

Human Suffering and Divine Abuse of Power in Lamentations: Reflections on Forgiveness in the Context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Process

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Abstract: The book of Lamentations depicts the historical event of the destruction of Jerusalem in emotive and graphic terms. Both the woman metaphor and the first-person account of a man of sorrows are charged with pathos. God, meanwhile, the perpetrator of violence, emerges as brutal and unforgiving. Here this disturbing contrast is examined from the background of South Africa's truth and reconciliation process. The essay interrogates the nature of forgiveness from a theological and contextual perspective, examines whether forgiveness ought to be conditional and if the God of Lamentations is eligible for amnesty.

"LAMENTATIONS" MITIGATES THE EXCLAMATORY FORCE of *eykah*, the Hebrew title and opening. This outcry, which means "how can it be?" or "how terrible!" expresses force, indignation, anguish and outrage. I have heard "Amandla!" articulated in ways not entirely dissimilar. The God of this book is sinister and brutal, executing his punishment upon Jerusalem with violent abandon. The viciousness of this text has been highlighted by a number of modern commentators.¹ God is not forgiving, not merciful and not repentant: can and should he be forgiven? Questions of who can forgive whom and under what conditions (if any) have been raised by South Africa's truth and reconciliation process. In this essay I explore the parameters of forgiveness, by expounding the connections I make between victims and perpetrators of violence in Lamentations on the one hand and in post-apartheid South Africa on the other.

1. Uppermost in my mind are F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology in the Book of Lamentations", *JSOT* 74 (1997), 29-60; Deryn Guest, "Hiding Behind the Naked Women in Lamentations: A Recriminative Response", *Biblical Interpretation* 7 (1999), 413-48 and Hugh S. Pypers, "Reading Lamentations", *JSOT* 95 (2001), 55-69.

Brutality and the abuse of power have acquired for me, living these past three years in southern Africa, a much more forceful immediacy. I am referring here particularly to a new understanding of and emotional shock towards the atrocities committed during the apartheid regime and in its wake. I find myself absorbed in and haunted by the accounts of sufferers and perpetrators presented before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). True, from the sanctuary of my homeland New Zealand I had read Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Father Huddleston's *Nought For Your Comfort*, Donald Woods' *Biko* and Winnie Mandela's *Part Of My Soul*. My introduction to this literature while I was still a child is due above all to my mother, Jan Stiebert, who instilled in me through her example that justice must be both well-informed and actively defended.

The 1981 Springbok Tour and subsequent division of New Zealanders into "for" and "against" constituted a further profound politicising experience for me. We protested against the contravention of the Gleneagles Agreement and the apartheid regime; and we adhered to the sanctions. In later years I joined a picket outside South Africa House on London's Trafalgar Square, where we proposed renaming Nelson's Column the Nelson Mandela Column. I celebrated when Mandela was released and again when the first democratic elections were held; I admired the aims of the TRC and tried to keep informed about its progress. In all this I was one of many well-meaning, halfway-informed leftists.

Since then, living in Botswana and visiting South Africa frequently, listening now to first-hand accounts of Botswana and South Africans who lived through the apartheid years, I am changed. The words of Father Michael Lapsley resonate for me. Lapsley is a New Zealand-born priest who came to South Africa in 1986. He was expelled three years later and played a pastoral role for African National Congress (ANC) members in exile. In 1990 he lost his hands and an eye in a letter bomb, sent to him in Zimbabwe. Today he is co-ordinator of the chaplaincy at the Cape Town-based Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture.

I was born in New Zealand and came to South Africa as an adult. When I reflect back on my arrival here I think that was when I stopped being a human being and became ... white.... Whiteness became like leprosy, something that would not wash off. I knew a lot about apartheid beforehand but I had never really understood what it would mean to be structurally an oppressor.²

2. Cited in Alex Boraine, Janet Levy and Ronel Scheffer (eds.), *Dealing with the Past: Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*. 2nd edn. (Cape Town: Institute for Democracy in South Africa, 1997) 26.

Prior to moving to Africa I, too, never thought of myself as white, never felt tainted by my whiteness. It was peculiar to have assumptions made about me purely on the basis of my skin-colour. White South Africans have sometimes spontaneously extended hospitality and solidarity – because I am white. Some black Botswana and South Africans have made (very far off the mark) assumptions about my financial status or attitudes on racial issues – because I am white. My own assumption that black South Africans would be hostile on account of my whiteness proved absolutely wrong. I have been made warmly welcome, such that I am a bit ashamed but above all filled with gratitude. Recent experiences have left their mark also on my work as interpreter of the Hebrew Bible. Some of the imagery of Lamentations now triggers for me distinctly African mind-pictures: I have seen lions (3:10), jackals (4:3; 5:18), ostriches (4:3) and eagles (4:19) with my own eyes and I know just how the speakers of 5:10a (“our skin is becoming hot as an oven”) are feeling! New and insistent voices have joined my undertaking of analysing this disturbing book. The following study is testimony to this.³

THE PERPETRATOR: YHWH

Jerusalem’s suffering is depicted vividly and distressingly in the book of Lamentations: partly through the female personification of a raped, humiliated and desolate woman, whose direct speech and pleas I, as reader, participate in; partly in the form of a first-person eye-witness account by an anonymous weeping man. The perpetrator of the violence is YHWH: no questions about it. As YHWH is in complete control, with no one superseding him, it is also he who is implored to relent and to visit his punishment upon the human enemies of Jerusalem. YHWH is, thus, *both* violent oppressor *and* invoked as possible saviour.

Lamentations opens with an account of Jerusalem’s desolation and punishment. Throughout the book, images of suffering are considerably more prominent than references to Jerusalem’s wrongdoing. Furthermore, Jerusalem’s sin is not described with any precision, whereas her ordeals receive detailed attention. As F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp points out, this “effectively plays down the sin theme, which does not seize the

3. I would like to acknowledge my admiration for the work of Gerald O. West and others at the Institute for the Study of the Bible in Pietermaritzburg. Gerald has permitted me to read his exposition of Contextual Criticism, in which he explains how biblical texts can be read, interpreted, detoxified or redeemed in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. I am impressed to see how a community-based reading of 2 Samuel 13:1-22 (the story of the rape of Tamar) was able to facilitate healing. Contextual Criticism has some affinity with Liberation Theology and appeals to me first, because it is political; secondly, because it foregrounds the reality that environment affects the reading process and thirdly, because it is aimed at exerting a positive social influence.

reader with anything like the intensity of the images of suffering”⁴ While there is frequent mention of enemies from the outset (1:2, 5, 7, 9-10, 16, 21), it is clear that YHWH is the primary agent of the city’s punishment. Hence, we read at 1:5, “for YHWH has brought her grief” (also 1:12, 17, 21).

The depiction of YHWH is distinctly sinister – he is very much the torturer-God. Hence, YHWH sends fire into the bones of his (feminine) victim, spreads a net for her feet⁵ and persecutes her, though she is parched and weak (1:13). Bringing to mind the image of a slave-master, we read that he makes a yoke and plants it on his victim’s neck before handing her over, sapped of strength, to others (1:14). Most affecting of all, for me, is 1:15c – “in a winepress the Lord tramples upon the virgin daughter of Judah” – because here the contrast between the weakness and vulnerability of Jerusalem and the power and gratuitous brutality of her abuser is so stark. There is no evidence to substantiate the claim of 1:18: “YHWH is righteous.” We see him only as brute: there is no indication of his capacity for pity (see also 2:2, 17, 21; 3:43), forgiveness, or mercy;⁶ there is no indication of his even hearing, let alone listening to Jerusalem’s pleas (3:8, 44). He is deaf even to her particularly heart-wrenching appeal at 2:20:

Look, O Lord and behold – whom else have you treated thus?
Should women eat their offspring, children they have reared?
Should priest and prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?

The answer to the last two horrific questions is, clearly, “NO!” Yet the perpetrator being implored relentlessly continues with his violence.

YHWH’s aggression is asserted insistently. He is the subject of such verbs as “hurl” (2:1), “tear down” (2:2, 17), “hew” (2:3), “kill” (2:4, 21; 3:43), “treat violently” (2:6), “bring ruin” (2:6, 8), “slaughter” (2:21), “destroy” (3:4), “tear in pieces” (3:11) and “crush” (3:16). He is compared to a warrior, stringing his bow (2:4; 3:12-13), to a consuming fire (2:3), an enemy (2:4, 5), a foe (2:4), a preying bear and lion (3:10). He has considerable power to wield (3:37; 5:19) and he wields it liberally,

4. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Tragedy, Tradition and Theology”, 37.

5. The setting of the trap, like the barring of the man-of-sorrow’s way and the making his path crooked in 3:9, all imply that YHWH is actively contributing to “setting up” Jerusalem for her downfall. This idea of a contriving God is not singular: after all, at Ezekiel 20:25 YHWH admits, “I also gave them statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by.”

6. Forgiveness and mercy are related but not identical concepts. Forgiveness refers to pardoning an offence or offender(s), to giving up resentment or anger and to no longer claiming requital. Where mercy is concerned, there exists an imbalanced relationship: mercy can only be extended by a powerful person/being to a powerless one. Compassion and forbearance are associated with mercy. In Lamentations, God is clearly powerful but he is not compassionate (*pace* 3:22, 32, see below) – hence, he is not extending mercy. He also does not relinquish his anger, which rages on until the very last verse (5:22), hence he is not forgiving either (also 3:42b).

attacking from heaven (2:1), giving full vent to his fury (4:11), swallowing whole communities (2:2, 5) and humiliating an entire kingdom (2:2). In all this he is doing exactly as he pleases, fulfilling the plan he himself determined (2:17).

Against this overwhelming catalogue of cruelty, the appeals to YHWH's "kindness" and "compassion" (3:22, 32), "faithfulness" (3:23) and "salvation" (3:26) are hard to take seriously. Given the wider context, 3:19-41 reads like macabre sarcasm.⁷ The question of 3:34-36 – ostensibly referring to the human enemy afflicting Jerusalem – appears like an indictment against YHWH. Here the poet asks, "To crush underfoot all prisoners of the land; to pervert a man's rights before the Most High; to corrupt a man's legal rights: would not the Lord see this?" The majority of Lamentations raises the question if YHWH indeed sees, or cares. He seems to be all too focused on his berserker behaviour to examine the injustices of his actions. While he remembers his destructive plan and sets out to fulfil it (2:17), he does not remember "his footstool" (2:1) and he forgets his people (5:20).

THE SUFFERER: WOMAN JERUSALEM (LAMENTATIONS 1 AND 2)

The feminising of Jerusalem in the first two chapters of Lamentations accentuates my pity. The suffering of the citizens at large is not ignored (1:4-6, 11, 15-16, 18-19; 2:9-12, 21) but Woman Jerusalem personalises the brutality inflicted by YHWH on the masses. I can empathise with her – especially when I hear the words I take to be her own (1:9, 11-16, 18-22; 2:11, 20-22). As she is a woman – that is, someone more likely to be socially marginalised and disadvantaged – she emerges as particularly vulnerable and needy of protection. The name "Daughter of Zion"⁸ conjures up the mental picture of a young woman, possibly an

7. I agree with Dobbs-Allsopp that the ethical vision of this passage does not, ultimately, leave one with any sense of hope. Dobbs-Allsopp argues that Lamentations follows the pattern of classical tragedy. Characteristically, he explains, the disaster befalling the tragic protagonist (in this case personified Jerusalem) results from a transgression – but with the upshot that the consequences are out of proportion to the catalyst-transgression. Further, the tragic protagonist's suffering must be laid at the feet of divine power(s). While, typically, this power is not questioned, the divine sense of justice and goodness certainly are. Dobbs-Allsopp, in "Tragedy, Tradition and Theology", 49-50, explains 3:19-39 as playing a role similar to that of the chorus in Greek tragedy or the speeches of Job's friends: "The ethical vision of Lam 3.19-39 provides a choric frame of reference, the foil against which one is to read the rest of the book. The sentiments expressed are traditional and presumably would have been well known to the poet's audience and expected to bolster confidence and hope. But as deployed they must ultimately be read ironically."

8. The name "Daughter of Zion" appears frequently throughout the first two chapters (1:6; 2:1, 4, 8, 10, 18). Other variants are "Virgin Daughter of Judah" (1:15) and "Daughter of Judah" (2:2, 5), "Daughter of Jerusalem" (2:13, 15) and "Virgin Daughter of Zion" (2:13). She is thus ever-present in my mind's eye as a young woman – someone I can identify with.

unmarried woman, entitled to the protection of her father. This father, furthermore, could conceivably be YHWH himself. Her own father's lack of pity exacerbates her desolation (she has already been deserted by her lovers and betrayed by her friends, 1:2, 19) – and the indignation I feel towards YHWH.⁹

Woman Jerusalem's downfall is complete. She was once unusually powerful and privileged: she ruled over provinces ("princess/noble woman of the provinces", 1:1), she was resplendent and prosperous ("her splendour", 1:6; "her treasures", 1:7), beautiful and exalted in all the land (2:15). From this height she has fallen to the depths of degradation: she is likened to a widow and a serf (1:1); she suffers harsh physical labour and exile (1:3, 7, 18), enemy invasion (1:15), starvation (1:11, 19) and mocking (1:6, 21; 2:15-17).

Most pathetic of all is the sexualised image of Woman Jerusalem's public degradation. Following a reference to her great sin (1:8), she is described as utterly defiled. The word here is *niddah* (a variant of which reappears at 1:17), a term designating both considerable impurity and abhorrence. It happens to be associated particularly with menstruation and is used at Ezekiel 7:19, 8:6 and 22:10, for instance, to conjure up a sense of extreme revulsion.¹⁰ The bleeding woman is called "unclean" (1:9); her genitals are exposed – the NIV's translation of *ervatah* as "her nakedness" is far too tame – and the strong implication is that she has been raped. The description of pagan nations entering her sanctuary (1:10) strikes me as a thinly veiled reference to the rape by foreign invaders.¹¹ Sexual violence against women is stated explicitly in 5:11 – again, however, the NIV's translation of the verb *anah* as "ravish" dilutes the force of the Hebrew. This verb refers to physical force, sexual

9. The designations "daughter" and "virgin" could point to a young woman who is still under the protection of her father (rather than husband). This might be aimed at arousing protectiveness – especially in a male audience. Jerusalem, however, is *also* a mother (1:5; 2:19). If we read the metaphor too literally this would mean, first of all, that she is clearly not a *virgo intacta*; and also, if she is *both* unmarried *and* mother that she would in a traditional and patriarchal honour/shame culture be an object of disgrace, rather than sympathy, or pathos. Support for her licentiousness (which would pitch the stakes against her yet further) could also be found in the reference to her lovers (1:2 – the noun with the possessive suffix is in the plural). I have discussed honour/shame cultures and the role of woman Jerusalem in Lamentations and the prophetic corpus more fully elsewhere (Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible: The Prophetic Contribution* [JSOT Suppl. 346; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002] 138-51).

10. Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame*, 106.

11. F. R. Magdalene in "Ancient Near Eastern Treaty-Curses and the Ultimate Texts of Terror: A Study of the Language of Divine Sexual Abuse in the Prophetic Corpus" (see Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* [The Feminist Companion to the Bible 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995] 326-52) has drawn attention to similarly veiled rape language in Isaiah 3:17 and 26: "'Opening', *pat*, typically translated 'secret parts', is a word play on the word for 'gate' *patach*, or the opening of a city. Thus the metaphor operates to equate both the city with the person of the female and the gate of the city with the vaginal opening of the female body. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is the military metaphor of the ravaged city as ravished female seen more clearly." (p. 333).

crime as well as to debasement and humiliation (Genesis 34:2; Deuteronomy 21:14; 22:24, 29; Judges 19:24; 2 Samuel 13:12-13). A translation of “rape” would, in my view be preferable, as it lacks the more passionate, even romantic, overtones of “ravish”. Unable to escape the gaze and mocking of her tormentors (1:7-8), Jerusalem groans, turns away, abandons any idea of a future (1:9)¹² and summons the little strength that remains to plead with YHWH.

My sympathy for Woman Jerusalem and, correspondingly, my indignation at the violation she endures, are heightened by her displays of emotion and remorse. She weeps bitterly (1:2, 16; 2:11); she groans (1:8, 21-22); she cries out to YHWH, imploring him to look upon her misfortune (1:9, 11); she stretches out her hands (1:17) and confesses her own wrongdoing, even exonerating her oppressor: “YHWH, he is righteous; but I rebelled against his word” (1:18a). Admissions of guilt also recur at 1:20 (“I have indeed been rebellious”) and 1:22, where she admits to acts of disobedience. Her description of her heart being overturned within her (1:20b) indicates internal commotion and conscience pangs.¹³ She even summons witnesses against herself: “listen well, all you people...” (1:18b), indicating public confession.

Woman Jerusalem’s utter helplessness and the complete humility of her supplication are vividly captured in 2:11: literally, “my liver is poured out on the ground”. This idiom requires a little explanation. The verb “to pour out” occasionally refers to an emotion of extreme helplessness, or self-abandonment. The forsaken speaker of Psalm 22 says that he has been “poured out like water” (22:15) and Job describes his desolation and misery as “my soul pours itself out upon me” (30:16). The liver, meanwhile, is regarded in Hebrew as the centre of emotion. Woman Jerusalem, therefore, appears to be in a state of almost unbearable emotional agony. Alongside her public confession of guilt and in spite of her extreme adversity, we see her continuing to care for her people. She suffers on account of her people and particularly her children, whose lives are poured out into their mothers’ bosom (2:11-12) – another heart-rending image. We know she cares for them because she tells us: “I dandled and I raised [them]” (2:22). The tragedy of her situation is intensified by the comment of an onlooker who describes her hurt as being “as great as the sea” (2:13) and who removes some of the responsibility for what has befallen her by alluding to the worthless and

12. The Hebrew expression “she could not call to mind what would be next for her” to me indicates complete mental exhaustion and despondency. Woman Jerusalem seems at this point to hold out no hope or prospect for a future.

13. In Hebrew the heart signifies not so much the centre of emotion but one’s intrinsic being and also one’s mind, including one’s reflective mind, or conscience. This emerges particularly clearly from the usage of “heart” in Genesis 20:5-6; Job 27:6 and 1 Chronicles 29:17.

deceitful prophets who did not advise her as they ought to have done (2:14).¹⁴

ANOTHER SUFFERER: THE NAMELESS POET (LAMENTATIONS 3)

Chapter 3 of Lamentations constitutes an acrostic poem, where the verses of each stanza begin with successive letters of the Hebrew *alphabet*. Reading the chapter in Hebrew, it is as if this rigid structure is the only thing holding the grieving poet together. Like Woman Jerusalem the speaker has endured extreme adversity. He introduces himself as a man who has seen affliction (3:1). The abuser is at first nameless: brutality is heightened by anonymity.¹⁵ He drives his victim away (3:2), breaks his bones (3:4), imposes hardship (3:5) and darkness (3:2, 6), confinement and fetters (3:7, 9), without admitting any pleas for help (3:8). The catalogue of horrors continues: the abuser pierces his victim's kidneys (3:13), breaks his teeth and tramples upon him (3:16).

Although it emerges that this vicious abuser is none other than YHWH (3:37-43), the poet is able to invoke his kindness and compassion (3:22, 32).¹⁶ Is he being macabre? Has he internalised his degradation to such an extent that he despises himself more than his abuser? Or is he capable of forgiveness such as would put YHWH to shame?¹⁷ In my view there are complex tensions at work here and God emerges as responsible, accountable and lacking in compassion, as utterly blameworthy. The poet does speak of YHWH's faithfulness (3:23), refers to him as good (3:25) and a bringer of salvation (3:26); he advocates sitting in silence and putting one's face in the dust on the ground (an action

14. Micah is notable for railing at irresponsible and false prophets (Mic 2:6-11; 3:5-7). Amos, meanwhile, announces that YHWH will do nothing without confiding in his servants, the prophets (Amos 3:7). If they, however, do not fulfil their duty of proclaiming the divine revelation, they are primarily responsible for any harm resulting in consequence. This, at any rate, appears to be the message of Ezekiel's watchman metaphor (Ezek 33:6-7).

15. In the book of Amos, too, withholding of the enemy's name adds to the terror. While there is much talk of terrifying and imminent destruction, as well as allusions to an enemy nation (Amos 6:14), the identity (most probably Assyria) is never supplied.

16. In Hebrew the words are *chesed* and *racham*. The former, usually translated "goodness", "kindness", "graciousness", or "loving kindness", is depicted in the Hebrew Bible as one of the worthiest qualities of either a human being or God. The latter, usually used of God, refers to compassion, or occasionally to brotherly or maternal feeling. The association with maternal feeling could be attributed to the similarity with the noun meaning "womb". (We have yet to encounter the chilling image of motherly compassion at 4:10.)

17. I am reminded of the *abutu* ritual observed by the anthropologist A. L. Epstein on the Goodenough Islands of Melanesia (see *The Experience of Shame in Melanesia: An Essay in the Anthropology of Affect* [Occasional Paper No. 40; Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1984] 46-47), whereby an opponent is shamed by presenting him with food of such abundance that he cannot make return. Analogously, magnanimously extending forgiveness to YHWH, the abuser, draws attention to *his* lack of magnanimity and forgiveness, thereby (this possibly being the original intention) eliciting YHWH's shame. (See also, Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame*, 96-98.)

signifying self-abasement)¹⁸ in an effort to procure hope (3:28-29); and also, to offer one's cheek for a beating¹⁹ and become sated with disgrace (3:30). His professed hope is that no one is abandoned forever (3:31) and that YHWH will show compassion and kindness (3:32): "because from his heart he does not afflict or cause sorrow for humankind" (3:33).²⁰ But how can we possibly believe this, in the light of YHWH's multiple atrocities? Furthermore, a few verses later we read that nothing happens *unless* YHWH has commanded it (3:37) and also, "do not evil²¹ and good come forth from the mouth of the Most High?" (3:38). A question follows: "Why should any person alive complain, any person on account of his sin?" It seems to me that given the amount of punishment received, the poet has *every* right to complain and protest. He does admit to his wrongdoing – "yes, we *have* rebelled and acted stubbornly..." (3:42a) – but he follows this up with what sounds to me like a veiled criticism of YHWH, who has not kept up his end of the bargain by responding accordingly: "but *you*²² have not been forgiving" (3:42b).

What ensues accentuates the criticism. The pitch is raised to accusation: "You have covered yourself in anger and you have pursued us; you have killed and not been compassionate. You have covered yourself in cloud, against prayer (getting through). Scum and refuse you have made us amid the nations" (3:43-45). Following these accusations, the repercussions of YHWH's actions are spelled out. Enemies have tormented him and his people (3:46, 52-53, 60-63), causing an outpouring of grief (3:48-49). While such reference to the enemy could be said to displace the blame from YHWH, it must not be forgotten that YHWH himself sent the enemy. Consequently,

18. Eating dust is the curse, punishment and humiliation inflicted upon the serpent (Gen 3:14). At Joshua 7:6 Joshua prostrates himself, with his face to the ground, while the elders sprinkle dust on their heads, also (as here in Lamentations) in an effort to implore YHWH. Having one's face on the ground and licking dust signifies mortification at Isaiah 49:23 (also Mic 7:17; Ps 72:9).

19. Striking another's cheek is usually an expression of scorn. Zedekiah slaps the prophet Micaiah's cheek because he despises his message (1 Kings 22:24) and Job's cheek is struck to inflict disgrace (Job 16:10). Famously, the servant of Isaiah 50:6 offers his cheeks without hiding from humiliations and scorn.

20. The first verb refers to very serious, often humbling afflictions. Note that the servant of Isaiah is also considered to have been thus afflicted by God (Isa 53:4). If allusions to the innocently abused servant of Isaiah are deliberate, God is being sharply (though implicitly) criticised.

21. My students are often discomforted by the idea that God generates evil. Again, in the Hebrew Bible, this occurrence is not singular. The evil spirit afflicting Saul is from God (1 Sam 16:15) and at Job 42:11, Job is comforted and consoled by friends and family on account of all the evil YHWH had brought upon him. The discomfort of my students is possibly reflected in the NIV's diluted translation. The word is translated "calamities" at Lamentations 3:38 and "trouble" at Job 42:11.

22. It is not usually necessary in Hebrew to state the pronoun, as the verbal form indicates person. In this verse, however, both the "we" and "you" appear, suggesting emphatic contrasting.

imprecations at one (human enemies) necessarily implicate the other (YHWH).²³ The torment of the “daughters of [his] city” receives special mention (3:51). Again, therefore, like Woman Jerusalem, the poet demonstrates concern and compassion for others where YHWH does not.

MORE SUFFERING: LAMENTATIONS 4 AND 5

Chapter 4 is a second acrostic poem. The focus is a lament on account of the devastation of Jerusalem. Once the city was glorious, her citizens splendid – now the lustre has gone (4:1-2, 5, 7-8). Again, there is some acknowledgment of Jerusalem’s wrongdoing: she is, thus, unfavourably compared with jackals and called “cruel” (4:3). The sin-theme is again, however, mitigated by a number of juxtapositions. First of all, the misery Jerusalem suffers supersedes her crime – it certainly receives more mention. Hence, we are told about dehydrated infants, starving children (4:4) and emaciated princes (4:7-9); those who died violently by the sword are said to be better off than those enduring the famine (4:9) and, most chilling of all, the women cooking their own children are called compassionate (4:10) – the very quality sought from YHWH. The disproportionate nature of the punishment is further highlighted by the claim that Jerusalem’s sentence is greater than that of Sodom, the sinner *par excellence*, whose destruction, presumably, loomed dramatically in the public imagination. Secondly, Jerusalem is not fully responsible: she was led by the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests (4:13). And thirdly, once again, YHWH’s pivotal part in inflicting suffering is only too clear. He is full of wrath and has poured out his anger; it was he who kindled the destructive fire (4:11), who scattered and who ceased protecting the people (4:16). In my view, any attempt to focus on Jerusalem’s wrongdoing is blurred by the harshness of YHWH’s viciousness, and by the magnitude of both her punishment and her suffering – which *are* not and, in my view, *cannot* be adequately justified. Solace is sought in imagining the punishment of the enemy – YHWH’s agents, rather than YHWH himself! – in this case Edom (4:21-22).

In the final chapter of Lamentations we see several earlier motifs once more. Again, Jerusalem admits her guilt: “we have sinned” (5:16); again, her responsibility is only partial: “Our fathers sinned, they are no more; it is *we* who bear the heavy burden of their iniquities” (5:7); again, her misery is overwhelming: she has been invaded (5:2), she is alone (5:3), impoverished (5:4), persecuted (5:5, 9) and famished (5:10). Moreover, the women of Jerusalem have been raped (5:11), the princes tortured (5:12), the young men enslaved (5:13). The book ends with

23. See Dobbs-Allsopp, “Tragedy, Tradition and Theology”, 38.

communal questions: has YHWH forgotten them? Why has he abandoned them so long? A plea for restoration is made (5:21) and the possibility of this is envisaged – unless, YHWH’s anger is limitless and he has utterly rejected them. Indeed, how, looking around them, could Jerusalem’s people think otherwise?

Lamentations in a Wider Context

The destruction of Jerusalem is the central event not only of Lamentations but also of several other Hebrew Bible compositions, notably the Major Prophets. In all three (as well as the earlier prophetic book of Hosea) YHWH sometimes emerges as capable of both compassion and extraordinary forgiveness. In Hosea God speaks tenderly to fallen Israel and offers her a new and generous covenant (2:14-23). In Isaiah he is compassionate (14:1) and comforts Jerusalem (40:1). As in Lamentations Jerusalem is occasionally depicted in Isaiah as a woman. Here YHWH restores her, blesses her with children, cleanses her from shame and, following the brief time of abandonment, consoles her (54:1-8). In Ezekiel YHWH pronounces his compassion (39:25), while in Jeremiah he appears to be moved by the image of Rachel weeping inconsolably for her children (31:15). Especially affecting are YHWH’s own words in 31:20, “is not Ephraim my dear son, my delightful child? Though I speak against him, I certainly remember him. Because of this my whole being is moved. I certainly have compassion for him.” In the Hebrew there are two emphatic verbal constructions stressing YHWH’s concern and compassion. The idiom translating “my whole being is moved” (NIV “my heart yearns”) is a graphic one referring literally to commotion of one’s insides, intestines or bowels. This expression is indicative of very strong emotion.

While these passages all point to a God who is considerably more benign than the brute of Lamentations, it cannot be ignored that this is not the complete picture. In the Prophets, too, YHWH has sinister features. I have expounded this elsewhere with particular reference to Ezekiel.²⁴ In Hosea we see him behaving in a threatening and abusive way towards a feminised victim (2:3, 6, 10-13) and in Isaiah his promise of compassion is followed by a swash-buckling and intimidating display of his power (40:10-26). In Jeremiah, moreover, YHWH insists that he will not listen to his people but go ahead with punishments of war, famine and plague (14:12). He promises calamity (14:16), no matter how much they weep and implore him (14:17-22). Even if Moses and Samuel were to petition his compassion, YHWH will not relent from an impending catalogue of atrocities (15:1, 6, 8). In the light of this,

24. Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame*, 133-51.

Lamentations, while it may be a particularly virulent example of the divine abuse of power, cannot be regarded as an isolated case in point.

THE TRC²⁵

The foundations for South Africa's TRC were laid in 1995, when newly-elected President Nelson Mandela signed the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No 34. The basis of its establishment was the principle that, "reconciliation depends on forgiveness and ...forgiveness can only take place if gross violations of human rights are fully disclosed".²⁶ Seventeen members, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu²⁷ and his deputy, Dr Alex Boraine, served on the Commission. Their task was substantial and the Commission sub-divided into three committees:

1. The Human Rights Violations Committee (HRVC), whose primary task was to establish as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross human rights violations committed in the period between 1 March 1960 and 10 May 1994.
2. The Amnesty Committee, whose brief was to consider the granting of amnesty to persons who made full disclosure of all the pertinent facts relating to acts associated with a political objective.²⁸
3. The Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee, which was to restore the human civil dignity of victims and recommend measures of reparation.

Ideals were high:

25. There exists an enormous literature on South Africa's TRC. An impressive list of references is contained in Muhammed Haron's "Truth-Telling Through Thick and Thin: South Africa's Experience in the Process of Reconciliation", forthcoming in *Journal of the Henry Martin Institute* 23/3 (2002). Excellent, too, is the documentary *A Long Night's Journey into Day*, directed by Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann. The documentary profiles four amnesty cases: the four men involved in the killing of American Fulbright scholar Amy Biehl; the police officers responsible for the murder of the "Cradock Four"; Robert McBride, a one-time member of the ANC's armed wing, who participated in the bombing of a Durban club, in which three died and two of the police officers involved in the infamous "Guguletu Seven" incident (see below).

26. Cited by Haron, "Truth-telling" (page numbers for Haron's article are not as yet available).

27. South Africans' perceptions of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are various. (I have heard Mandela called both a "terrorist" and a "saint".) Whereas Muhammed Haron ("Truth-telling") refers to them as "two notable individuals whose integrity is beyond question and who were true agents of reconciliation", Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, in "Dealing Lightly With the Wound of My People? The TRC Process in Theological Perspective", *Missionalia* 25/3 (1997), 324-43, warns that they "have moved to centre stage and they define and encapsulate hegemony", 336. This, in turn, he cautions, could lead to "their hard-earned moral stature...disempowering...the rest of the nation", 336. In his view it is necessary to break their spell.

28. The Commission received some 7000 applications for amnesty from members of all political parties. Surprisingly perhaps, only 20% of amnesty applicants were white (*A Long Night's Journey into Day*).

to return to victims their civil and human rights; to restore the moral order of the society; to seek the truth, record it, and make it known to the public; to create a culture of human rights and respect for the rule of law; and to prevent the shameful events of the past from happening again.²⁹

Some observers considered such aims unrealistic. Rajeev Bhargava, for example, proposed that a more proportionate aim would have been “to create a minimally decent society – no mean feat anyhow”.³⁰

Few would suggest that *any* of the high aims of the TRC have been fully attained. By no means all submissions to the HRVC were heard³¹ and granting of amnesty to perpetrators was widely regarded as controversial and “the most morally problematic practice of the TRC”.³² Further, while, indeed, some of the victims who testified before the HRVC reported feeling a sense of relief, others experienced psychological stress as old wounds were reopened, as well as hostility towards both the new government and the TRC.³³ Tutu himself, very much a strong and charismatic driving force behind and enthusiast for the TRC, cautioned that its achievement “is and cannot be the whole story” but rather a “road map to travel the past”.³⁴

Various criticisms have been levelled against the TRC. The aim of forgiveness has been criticised on the basis that some crimes cannot and should not be forgiven – especially if perpetrators are unwilling to be punished for their crimes, or to offer restitution to their victims. Related to this is the anxiety that “although forgiving does not logically entail forgetting, it makes forgetting much easier, and the crimes of apartheid should not be made easier to forget”.³⁵ Others have pointed out that the TRC’s (possibly unintentionally appropriated) Christian overtones in constructing processes for obtaining forgiveness are not acceptable to

29. Publisher’s Note, in Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998) p. vii.

30. See Rajeev Bhargava, “Restoring Decency to Barbaric Societies”, in Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (eds.), *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000) 45-67, 60.

31. More than 23,000 submissions were received by the HRVC. Of these, the testimony of just over 2000 victims of apartheid-era violence was heard. See Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, “The Moral Foundations of Truth Commissions”, in *Truth v. Justice*, 22-44.

32. Gutmann and Thompson, “The Moral Foundations”, 24. Maluleke, reflecting on life in South Africa after the TRC, points out that, “Apartheid or Third-Force related violence continues in the KwaZulu-Natal province and the thousands of victims who appeared before the TRC still await relief. In contrast, the fate of amnesty applicants was finalised and enshrined in law beforehand with the result that those who were granted amnesty did not have to wait, but received amnesty immediately.” (“Dealing Lightly”, 330).

33. Gutmann and Thompson, “The Moral Foundations”, 30.

34. Cited in Haron, “Truth-Telling”.

35. Gutmann and Thompson, “The Moral Foundations”, 31.

all.³⁶ Njabulo Ndebele argues that this may have “closed off many other angles of discussion”. He also makes the incisive point that,

If reconciliation was a matter of confession and forgiveness (and there were not many white people confessing and asking for forgiveness),³⁷ if things change while they remain the same, then it should not be surprising that there could be room for cynicism, disillusionment, and the feeling by many of having been fooled.³⁸

These feelings are echoed by Tinyiko Maluleke.³⁹ He draws attention to the TRC’s very existence being “part of the political settlement which catapulted the ANC into power”.⁴⁰ This, he explains, means that at its inception, “political power and impunity rather than national healing ... were at stake”, with the result that “the spotlight [was] on the foot soldiers rather than the persons or institutions which planned and legitimised gross violations of human rights letting most politicians off the hook!”⁴¹ Consequently, he expresses no surprise at the “massive undercurrent of scepticism about the TRC in the black community”.⁴²

As we have seen, Tutu and Boraine were certainly not naïve concerning the limitations and shortcomings of the TRC. What we find on the other hand, too, is that even its critics often have something positive or redeeming to say about the Commission. Maluleke, hence, concedes that,

There is no denying that the basic idea behind the...TRC...process is a noble one. After years of Apartheid and its dire consequences, South Africans do need national healing. This is especially true since black people have been dehumanised and oppressed for more than 300 years. South Africa is indeed a wounded nation. The wounds go beyond what can be seen with the naked eye and beyond what has been recorded or celebrated: Our nation needs healing. Victims and survivors who bore the brunt of the Apartheid system need healing. Perpetrators are, in their own way, victims of the Apartheid system and they, too, need healing.⁴³

36. See Bhargava, “Restoring Decency”, 61 and Haron, “Truth-Telling”.

37. Maluleke argues similarly that, “What we need now in South Africa is not simply more Christian theology; Apartheid *was* Christian theology” (“Dealing Lightly”, 338).

38. See Njabulo Ndebele, “Of Lions and Rabbits: Thoughts on Democracy and Reconciliation”, in Wilmot James and Linda van de Vijver, *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001) 143-56, 152.

39. I am honoured to have met Tinyiko Maluleke on a number of greatly enjoyed occasions. He is a person of tremendous energy and intellect, whose wide-ranging commitments and (much deserved) academic status and international acclaim have never derailed him from sharing his time and knowledge and extending his support. Thank you.

40. Maluleke, “Dealing Lightly”, 328.

41. Maluleke, “Dealing Lightly”, 328.

42. Maluleke, “Dealing Lightly”, 330.

43. Maluleke, “Dealing Lightly”, 325.

Another balanced and predominantly optimistic evaluation is that of Muhammed Haron:⁴⁴

Despite the TRC's shortcomings, there is no doubt that the TRC was a crucial cog within the South African social drama. It had to happen and it was implemented at the right moment in the social history of the democratic state of South Africa. Even though reconciliation could not be (fully) achieved, the TRC was able to deliver the partial and full "truths" of a part of the South African society; that in itself was an important, – and for the present generation – an unforgettable milestone....⁴⁵

On balance, I admire both the aims and the achievements of the TRC. Criticism of it is not, in my view, a negative activity, as it helps to draw attention to its task being far from complete. As long as there is criticism, there is engagement; while the TRC is discussed and debated and written about in the media, the reasons for its establishment will also (and even if only by proxy) stay alive in the public consciousness.⁴⁶

LAMENTATIONS AND THE TRC

Reading Lamentations in the context of the TRC hearings is painful, scandalising. The suffering of victim Jerusalem has strong affinities with the accounts brought before the HRVC, while perpetrator YHWH's brutality has pronounced points of connection with the descriptions of amnesty seekers. This struck me particularly when reading Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*.

Krog gives an account of a perpetrator, giving a commentary on the photographs of one of his victims, a young woman:

Next photo: the earth holding a bundle of bones... Ribs. Breastbone that once held heart. Around the pelvis is a blue plastic bag. "Oh yes", the grave indicator remembers. "We kept her naked and after ten days she made herself these panties." He sniggers: "God...she was brave."⁴⁷

44. I have been privileged to work in the same department as and to befriend Muhammed Haron. I know that given his personal pain deriving from the apartheid regime, his optimism is particularly (and, I can say, characteristically) big-hearted.

45. Haron, "Truth-Telling".

46. I find it encouraging to see that the TRC model has been recommended for Rwanda and Serbia. Another state to adopt and adapt it, is recently independent East Timor. At the time of writing, the newspaper *Mail and Guardian* reports that the final TRC report is not as yet ready. Volumes 6 and 7, due to appear by 9 August 2002, contain the summaries of 22,000 victims' statements and an account of the amnesty process, respectively ("In brief", July 5-11, 2002, 9).

47. Krog, *My Skull*, 128.

Here is woman Jerusalem, stripped and abused. And here is YHWH, sinister, indicating no pity.⁴⁸ There are many more parallels. Mourning mothers, like mother Jerusalem, telling of their sons being callously murdered;⁴⁹ Dirk Coetzee's chilling description of the disposing of Sizwe Kondile's corpse – "The burning of a body on an open fire takes seven hours. Whilst that happened we were drinking and braaing next to the fire"⁵⁰ – brings into my mind Jerusalem's cry, "he sent fire, sent it down into my bones" (1:13). The emotion, pathos and tears of suffering Jerusalem move into my mind as I read Krog's description of Father Lapsley before his submission to the TRC:

It is these stainless-steel pincers that Father Lapsley raised to take the oath... But it is also these pincers that prevent him from wiping away his tears like other victims. When their stories cut too close, victims often bury their faces in their hands, and wipe their eyes with tissues. But how do you hold the fragile veil of tissue in such pincers? How do you complete the simple action of blowing your nose? Several times the pincers move towards his face in a reflex action – as if he wants to cover his face with his hands – and every movement flashes the inhumanity of South Africa's past into the hall... hard, shiny and sterile.⁵¹

The directness of impact of both Jerusalem and the man of sorrow's first-person accounts is explained to me by the words of a Tswana interpreter: "It is difficult to interpret victim hearings...because you use the first person all the time. I have no distance when I say 'I...it runs through me with I.'"⁵² Also, the disciplined structure of Lamentations 3 and 4 suddenly makes more sense when I read Chief Anderson Joyi's reason for starting his testimony with a formulaic recital of his nineteen generations of forebears:

Their names organize the flow of time.... Their names give my story a shadow. Their names put what has happened to me in perspective. Their names say I am a chief with many colours. Their names say we have the ability to endure the past...and the present.⁵³

"Their names" functions much like the regulated structure of the acrostic form: conferring identity and organising the sequence of events that are so painful and yet so vital to remember.

48. It would be inaccurate to suggest that *all* perpetrators of apartheid-related violence lacked feelings such as pity, remorse, guilt and shame. This emerges only too clearly in portions of Krog's moving impressionistic work (*My Skull*, 46-47, 93, 147).

49. Krog, *My Skull*, 28.

50. Krog, *My Skull*, 60.

51. Krog, *My Skull*, 133.

52. Krog, *My Skull*, 129.

53. Krog, *My Skull*, 137.

There is a “spin” as connections are drawn between Lamentations and the TRC, because in the biblical text the perpetrator is YHWH. Hugh Pyper is right to point out, “what is at stake is whether God will survive, whether the people will follow their natural inclination to abandon the instrument of their torture”.⁵⁴ In other words, we are entitled to ask, “Does YHWH deserve forgiveness and amnesty?” Next, I would like to examine the notion of forgiveness, which has been so central to the TRC investigations, and go on to explore whether we can and should forgive YHWH.

FORGIVENESS

The forgiveness extended by those who suffered most under apartheid is nothing short of astounding. Tutu has said, “The most forgiving people I have ever come across are people who have suffered – it is as if suffering has ripped them open into empathy.”⁵⁵ Reading of women like Beth Savage and Cynthia Ngewu, this appears to be true.⁵⁶ Beth Savage, following massive injuries resulting from a grenade attack and having spent one month in intensive care, undergoing open-heart surgery and having her large intestine removed, expressed a desire to meet the man responsible in the spirit of forgiveness. She also hoped her attacker would forgive her (for whatever reason). Cynthia Ngewu’s son was one of the Guguletu Seven.⁵⁷ Confronted with one of the officers responsible for her son’s killing, she extended her forgiveness, saying, “We do not want to return the evil that perpetrators committed to the nation. We want to demonstrate humaneness towards them, so that they in turn may restore their own humanity.”⁵⁸

Remarkable as this magnanimity (far exceeding anything YHWH of Lamentations appears to be capable of) may be, the question arises if forgiveness is invariably appropriate and advisable. Bhargava captures well the point I am trying to drive at:

Why should the victim forgive? Forgiveness implies forswearing resentment toward the person who inflicted moral injury. It is hard to take the view that the forswearing of resentment is always morally appropriate. After all, there is nothing intrinsically wrong in resenting perpetrators of evil. Indeed, since such emotions are

54. Pyper, “Reading Lamentations”, 61.

55. Cited in Krog, *My Skull*, 17.

56. See Dumisa Ntsebeza, “A Lot More to Live For”, in *After the TRC*, 101-06.

57. The “Guguletu Seven” was a group of seven young men, all angry at apartheid, whose circle was infiltrated by undercover policemen. These officers trained, armed and then killed the Guguletu Seven, with the intention of demonstrating police vigilance in the face of terrorism.

58. Cited in Ntsebeza, “A Lot More”, 103.

woven into one's sense of self-respect, persons who do not resent wrongs done them invariably lack self-respect.⁵⁹

Is there, to word it differently, a category of "unforgivable"⁶⁰ and do the offences of YHWH recounted in Lamentations belong in this category? My short answer to both is "yes".

Given such grave crimes against humanity as genocide, which have marked the twentieth century (and also our twenty-first century consciousness) indelibly, it is legitimate to ask these questions. Furthermore, they have been asked for some time, most prominently perhaps in the wake of the Shoah, the genocide of an estimated six million Jews, also known as the Holocaust.⁶¹ Vladimir Jankélévitch,⁶² for example, has labelled the Shoah an unforgivable crime, due both to its scale and the fact that the multitudes who perished are by their death in no position to offer forgiveness. Jankélévitch describes the Shoah as too great to be adequately punished and a crime that cannot be punished, he continues, also cannot be forgiven. The perpetrators, according to him, are "swine" – and forgiveness is not for swine. Jankélévitch emphasises that it is a duty *not* to forgive the unforgivable, so that the crime against humanity may never be forgotten.

But what if the perpetrators are not simply "swine" but people with a conscience, earnestly seeking forgiveness? What if they are repentant? This brings us to a distinction within the category of forgiveness: namely, conditional and unconditional forgiveness. As Pyper points out, there is a tension between the two within the Christian tradition:

Forgiveness is sometimes presented as a free and unconditional act, offered to guilty and innocent alike, which takes no account of repentance. At other times, repentance is presented as the necessary condition for forgiveness.⁶³

On the one hand, the New Testament advocates unconditional forgiveness of enemies, without a hint of repentance: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27). On the other hand, forgiveness, while

59. Bhargava, "Restoring Decency", 60-61.

60. In the Old Testament no category of sin is in principle unforgivable. The New Testament, however, names the unforgivable sin as "blasphemy against the Spirit" (Matt 12:31-32; see also Mark 3:29 and Luke 12:10). The exact nature of this sin has been anxiously debated but there is no consensus regarding the matter.

61. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (*Holocaust Theology*, London: Lamp Press, 1989) offers succinct summaries of several prominent theological responses to the Shoah. While some analogies *can* be drawn between the atrocities of the Shoah and the atrocities of the apartheid regime, it is advisable not to obscure the enormous differences. Admittedly, however, this paper is also making links between two disparate traumas.

62. Jankélévitch's essays on forgiveness are not accessible to me. I have relied on Hugh S. Pyper's discussion of his opinions in "Forgiving the Unforgivable: Kirkegaard, Derrida and the Scandal of Forgiveness", forthcoming in *Kierkegaardiana* (2002).

63. *Ibid.* (Page numbers for Pyper's article are not as yet available.)

freely extended, is presented as conditional on repentance: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says 'I repent', you must forgive him" (Luke 17:3; see also Matthew 6:14-15 and Luke 6:37).

In the context of the TRC forgiveness – or, more precisely amnesty – is conditional. As early as 1986 *The Kairos Document*⁶⁴ stated that,

In our situation in South Africa today it would be totally unchristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed. Any such plea plays into the hands of the oppressor trying to persuade those of us who are oppressed to accept our oppression and to become reconciled to the intolerable crimes that are committed against us. That is not Christian reconciliation, it is sin. It is asking us to become accomplices in our own oppression, to become servants of the devil. No reconciliation is possible in South Africa without justice.

Forgiveness and reconciliation here are dependent upon "justice" and thereby conditional. The conditions of the TRC's Amnesty Committee, also, specified first, that the crimes brought before it had a political objective⁶⁵ and secondly that "full disclosure" had to be made. Bhargava argues that only conditional forgiveness is of value:

Under what conditions is it morally justified to forgive? Clearly, only when the self-respect of victims is enhanced by forgiveness, or at least not undermined by it. This is turn happens when former perpetrators admit their wrongdoing, distance themselves from the wrongful act and join the victims in condemning the act as well as their own past. Only under these conditions can the self-respect of victims be restored and enhanced.⁶⁶

One purpose of the conditionality of TRC forgiveness appears to have been that it sought to guard against erasure of the victims' suffering. The demand that full disclosure be made and the fact that the accounts of both victims and perpetrators were presented at public hearings, broadcast live and recorded, provided a testimony, a protection against forgetting. As Krog, who reported on the hearings, put it, addressing the deceased victim, "Do not dare die! I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story...."⁶⁷

64. *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1986) came into being through the co-operation of contextual theologians opposed to apartheid.

65. One of the "Cradock Four" murdered by police was not known to be a political activist. This compromised the perpetrators' amnesty application.

66. Bhargava, "Restoring Decency", 61.

67. Krog, *My Skull*, 27.

Pyper persuasively counteracts the concern that forgiveness transpires in forgetting. (Or, that if it does, then “forgetting” acquires a different nuance.) He distinguishes that forgiveness does not cease to see a sinful act but instead trusts that forgiveness takes sin away. He uses the phrase of Søren Kierkegaard that sin is “hidden behind God’s back”: that is, it has not ceased to exist but it has ceased to be regarded. He develops this point as follows,

In this special sense, God “forgets” sin, and here forgetting has the same structure as hope, but in reverse. Whereas hope gives being to what does not (yet) exist, forgetting removes being from what nevertheless exists. What is forgotten is not the same as that which never existed, or indeed as that which has ceased to exist. It is that which is disregarded in love.⁶⁸

So, where are we now? In Lamentations we have victims and a perpetrator. We have the victims’ accounts of the tremendous suffering endured. We also have YHWH, abusing his power. It is possible to forgive without the atrocity being forgotten – we have the assurance of Pyper and the fact that the text of Lamentations has survived for many centuries and is part of both the Jewish and Christian canon. Additionally, in Judaism it is a *mitzvah* (commandment) to read this book aloud in the synagogue on the annual occasion of *Tisha B’Av*, the ninth day of the month of Av, commemorating the destruction of the Jewish Temple. But should we forgive YHWH?

Given the TRC criteria, YHWH would not be granted amnesty: nowhere is he repentant; throughout the book he is silent, we do not hear his account, let alone any indication of remorse, or a full disclosure. He is quite different to the God who admits that Job spoke what was “right” (Job 42:7) – and let us not forget that Job said many a word that was hardly flattering to YHWH (e.g. 12:9; 17:6; 19:7-11; 27:2). He is also different to the merciful God of Jonah (3:10; 4:11). The only forgiveness we *could* extend YHWH is unconditional forgiveness. There are, as we have seen, precedents for unconditional forgiveness in the New Testament at least – plus, it appears to be possible to forgive on behalf of another (*pace* Jankélévitch). The idea that only the victim of a crime can extend forgiveness to the perpetrator is challenged by the witness of the New Testament. As Pyper shows, Jesus’ request “Father, forgive them: they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), is striking in that first, Jesus does not mention himself or his suffering (i.e. the fact that he is the victim) and secondly, because the speech is not addressed to the perpetrators (i.e. those who are crucifying him). Jesus is, therefore, invoking God to forgive *on his behalf*. The perpetrators, moreover, are not demonstrating any spirit of repentance – they do not even appear to

68. Pyper, “Forgiving the Unforgivable”.

acknowledge their action as constituting a wrongdoing. While, according to Jacques Derrida, a believer is someone who has *a priori* decided to forgive God,⁶⁹ is this really good enough? Do we *want* this monster-God?

I fully understand Deryn Guest's advocacy for the excision of Lamentations from the Scriptures,⁷⁰ but ultimately I support Pyper's argument for the retention of this text. He explains:

Insofar as the Hebrew Bible is a source of revelation, it is a revelation of darkness as well as light, of the involvement of human – mostly, but not exclusively, male – fear, greed, insecurity and viciousness in all that speaks of the divine.... Any attempt to come to grips with what it is to be human... must face these horrors squarely. One service among many that feminist critics have performed is to reveal the scandal of the divine, a scandal that is a chastening reminder of the human heart.... [T]he role of such texts in the canon may best be understood through their capacity to scandalize the reader into recognition of his or her own complicity in the psychology of destruction.⁷¹

Alongside Lamentations I want to applaud both Krog's book and the TRC report: for laying bare and recording the scandal of human suffering and the scandal of human brutality, for their efforts to ensure that neither be forgotten. All of these texts keep us alert to the dangers of abuse and corruption of power – including the abuse and corruption of divine power. The truth and reconciliation process in South Africa has shown us both repentant and unrepentant abusers. In my view it was correct to make amnesty conditional upon full disclosure. I am saying then, that YHWH of Lamentations does *not* deserve our forgiveness. But keeping this record of atrocity, like the records of other atrocities – the Shoah and apartheid South Africa – is essential. Only if and when we have assurance that suchlike will *never* happen again can we put these horrors to rest and extend unconditional forgiveness. Alas, the time is not here.

69. See Pyper, "Forgiving the Unforgivable".

70. Guest, "Hiding Behind the Naked Women in Lamentations", 444-45.

71. Pyper, "Reading Lamentations", 68-69.