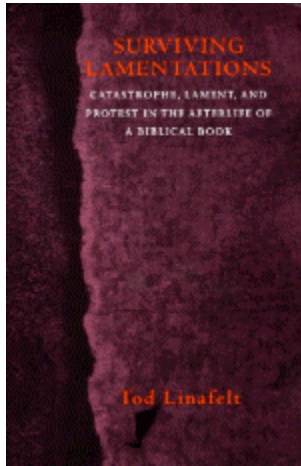


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Linafelt, Tod

Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book

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Linafelt's study of Lamentations is remarkable in a number of respects. It proposes refreshing reinterpretations of the genre, purpose, and theological significance of the biblical book. It explores a history of subsequent reuse and reinterpretation of Lamentations in subsequent texts from Second Isaiah. It reverses the usual backward direction of diachronic studies through a literary past of a biblical text and, instead, moves forward to study the book's afterlife as it "survives" in the Targum, Midrash, Medieval Kinot, and in Cynthia Ozick's contemporary novella, *The Shawl*.

"Surviving Lamentations" is a figure of speech with multiple resonances in Linafelt's work. It means readers' emotional and theological survival of Lamentations' brutality and general hopelessness. It refers to the book's purpose of expressing pain as a mode of survival. It encompasses the book's genre, broadly conceived as survival literature, and finally, it points to the continuing survival of Lamentations in subsequent literature of survival. In the course of this multi-dimensional study, Linafelt engages Holocaust literature and literary and philosophical thinkers, including Benjamin, Derrida, and Lyotard.

The book's organization traces Lamentation's survival. After an introduction and a methodological first chapter, the six remaining chapters treat the texts, beginning with Lamentations in chapter two and moving through its reuse and reinterpretation in each subsequent text. An appendix contains the Three Kinot of Eleazar ben Kallir. Although

Surviving Lamentations is a revised dissertation (C. Newsom, Emory University), it is blessedly free of jargon and onerous reviews of literature.

Linafelt makes three important contributions to interpretation of Lamentations. First, he classifies Lamentations as literature of survival that shares in common with other survival texts, particularly Holocaust testimonies, the primary purpose of asserting and facing pain and death rather than of interpreting it. This sets him against many classic interpreters of the book. Linafelt sharply rejects views, Christian and Jewish, that make hope and the encouragement of patience in suffering to be the book's theological and rhetorical purposes. Lamentations, instead, seeks to bring the numbing and dignity-denying experience of pain to expression and to "recruit its audience away from neutrality and towards the concerns of the survivor" (p. 21).

Second, Linafelt uncovers the male and Christian biases of interpreters who erroneously privilege the words of the hopeful male speaker of chapter three over the equally theological potent words of Daughter Zion in chapters one and two. Zion, the personified city of Jerusalem witnesses to pain, moves away from guilt and death toward life, and rails against God. Third, Linafelt draws attention to Zion's desperate concern for her lost children as a major interest of Lamentations. Little noticed in interpretation heretofore, the children's cruel fate and Zion's hopes for their survival symbolize the condition of the nation in the aftermath of the invasion.

Second Isaiah responds directly to Lamentations, quoting it, alluding to it, and revivifying Zion. Linafelt adds to a discussion already underway in Isaian studies the recognition that Lamentations' portrayal of Zion "sets the terms" (p. 79) by which Second Isaiah is able to imagine survival for exiles. Zion's assertive demands upon God for the survival of her children in Lamentations are transformed in Second Isaiah by the children's restoration, an unthinkable possibility in Lamentations.

In his study of Targum Lamentations, Linafelt argues that translation is an act of survival that both renews and mutates the original. He finds a more complex and less buoyant interpretation of suffering in the Targum than is usually thought and attends particularly to targumic expansions focusing on Zion and her children. Like Linafelt himself, the Targum "finds the 'locus of theological actions'" in the first two chapters of Lamentations that feature Zion.

A similar complex process of re-interpretation and survival occurs in the midrash which also gives attends closely to Zion and her children and connects her with Rachel as she weeps for her children (Jer 31:15). The medieval *Kinot* for Tisha b'Ab, the feast commemorating the Fall of Jerusalem, gathers up fragments of Lamentations, Second Isaiah, Targum Lamentations and the midrash to enact yet another version of survival.

For Linafelt, the paradox of the poetics of survival is how these texts can re-create Lamentations in service of survival without subsuming Lamentations into a happy ending that would falsify the original work, as has some critical interpretations in their exclusive concentration on the limited hope in chapter three. In Ozick's *The Shawl*, the hopefulness of intervening texts from Second Isaiah to the Kinot disappears and the "melancholia" of Lamentations itself reappears in full force. In this long history of survival, Lamentations is revised but never replaced by other texts.

Linafelt's interpretive horizon is Jewish history of persecution and the fact of the Holocaust that has destroyed theological and literary happy endings. As a Christian scholar he crosses over divides of disciplines, religions, and of centuries of hatred and persecution to find in Lamentations' survival a wellspring of material for expressing the pain of that history. *Surviving Lamentations* is itself an act of compassionate imagination as this Christian reader takes as his and our interpretive horizon, the history of Jewish suffering, enacted and reenacted in Lamentations and its literary survivors. Lamentations has indeed won him from neutrality to become an advocate for the literature, and a co-prosecutor before God.

The book is a splendid model of interpretive method, of theological originality, and of biblical interpretation that both uses and breaks with historical-critical method to follow interpretation forward rather than backward in time. Because it is eminently readable, it belongs in classrooms as well as in the hands of scholars and general readers interested in literature of loss, pain and grief and in the theological void that is the Holocaust.