

## **Cry with Us: A Palestinian Hopeful Reading of Lamentations**

My presentation seeks to present a theology of hope in the midst of tears. I will focus on the Book of Lamentations highlighting different human responses to the theopolitical catastrophe in 587 B.C. My points are simply: there was no comforter, no prophet, and no hope. I will simultaneously point out significant correspondences with the Palestinian catastrophic realities. Last, I will present important lessons that Palestinian Christians need to consider in their prophetic imagination.

During the last Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2014, I was studying the Book of Lamentations. The similarities of pain shocked me and for the first time in my life I was moved to write a poem in English.<sup>1</sup> It reads like this:

This is a season of weeping and mourning, but it is not void of hope.

**Our** tears are the bridge between brutality and humanity.

**Our** tears are the salty gates for seeing a different reality.

**Our** tears are facing soulless nations and a parched mentality.

**Our** tears are the dam preventing rivers of animosity.

**For** the sake of the mourning men, cry with us to reflect your amity.

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<sup>1</sup>Yohanna Katanacho, "Cry with Us"; available online at <http://www.bmsworldmission.org/news-blogs/archive/a-poem-lament-both-sides-gaza>; accessed on Dec 1, 2014.

**For** the sake of the poor children, cry with us demanding sanity.

**For** the sake of lamenting mothers, refuse violence and stupidity.

Love your enemies and cry with them is the advice of divinity.

Blessing those who curse is the path to genuine spirituality.

Pouring tears of mercy and compassion is true piety.

Pray with tears, for the sake of spreading equity.

Followers of Jesus: crying is now our responsibility.

But don't cry for your friends only; but also for your Enemy

I had many existential questions: What do we say or do when our cities collapse and hunger invades our streets? How do we respond when homes are destroyed and young children are brutally killed? What do we do when the teeth of evil are like nails from hell penetrating our souls? Why is God absent when the civic and moral infrastructures of our society collapse? Why does God forsake us when our holy places are defiled and our religious symbols are despised? The Book of Lamentations hosted my feelings and helped me to express my frustrations.<sup>2</sup> It says, "Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are

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<sup>2</sup>Many other contemporary scholars had a similar experience with the Book of Lamentations at harsh times. See for example, Adele Berlin, **Lamentations** (The Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); or Kathleen O'Connor, **Lamentations and the Tears of the World**. (New York: Orbis, 2003); or Collin Chapman, "A Lament over Lebanon," available online: <http://www.batneconwatch.blogspot.co.il/2006/08/lament-over-lebanon-by-rev-colin.html>; accessed on Dec 1, 2014.

destroyed. My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, until the Lord looks down from heaven and sees. What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women of my city” (Lam 3: 48 – 51).

No doubt that the Book of Lamentations is a place full of sorrow, sadness, and salty tears. This book is very relevant to our Palestinian situation. It can be a founding stone for our theology. My assumption is that the destruction of Jerusalem during the times of Jeremiah is similar to Al Nakbah in 1948 and to the series of catastrophes that Palestinians continue to experience.<sup>3</sup> Based on the Book of Lamentations, I will highlight three areas: there is no comforter, there is no prophet, and there is no hope.

First, there is no comforter. The Book of Lamentations points out the destruction of the socio-religious infrastructure of ancient Israel.<sup>4</sup> The text describes the besieging of Jerusalem, its famine, its invasion by a powerful army, the execution of its leaders, the exile of its people, the looting of its religious places, and the collapse of any hope. It simply states that there is no comforter. The

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<sup>3</sup>In the Septuagint and Latin versions, the book of Lamentations starts with an introduction that points out that Jeremiah is its author. In the Syriac version, we have four lamentations followed by a prayer by the prophet Jeremiah. Furthermore, many church fathers, the Talmud, Luther, Calvin and others argue that Jeremiah is the author of the pertinent book. See R. Salters, **Lamentations** (International Critical Commentary; New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2010), 5.

<sup>4</sup>For further information see Robin Parry. **Lamentations** (Electronic Form on Kindle; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), Loc 112.

Book of Lamentations keeps repeating this statement: there is no comforter (Lam 1: 2, 9, 16, 17, and 21). It states that no one can help the people to deal with their pain and pitiful realities. No one is showing them mercy, or compassion, or offering them encouragement and hope in the midst of their trouble. There is no comforter for Palestinians. Israelis are not going to resolve their problems. Neither the Arab world, nor the European world, nor the Islamic world, nor the United Nations are going to help them. The world has abandoned them. There is no comforter. We therefore lament.

Second, there is no prophet. The text says that “the law is no more, and her prophets no longer find visions from the Lord” (Lam 2:9). God is silent and people are suffering. This has led to many reactions. Some rightly ask: where is God? No doubt that many Palestinians rejected God favoring atheism especially after Al Nakbah in 1948 and the failure of the church to speak up before 1967. We prefer to accuse God instead of boycotting Him or eliminating his existence. Some believed that God had rejected them. The Book of Lamentations starts with a question about the suffering of the city, but ends with a question about the endurance of the rejection of God. Some preferred the path of self-pity, adopting a victim mentality that wants all people to see their pain (Lam 1: 12). Some preferred the path of revenge (Lam 1: 22; 3: 64). They dehumanized their enemies in order to facilitate destroying them. I refuse to abandon the logic of love that prompts us to seek

justice without abandoning the human dignity of all the inhabitants of Israel and Palestine. Revenge is not our path. I therefore strongly disagree with the popular statement: we shall not forget or forgive. This statement is a dangerous mistake regardless who says it whether Netanyahu or Abbas.<sup>5</sup>

Third, the book of lamentations depicts a reality in which there is no hope. It reminds us of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in which he wrote about the sign on the gates of hell. It says: "Through me you pass into the city of woe . . . All hope abandon ye who enter here."<sup>6</sup> In Palestine, we have an impossible task as we seek to find a political hope. However, the Book of Lamentations points out that hope does not depend on the circumstances but on seeing the divine perspective. The existence of a prophetic vision is indispensable for the existence of hope. Gladly, Palestinian theology affirms: faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13: 13). In first Corinthians, the literary unit of these three virtues is chapters 12-15 and concludes with a strong message of hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we follow in the footsteps of Saint Augustine. In his *Enchiridion*, or

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<sup>5</sup>It is common that many Israeli leaders use the expression: we shall not forget and we shall not forgive. However, it was sad to see President Abbas using the same expression on September 26, 2014 as he was addressing the UN General Assembly in New York. The full text is available online at: <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Full-text-of-Palestinian-Authority-President-Abbas-address-to-the-UN-General-Assembly-in-New-York-376388>; accessed on Dec 1, 2014.

<sup>6</sup>Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (trans. by Henry Francis Cary (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004), 13.

Handbook, he points out that hope is born out of faith.<sup>7</sup> Hope cannot exist without faith. He adds that “he who does not love believes in vain, even if what he believes is true; he hopes in vain . . . unless he believes and hopes for this: that he may through prayer obtain the gift of love.”<sup>8</sup> Love unites us to God.<sup>9</sup> Good hope cannot exist without faith and love. In the Book of Lamentations the text says, “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’ The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3: 21 – 26).

This hope is confirmed and embodied in the book of Acts. God inflicted pain on Jerusalem in the Book of Lamentation, and Jerusalem inflicted suffering on the son of God. However, the Triune God ended this cycle of violence through faith, love, and hope. The Father loved all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the rest of world that he gave his only begotten Son on the cross. He paved the way of faith for whoever believes will not perish (John 3:16). The Son wept over Jerusalem and

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<sup>7</sup>Saint Augustine. **Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love** (trans. Albert Outler; Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 76; available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/enchiridion.pdf>; accessed on Dec 1, 2014.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>9</sup>See 1 Clement 49: 5; Saint Clement, **The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians** (trans. J. B. Lightfoot; Athena: Athena Data Products), 24; available online at <http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/First%20Epistle%20of%20Clement%20to%20the%20Corinthians.pdf>; accessed on Dec 1, 2014.

suffered on its hands but he forgave and embodied the path of love. Then the Holy Spirit comes to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter that will end our exile from God and will grant us a prophetic vision not rooted in an ethnocentric reality and not limited to one group whether its Greeks or Hebrews, Palestinians or Jews. Instead, we are witnesses and prophets to the whole world (Acts 1:7–8). We share Jerusalem and its inclusive divine vision expressed in Psalm 87. Palestinian Christians are walking in the footsteps of the early church advocating faith, love, and hope. Hope is accessible to all those who call upon the name of the Lord (Act 2:21). The witness of Palestinian Christians is indispensable for embodying to both Palestinians and Israelis the power of faith, love, and hope. The multiethnic church continues to be God's hand to help the poor, challenge oppressive powers, fight discrimination, and spread the comfort of God to the ends of the earth. We are a sign of hope. Because of the presence and activities of the third person of the blessed Trinity in our midst, we hope to change the world one person at a time.

### **Some important lessons for Palestinians**

1. We can cry in the midst of catastrophes. Lamenting is not hopelessness but it is human and it helps us to maintain our humanity as we mourn with those who are mourning. But let us cry together and let us cry as an expression of commitment to justice and to human dignity.

2. We will not abandon good hope. Those who abandon hope will also abandon the pursuit of justice. A bad hope will lead to a suicidal revenge but a good hope will remind us of God's mercy, and that we are covenant creatures and his people. Palestinian Christians are a covenant people who can expect the blessings of God despite the forces of death. The rays of hope through our Kairos actions penetrate the clouds of despair or the structures of injustices.

3. We will commit ourselves to faith, hope, and love. Our hope is not wishful thinking, or optimism, and is not founded on the typhonic political atmosphere. It is founded on the nature of our God who conquered death, established the church of the martyrs, and promised to be with us. Hope is the bridge that will help us to move from the current reality to the hoped for reality. It is a force of change. It can only be good change when it is accompanied by faith and love and submission to the Holy Spirit. It is not a surprise that the prophetic voice of the Palestine Kairos Document insists on human dignity from the perspective of faith asserting that all human beings are created in the image of God, averring the logic of love, and choosing good hope. We Palestinians or Germans or Jews can hope alone but if we hope together we can do much more. Those who are created in the image of God have the capacity to hope and this capacity can transform us today.

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