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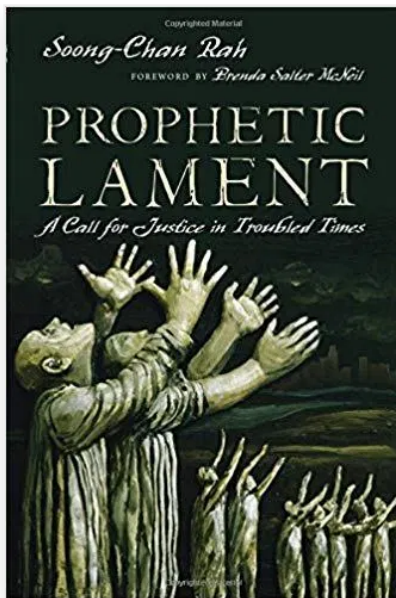
Reviews

# Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times

By David M. Johnstone

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No Comments



## Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times

Soong-Chan Rah

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Reviewed by David M. Johnstone, Student Life, George Fox University

Soong-Chan Rah ranks among the top American scholars who perceptively understand the contemporary Western church, speak prophetically into it, offer hope, and do not hesitate to probe the theological implications of scripture. I count his *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* as one of the most personally, and unexpectedly, impactful that I have read. It is currently shaping me in uncomfortable yet necessary ways.

In *Prophetic Lament*, Rah begins his reflections on the scriptural book of Lamentations by observing that the American church no longer remembers how to lament. He cites studies that demonstrate that in scripture, 60 percent of psalms are celebratory in nature, while 40 are songs of lament (22). In contrast, Rah observes that modern hymnals include only 13-19 percent as hymns of lament (22) and asks why such a discrepancy exists.

He notes that the contemporary focus on celebration stands in contrast to the context and words of Lamentations. As Rah observes, those who celebrate see their circumstances as being wonderful: things are going well, and they desire that circumstances remain the same. There is no need for change. In contrast, those who lament ask, “How can it be?” or declare, “Things are not fair.” Those who lament are longing for change: things have to get better, justice must prevail.

The context of Lamentations takes us to a time when Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians. The jewel of Israel’s kingdom, Jerusalem, had been dismantled, destroyed, and decimated. How can it be that the city that God loved had been treated in such a way? This is the central lament found in the book of Lamentations.

Rah starts to draw parallels with America’s experience, noting implications for the church in America (and, I would add, Christian colleges). The American, and by implication the Western, church often has no reason to lament. It has enough wealth, power, and resources to be comfortable enough to celebrate its circumstances. Things do not have to change. This is the root of Rah’s concern. There is no desire or

need for the church or society to change its relationships, its systems, or how it relates to the world around it. Unfortunately, there are many on the margins of the church, our campuses, and society for whom lamentation is part of their experience. Injustice, poverty, illness, tragedy, and even death are ever present. There is no relief in sight. How can it be? These are not solely the experiences of those outside the church. It is the experience of many within our own church and campus communities.

As I write, I am reminded of the notion of theodicy (the defense of God). In the recent Paris attacks, the gunmen were noted to have shouted, “Allahu Akbar” (“our god is greater”). When tragedies occur, it does feel like YHWH is not so great; sometimes life events suggest that he might not be as omnipotent as we think.

The book of Lamentations hints that theodicy is unnecessary, for YHWH does not need a defender. Lamentations is a declaration of his seeming injustice and negligence. His favored city Jerusalem, the jewel of his chosen people, has been sacked, destroyed, and eradicated. How is that possible? How can that be? Has YHWH abandoned his people? Does he not care? Is he impotent? These are the questions at the root of the scriptural book. Rah notes that God’s people have been marginalized, scattered, and made insignificant. He draws a parallel with today’s marginalized people. Those on the edges have much reason to be perplexed with their condition and context. When the Bible asserts that they are made in YHWH’s image and are to be considered children of the divine king, they wonder: What has happened? Does God not care?

But Rah notes that the book of Lamentations allows us to so inquire of YHWH, who is not put out by our questions. He notes that, “Lament is an act of protest as the lamenter is allowed to express indignation and even outrage about the experience of suffering. The lamenter talks back to God and ultimately petitions him for help in the midst of pain” (44). Rah sees it as a relational act: “Lament is honesty before God and each other” (47). YHWH needs no defense.

Rah uses the examination of Lamentations as the opportunity to speak into American society, stating: “If something has truly been declared dead, there is no use in sugarcoating that reality” (47). Many in American society do not fully recognize or acknowledge the racial history of the nation. There is death and rottenness in our history. Rah notes, “Our nation’s tainted racial history reflects a serious inability to deal with reality. Something has died and we refuse to participate in the funeral” (47). On many occasions, “[t]he story of suffering is ... swept under the rug in order not to create discomfort or bad feelings” (48). Herein lies the value of Lamentations; it “provides a truthful telling of the dead body in the room. The tragedy of our racial history requires the lament of a funeral dirge” (50).

Rah continues through each chapter of Lamentations. In providing the context and content, he moves the implications into our current time. Lamentations is a book of worship and hymns. Rah notes the value of this type of worship: “Stories of suffering can never be buried when lament is an important and central aspect of the church’s worship life (59) Our culture and church are uncomfortable with pain and

suffering, partly because we live “in a cultural context that upholds triumph and victory but fails to engage with suffering” (66). Therefore, “praise replaces lament. We skip the important step of lament and offer supplication in a contextual vacuum. Praise, therefore, can seem hollow when neither lament nor petition has been sufficiently offered” (66).

Rah notes,

The example in Lamentations (as well as the book of Job) may be that lament needs to run its course. Neither the absence of human comfort nor the human attempt to diffuse and minimize the emotional response of lament serves the suffering other. It only adds to the suffering. The appropriate response would be to express presence and an expression of lament alongside the sufferer rather than explain away the suffering. (67)

But allowing pain and suffering to run its course makes the church uncomfortable, which emphasizes the value of this scripture: “the book of Lamentations offers a counternarrative to the predominant narrative of the American church” (72). However, as Rah points out, for those who experienced the loss of Jerusalem, “the assurance that God would always be there for them [was] called into question” (76).

Rah suggests that this is part of the discomfort felt by the American church. He writes: “Western cultural values and how we live out Christian faith in the United States are presented as theologically normative and oppress voices from outside of the Western context” (78). He rightfully identifies

the self-perception of privilege for the American church. Our standing as the saviors of the world is assumed and not challenged. The book of Lamentations

reminds us that privilege is a standing before God that should not be co-opted for the sake of furthering a self-perceived exceptionalism. The language of lament is the language of humility. (95)

Israel had perceived themselves as the center of all things; the American church faces that same delusion.

As I was writing this review, we celebrated the birth of Jesus. As I am sure it was in many other communities in America, the focus in my community was on the hope that the birth of Jesus provides. There was no recognition of the pain, injustice, and discouragement that surrounded Jesus's coming. There was certainly little recognition of the pain within our own local communities, or on a national level either. When a community does not recognize that segments of its community are in pain, it does not recognize a true need for a message of hope. There is no need to lament, because things are good, they do not need to change. But then, there is no need for good news either. There is no need for Jesus. My own observations of the American church and, more specifically, many suburban, predominant-culture congregations, is that they seldom need to acknowledge distressing or despairing situations. This subconsciously or consciously leads us to celebration, with little acknowledgement of the pain in our local, national, or global communities.

The prophetic nature of this volume is tied to the format that Rah finds in Lamentations. He provides context and reflection for the scriptural passages, and then looks at how this small book of hymns might speak to early twenty-first-century America. Rah is poignant and surgical.



There is a cutting edge to the judgment noted in Lamentations, but, as Rah points out, YHWH's response is also full of mercy and redemption. Rah takes the scriptural passage, discerns contemporary and societal implications, and writes with the hard perception of understanding and conviction. As the book of Lamentations models, Rah also moves beyond despair and provides a glimpse of hope and reconciliation.

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