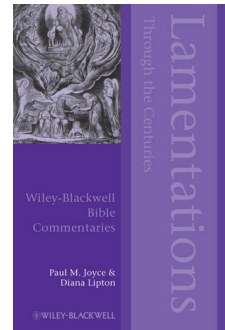


Lamentations through the Centuries, by Paul M. Joyce and Diana Lipton

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This volume in the Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentaries series presents a “reception exegesis” (17) of the book of Lamentations. The editors’ preface sets out the series aim: to encourage “readers to consider how the biblical text has been interpreted down the ages and ... to open their eyes to different uses of the Bible in contemporary culture” (ix). In the case of Lamentations, this requires reckoning with some 2500 years of interpretation.

The authors’ introduction sets out some specific considerations taken when considering Lamentations and its reception (1–25). A brief overview of the book of Lamentations directs readers to Provan (1991), Berlin (1992), and Hillers (2002) for introductions to the usual historical-critical discussions (2). There follows a discussion of the traditional ascription to Jeremiah,



accompanied by paintings for illustration (2–6). Indeed, Joyce and Lipton identify this ascription as one of the key difficulties in undertaking reception-critical work of Lamentations. That is, since the book from earliest times was ascribed to Jeremiah, there is a question as to whether *every* appearance of Jeremiah in succeeding works of art or literature might obliquely allude to the book of Lamentations, even though modern biblical scholars generally agree that he was not the historical author of the poems (17). Similarly, works entitled “Lamentations” may or may not be explicitly referencing the biblical book. Joyce and Lipton take the decision to consider these regardless of any intentionality (17).

Joyce and Lipton suggest that Lamentations is a book whose “time has come” (7). They locate the origins of current scholarly interest in Brueggemann’s seminal article and highlight several important recent studies from the UK, Germany, and the US, as well as identifying a similar interest in continental systematic theology (7). It is notable that no works from the global south appear in their list of “important contributions” (7)—Liz Boase’s work (Australia), at the very least, should rate a mention. Similarly, when they later observe the increasing recognition of reception *history* as a discipline they note (12) the contributions of the series in which they write, the *Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, and Sheffield’s annual, *Biblical Reception*; but not *Relegere* (established 2011).

The introduction offers a whistle-stop tour of contexts in which Lamentations has been “received,” including the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls, *Targum Lamentations*, Josephus, Jewish liturgical practice, the Church Fathers, Medieval Jewish Rabbinics, liturgical settings for Holy Week from the Middle Ages onwards, the reformers, mystic and devotional writers, Eastern European Jewish modernist thought, Western European social contexts, the Shoah, the Balkans, South Africa, and 9/11; it spans media as diverse as art, modern novels and autobiography, political philosophy and historical criticism (7–9).

Joyce and Lipton then sketch out their understanding of reception history, beginning with John Sawyer’s definition thereof as “the study of post-biblical readings and artistic representations . . . that is, the history of the effect the Bible has had on its readers.” They helpfully observe Jonathan Roberts’s distinction between reception as “every act or word of interpretation of the Bible” and reception history as “a scholarly enterprise, consisting of selecting and collating shards of that infinite wealth of reception material

in accordance with the particular interest of the historian concerned, and giving them a narrative frame.” These definitions are set against Yvonne Sherwood’s “afterlife” of a biblical text, and Joyce and Lipton locate their volume as one that “falls somewhere between an afterlife of the book of Lamentations and a reception history” (11). They rightly include academic biblical criticism as one oeuvre under consideration when examining the reception history of Lamentations (11), recognising that the way in which historical critics/biblical scholars have approached Lamentations is as worthy of study as the way in which creators of other works have used or responded to it.

In defining the audience for reception history—and hence their audience—the authors identify biblical scholars, “members of faith communities that hold the Bible sacred,” (13) those who “turn to the Bible in times of trauma” (13), and “all who enjoy being taken on a journey, through time and space, in the company of a text that has spoken to an astoundingly varied audience, and continues to speak” (14). And indeed, there is much in the volume that should be of interest to all of these groups.

Joyce and Lipton then acknowledge some of the ethical questions of undertaking reception history of Lamentations. First, they note that there must necessarily be some selectivity. Joyce and Lipton identify as priorities in their selection “feminist issues and . . . sensitivities in the relationship between Christians and Jews, and where possible also . . . questions bearing on race” (14). Second, they raise the question of enjoying the artistry of Lamentations and its receptions when the content it covers is so disturbing. Third, they acknowledge the much-discussed problematic of Lamentations’ depiction of women; fourth, the appropriation of the Hebrew Bible and supersessionist attitudes in Christian interpretation; and fifth, the injunction that victims turn for relief and comfort to their abusers (14–15).

Duly acknowledged, Joyce and Lipton set out their aim: “to showcase the book of Lamentations as it has been interpreted, alluded to and used in as wide as possible a range of media” (16). They cover an impressive array of material, taking in both obvious (Deutero-Isaiah, Tallis, Chagall) and less obvious receptions (Zimbabwean junk art, Virginia Woolf) of Lamentations. While they have raised the issue of selectivity, however, some further explanation of how they selected the particular material with which they chose to showcase Lamentations would be welcome. To be sure, Joyce and Lipton include autobiographical cameos at the end of the introduction, and these go some way toward explaining the choices. That the authors are a male Christian (Joyce) and a female Jew (Lipton), both Oxford educated, could

account for the particular care given to including feminist perspectives and due sensitivity to both Jewish and Christian interpretations, as well as the predominance of the UK and Europe in the chosen receptions' origins. But a volume such as this cannot be a comprehensive catalogue of all receptions, and so some further explanation of why *these* works were chosen for inclusion would be helpful.

Joyce and Lipton further define their commentary as “reception exegesis” (17), and this is, I think, where they make a distinctive contribution. Reception exegesis is the name they give to the phenomenon whereby receptions of Lamentations are not just studied for how they have used and responded to the text, but are then in turn brought to bear on the interpretation and exposition of Lamentations. In this way the volume is quasi-midrashic, but whereas midrash brings other verses of the Bible to bear on the interpretation of each verse of Lamentations, Joyce and Lipton bring “an interpretation or use of the Lamentations verse” (18) under consideration to bear on its exegesis. As such, they intend to “show the biblical scholars bent on interpretation do not have a monopoly on explication of the ancient text” (18).

Their “reception exegesis” as it plays out through the commentary produces some very fruitful observations, illuminating the text in new and sometimes surprising ways. This practice of turning the reception back to the text in order to exegete in light of it is not undertaken in every case, but where it is it is groundbreaking. For example, in their discussion of Lam 4:10, Joyce and Lipton discuss a poem by Abraham Sutzkever from the Vilna ghetto in 1943, in which the poet does not consider himself worthy to eat his infant son and be his grave. Turning this back to (re)interpret Lam 4:10, Joyce and Lipton are then able to suggest that instead of hunger driving compassionate women to eat their children in an abhorrent subversion of the nurturing role (as usually inferred by commentators), it could be that “these mothers longed to return their babies to the place from which they came, not to the earth, but to their own bodies” (159).

After the introduction the remainder of the volume presents the commentary, working through each chapter verse by verse, or unit by unit. For each verse or unit, one, or maybe two, examples of how the text has been used are presented, sometimes with comment on how the receiving work can then be brought to bear on the exegesis of the text, with some genuine illumination of the text thereby. Each chapter includes a handy bibliography of the works cited. It is a particular challenge of this kind of work that the many receptions must be summarised and communicated in brief, giving enough

context to the work under discussion such that a reader of the commentary who has not read, seen, heard, or experienced the reception itself can understand the point being made. Joyce and Lipton achieve this admirably, although it is interesting to note that a fair bit of their discussion of reception comes by way of a third party again—for example, discussion of 4Q179 comes as interpreted by Tal Ilan (36–39). This adds another dimension again to the notion of reception—not only is a reception of Lamentations being discussed, but it is done so as that reception has, in turn, been received by other scholars. This volume has much to offer, both in its distinctive understanding of its task as reception *exegesis*, rather than reception history, and in the particular receptions under discussion, which are then in turn used to illuminate the biblical text.

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