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As the title suggests, this commentary by Leslie Allen contributes to the growing list of publications on the book of Lamentations from a perspective less commonly encountered in the genre of commentary writing. Allen seeks to read Lamentations as a resource for those working in pastoral care contexts, drawing as it does on his experiences both as a biblical scholar and as a hospital chaplain. Allen brings to his task insights gained from academic engagement with the literature of Lamentations scholarship and grief studies, combining them with brief anecdotal reports of pastoral encounters that help to illustrate the significance of the text in contemporary contexts of grief.

In the preface Allen makes a statement that shapes the direction of the commentary that follows. Listening to personal grief stories, reading grief accounts and grief manuals, and correlating these with Lamentations led Allen to conclude that “Lamentations belongs to a genre of grief literature that is recognizable by and relevant to the modern reader not only in its general message but also in many of its details” (ix). He suggests that Lamentations includes an engagement with grief from the perspectives of both suffering and caregiving. These two perspectives dominate the discussion throughout the commentary.
The introductory chapter sets out the framework for the commentary that follows, the discussion of which will occupy the bulk of this review, given that the commentary itself is so strongly shaped by the interpretive decisions made here. Divided into seven sections, the introduction intersperses pastoral examples with discussions on various aspects of Lamentations. The chapter opens under the heading “Tears, Talk, and Time” (1–4) in order to introduce aspects of the grieving process and the content of Lamentations, linking the need for tears, for the articulation of grief, and the importance of time in the process of healing. This is an important aspect of the discussion, as Allen reads the book through the lens of a pastoral relationship that facilitates a movement toward healing.

The historical context and the genre of Lamentations are then explored under the headings “Trauma: The Source of This Grief” (4–5) and “Tradition: Ancient Idioms of Grief” (5–8). In the discussion of tradition, Allen contrasts the lack of adequate grieving ritual in contemporary northern cultures (note the assumed North American context here) with the ritual practices and genres of the ancient world. In the discussion of genre he considers the dirge, the lament psalm (including the complaint psalm as a subgenre), and the city-lament genre.

Allen then makes a distinctive move that shapes his subsequent reading in the commentary. He identifies Lamentations as “A Liturgy of Grief” (8–14). Allen argues that the book of Lamentations is “best understood as the script of a liturgy intended as a therapeutic ritual” (8). Although he does not dismiss the possibility that Lamentations was written over a period of time, his framework for understanding the book is the context of a mourning liturgy performed at the site of the ruined temple. Allen argues for a coherence in Lamentations when it is regarded in terms of story. The poems verbalize a complex story that includes a piecemeal telling of the basics facts, primarily in the form of flashback memories in Lam 1–2, with the fourth and fifth poems moving to the closing days of the siege and the postwar occupation.

Importantly, Allen argues that there is a development in Lamentations toward a resolution. While Allen is quick to assert that the book does not exhibit closure, he does contend that there is a movement within the poems toward a climax in chapter 5 in which the grieving community is able to articulate its prayer to God in the form of a lament psalm. In so arguing, Allen suggests that both the character of Zion and the narrator have modeled prayer as an appropriate response to grief and have encouraged the community to follow their lead (9–10). The goal of Lamentations is congregational prayer. In its form as a completed liturgy, Lamentations moves “steadily and with increasing passion toward a dynamic appeal to the congregation to utter a prayer of repentance” and supports that appeal “with an assurance of Yahweh’s grace and compassion” (11). The third poem is
read as an interim climax, with the fifth as the real climax in the form of a communal prayer.

Supporting this, Allen identifies three speakers in the book: the communal voice; the personified woman, who functions as a role model for the congregation intended to inspire their reaction (11: the “poster girl for the responses to tragedy the community should make”); and the third voice, which includes both the narrator (as worship leader) and the speaker in Lam 3, who plays a number of roles, primarily as a pastoral mentor, but at the same time a member of the suffering community and a wounded healer. This speaker endeavors to guide the community through their distress and engage in grief work on their behalf. In addition, Allen suggests that the voice of God is “heard from afar” through intertextual allusions to Deuteronomic and prophetic literature.

The final sections of the introduction include “Trajectories of Grief, Guilt, and Grievance,” (15–22), “The Fifth Poem as Finale,” (22–24), “Balm for the Grief-Stricken” (24–25), and “A Book for Caregivers” (25–29). In the section on trajectories, Allen outlines the presence of these three that run through the poems. Particular attention is paid to the trajectories of guilt and grievance. With regard to guilt, Allen argues that guilt is a common response to grief but stresses that within Lamentations guilt is claimed to be “legitimate and appropriate” (17). Reading against some recent commentators, Allen stresses the centrality and the importance of the recognition of guilt within Lamentations, arguing that both Zion and the narrator/mentor urge this recognition in the worshiping community. Allen finds a modern counterpart in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, often likening the narrator’s voice to that of an AA mentor in his commentary section. Finally, Allen explores the trajectory of grievance, acknowledging that this aspect of Lamentations is one that sits uncomfortably in contemporary (Western) Christian spirituality. These trajectories are brought together in the final poem: the prayer of the community.

The last two sections of the introduction engage with the contemporary relevance of Lamentations from the perspective of those who grieve and those who care. For those who grieve, Lamentations embraces grief, offering a canonical voice that can accompany the journey in and through grief. In his exposition, Allen “offers role models for dealing compassionately with those who grieve” (26), a project that focuses primarily on the narrator of Lamentations as mentor, in that it offers role models for dealing compassionately with those who grieve.

The chapters that follow correspond to each of the chapters of Lamentations. Each follows a similar pattern, a brief introduction to the chapter, outlining some of the issues or features of the chapter and highlighting pertinent aspects from the categories
established in the introduction. For example, in chapter 1 Allen introduces the historical context, interestingly by way of reference to the bronze coin commissioned by Vespasian in 71 C.E. that depicts Judah as a grieving woman, followed by a discussion of the acrostic form, the division of the poem into stanzas, and an identification of the speaking voices. The dominant trajectory of each chapter (grief, guilt, or grievance) is highlighted, as is a suggestion as to the intent of the chapter in relation to the larger resolution that Allen suggests shapes the entire collection. Each chapter is given a heading, itself an interpretive statement about the intent of the relevant poetic unit (e.g., Lam 1: “Grief, Guilt, and the Need for Prayer”; Lam 3: “The Wounded Healer”). The text is translated and discussed on a section-by-section basis, again with each section given an interpretive title (e.g., “Human Losses” [1:1–6]; “Material Losses” [1:7–11]; “Zion’s Cry of Culpability” [1:12–16]). Translation notes are included in endnotes, without any indication given in the main text as to where translation issues might be present. The commentary itself is explanatory and descriptive, and while exegetical rigor clearly supports the discussion, technical issues are kept to a minimum. The discussion focuses on the processes of both grieving and caregiving, moving between the historical world of and behind the text and contemporary issues and/or examples of grief and pastoral care. Allen incorporates the work of other scholars where helpful but does not labor over issues of scholarly debate. Allen seeks to develop a cohesion in the explanation of the text throughout, exploring links between the chapters, always guided by his identification that the purpose of Lamentations is to encourage the congregation to bring its prayer to God.

As a resource for those who grieve, or care for others in grief, Allen’s commentary is an effective and illuminating treatment of the text. Its strength lies in the many links the discussion makes between the world of the text and contemporary contexts of grieving. In the blend of scholarship and lived experience, the commentary offers a helpful reading of Lamentations.

There are, however, some areas over which I have reservations. Both the translation and the discussion are shaped by Allen’s understanding of the cohesion and purpose of the book. While a case can be made that a certain resolution emerges through the communal prayer in Lam 5, it is more difficult to sustain the argument that the narrator and Zion always have this intent in their respective speeches. The reading suggests a greater level of cohesion in and between the poems than has been suggested by much recent scholarship. In addition, Allen places a heavy emphasis on the recognition of guilt as being a key to the book. This emphasis results in both the translation and discussion foregrounding guilt beyond that which can be easily sustained. By way of example, in discussing 2:18–19, in which the narrator calls on Zion to cry out to God, Allen states that “grieving over implicitly merited destruction is now to be brought to God in prayer” (80). This in a chapter notable for its relative absence of references to sin. In a similar way, the sense of
unwarranted suffering is diminished in the discussion in that God’s actions are seen as merited throughout. This is not to say that Allen does not treat the reality of grievance as an important feature of Lamentations; however, guilt is seen as the more dominant, or perhaps important, trajectory.

Allen’s book makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of Lamentations as a resource for contemporary pastoral care contexts. Allen does not make a simple equation between the context of Lamentations and today’s world but does provide a helpful framework within which this book can be seen to speak to situations of pain and suffering through the very nature of its language about suffering being brought into the presence of God.