⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*. 116. Kevin Vanhoozer is not saying this about Lamentations, but the speaker and author of Lamentations is saying this based on the context of the word בָּדָד (badad).

²⁰ F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Interpretation*. 51.

²¹ Joshua D. Henson, *Exegetical Analysis*, 94. The self-expressive speech zone is connected to any aspect of communication, including speaking and hearing. The author is now connecting physical taste with grief, describing it as bitter.

²² F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Interpretation*. 53.

current of betrayal is communicated by words that describe broken trust. Betrayal is what causes bitter emotions within the soul, communities, groups, and individuals; further, the display of bitterness for all to see and experience is the purposeful act of the one in grief. The response is purposeful because her friends are now her enemies and treat her harshly.²³

In verse three, Judah's fate is told to us: it has gone into exile and can find no rest, as it is placed in servitude/slavery. The question of why God allows bad things to happen is often raised in situations like the one being described. The contextualization of the SRA process helps us understand how to exegete the significance of grief for today.²⁴ The purposeful meaning of "why" is an undercurrent among those being impacted by others' sinful living. Therefore, understanding the undercurrent helps guide a proper pastoral response in connection with the Doctrine of God's Providence. But the answer to the main undercurrent is conveyed in verses 5 and 10 for Israel's situation. First, the Lord has allowed it because of their transgressions. Their transgressions communicate the understanding that sometimes bad things happen to good people because of others' sinful living, so the children of the city have all gone away. The evidence of the fallout is in churches within the evangelical West in arguments over what is and is not sinful living. But, within the community of faith, some ministers can be heard crying out, "Where have

²³ Joshua D. Henson, *Exegetical Analysis*, 94. The sensory aesthetic is a *purposeful act* and is seen in moral injury and betrayal-type incidents, resulting in bitter grief or even a desire to lash out at the one responsible. Such incidents would be: DUI, death by illegal immigrant, careless murder, mistake costing someone their life, their financial livelihood, or their status in the community. We are seeing a lot of sinfulness in the church and our world today, and the backlash is creating a cycle of bitter rage.

²⁴ Joshua D. Henson, *Exegetical Analysis*, 69. Qualitative inquiry and the hermeneutical process have two parts—first, original intent; second, contextual significance for today with the text. This was footnoted by the author from Osborne 2006. Care must be taken not to allow proof-texting when conducting exegesis of a passage or to make it say something the author did not say.

all our children gone?" The answer is what grieves us. The children of the faith are leaving the church because some ministers within the church allowed certain sinful practices to be considered acceptable that God forbade to enter his holy sanctuary, as communicated in Lam. 1:10. Now, just as in verse 4, the priest groans because of the sinfulness against God's design; the children of Israel were led astray, depicted in verse 10. Therefore, the church today can resonate with Lamentations 1, as it reflects on what is destroying the community of faith within the evangelical church of the West. Sinfulness is being allowed to be celebrated in God's holy sanctuary. For those claiming to be of faith while defiling God's holy temple within the soul of humanity destroys the temple of God within their soul, and all involved can be seen as the terrible fall of each individual soul today.

The crux of our theme of grief's foundation lies in verses 4 and 5, as they speak of all the roads to Zion mourning. The explanation of why there is mourning is described in the rest of the verse with the use of the word "for."²⁵ But the explanation we are given is a particularization construction, meaning things move from generalization to more particularization concerning details: none came to the festivals, gates desolate, priest gone, virgins afflicted, bitter suffering. The description conveys a city that was destroyed, and nothing remains that resembles a place of promise.²⁶ In verse 5, the enemies are now in charge and prosper because the Lord has afflicted her, Israel, an explanation for the multitude of her transgressions, resulting in the children being taken captive as a result of sinful living. Grief creates a profound sense of lost hope, often like a broken promise, reflecting the painful consequences of humanity's fall. Yet the Lord permits the

²⁵ Joshua D. Henson, *Exegetical Analysis*, 42.

²⁶ F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Interpretation*. 53.

affliction of grief to remind us of the goodness and treasure found in a right relationship with Him, as a place of rest that can sustain us through seasons of sorrow.

The first five verses build to a point, and then you can see a similar process mirroring the structure. An example in verse 6: from the daughter of Zion, all her majesty has departed; royalty has gone, and the emptiness of leadership fled, ties back to the lonely, empty city in verse one. The princes have become like deer that find no pasture. A metaphor depicting the children of royalty as not having any place to find rest, no strength, and being chased by their pursuer. It further ties to the second part of verse one and the children in verse 5. More information is being communicated by the one person observing the grief-stricken community, which clearly communicates the need for lamenting sin.

When we grieve, we long to remember the times of goodness prior to grief. In verse 6, the one lamenting refers to a time when things were better for the children of Israel. A time before they received the promised land. A time when they had to rely on God to supply their sustenance and teach them the importance of reliance upon Him for all their needs. Grief calls us back to a time when we experienced the best of days with a community, an individual, love, freedom, happiness, hope, and joy. When grief strikes us, it reminds us of the goodness that came before the pain. God led the children of Israel for forty years before He gave them the promised land. The poet is pointing out that times were better when they followed God's plan rather than Israel's desires. Verse seven mirrors verse three, depicting Judah's exile and being placed in servitude to others. Jerusalem remembers when they fell into the hands of their foes, and none came to help her, but now these so-called friends mock her.

The depth of understanding Lamentations requires recognizing that the one lamenting is communicating just how badly the community of Israel went against God's plans. Verses 8 and 9

communicate pornographic detail as a result of the sinful desires of Israel. These verses depict the horrors of war. Israel sinned in verse 8, described as נָחַץ, grievously, which is the same root as in verse 1 Lonely sits the city.²⁷ Then connects and speaks to the fallout of sinfulness upon the community. It is important to understand that when sin is allowed, it causes decay to the point that the community of faith then looks no different from the world. By looking like the world, in verse 9, the image that is communicated is that Israel has become a whore as her uncleanness was in her skirts, and she has been pillaged of her godliness. Jerusalem's sin in verse 8 communicates the results of sin as grief. Grief is what caused a fall from God's presence upon Israel. The communicating by the one lamenting makes it personal in that now, because of Israel's fall, they too will experience the ramifications from Israel's actions. For the author says, "O Lord, behold my afflictions, for the enemy has triumphed!" The statement is not a joyous statement, but one that cries out for God's help in facing the painful consequences of sinful rebellion. Grief then is not just for those who face the loss of a physical relationship but for those who are experiencing a separation from the transcendence and immanence of God because of sinful acts. The author is now crying out in need of God and is grieved because of the separation caused by Israel's sin.

In these last two verses, the author communicates that because Israel allowed sinfulness to enter into the holy places where God instructed the children of Israel to keep pure. God will not allow unholy things to be before His presence; the result is the destruction of the promised land as the children of God are no more, and the temple where God resided no longer stands. Verse 11 says, "All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food

²⁷ Faithlife, *Logos Bible Software*, version 7.0 TWOT (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

to revive their strength. "Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised." The author spoke in verse 7 about their wanderings and God sustaining them during that period of Israel's life. Now, Israel is trading their treasures for earthly food. Israel's history began with slavery, and having been freed from slavery, they received bread from heaven by God, who created all things, but now they trade their treasure for earthly bread. The author concludes by stating Look, Lord, and see, for I am despised," which communicates grief. The author feels he is a failure because of the outcome and is grieved because of Israel's choices.

When we look at these eleven verses, we are confronted with the death of a community of people that were once favored and referred to as God's chosen people. The grief is in the death of the relationship between God and His chosen people. One crucial question is why grief is important to the discussion of sinfulness within the community of faith. Grief is not subject only to the sinful. Grief will impact all humanity because of sin. However, how we seek to preserve ourselves in these circumstances of life is crucial to communicating that the temple of God today is not a building but found in a believer's soul. Grief is a normative foundation for experiencing the goodness of God, helping us process the painful consequences of human sin in the world. What can be taken from the book of Lamentations moving forward to address grief is that sin is what birthed grief. God grieved when Adam and Eve sinned. He grieves when sin separates us from His Holy presence. But God never removes the individual's ability to respond to His love, which is the treasure that changes grief. Grief will always be a part of humanity's life, but how we navigate it is through God breaking through to us in our fallenness, changing death into life, darkness into light, sorrow into joy, and uncleanness into holiness. For then and only then do we experience the goodness of hope over grief.

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Appendix 1: A Social Rhetorical Survey for Understanding Grief

Demographics

Circle Gender: male/female. Current Age _____

How long have you suffered with grief? _____ years, _____ months.

Circle your answer about your grief. My grief comes from the death of a spouse, child, or close friend, or my grief is because of a betrayal in a long friendship, work situation, or spiritual community

Check the box that best aligns with your level of grief.

1. Weight of the Burden (*Quantitative*)

Scripture often speaks of sorrow as a burden carried by the heart (cf. Psalm 38:4).

On a scale of 1 to 5, how heavy does your grief feel now?

- 1 ☐ Very light
2 ☐ Light
3 ☐ Moderate
4 ☐ Heavy
5 ☐ Crushing

2. Practice of Lament (*Quantitative* + *Qualitative*)

The Bible contains many laments that give voice to pain before God (cf. Psalm 13).

How often do you find yourself expressing your grief (*through prayer, words, tears, silence, or reflection*)?

- 1 ☐ Never
2 ☐ Rarely
3 ☐ Sometimes
4 ☐ Often
5 ☐ Continually

In a few sentences, explain the ways you most often express your grief.

[illegible]

If you need more space, please use the back of the survey

3. Impact on Daily Faithfulness (*Quantitative*)

Scripture acknowledges that grief can affect one's strength and daily walk (cf. Lamentations 1:1 - 11; 3:17).

To what extent has grief affected your ability to carry out daily responsibilities and relationships?

- 1 ☐ Not at all
- 2 ☐ Slightly
- 3 ☐ Moderately
- 4 ☐ Greatly
- 5 ☐ Completely

4. Presence of Community (*Quantitative + Qualitative*)

The Bible emphasizes bearing one another's burdens (cf. Galatians 6:2).

How supported do you feel by others (family, friends, faith community) in your grief?

- 1 ☐ Deeply supported
- 2 ☐ Well supported
- 3 ☐ Moderately supported
- 4 ☐ Slightly supported
- 5 ☐ Not supported

In a few sentences, explain what has been most present or most absent from the support you have received during your grief.

5. Hope and Meaning (*Qualitative*)

Scripture often holds sorrows and hopes together (cf. Romans 8:18).

In a few sentences, share how grief has shaped your understanding of hope, faith, and your interpretation or meaning of the grief process.
