Short Paper:

Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Lamentations 3

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Trauma and the expressions of that trauma are not exclusive realities and concepts relevant only to our modern experiences. Ancient communities also experienced catastrophic violence, displacement, death, loss, and disruption of their understanding of not only themselves, but also of God. Historically, there have been a variety of events that have been considered traumatic or have induced trauma. For example, as presented in the Biblical narrative, the rape of Dinah in Genesis, the ban of nations as found in Deuteronomy 7:1-2, and the sack of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile are all events that are traumatic, both to those who experienced these events and to us in the present. The book of Lamentations emerges out of the aforementioned traumatic experiences of the destruction of Jerusalem. In its text, Lamentations' creative poetic expression gives voice to the devastation of Jerusalem's destruction. In particular, chapter 3 sees the speaker move from a profound affliction and despair towards a hope that is grounded in God's steadfast love.

In addition to the act of experiencing trauma, talking about trauma and coping through the creation of some form of narrative, be it a book, a poem, or other works, has also been occurring for generations.

What perhaps is more "modern" is the systematic processing of trauma. Modern therapy techniques, including cognitive behavioral therapy, which was started by Dr. Aaron Beck in the 1960s, are a more recent development in processing trauma.[1] Even more recently, there has been an exploration of therapy modalities that support children. Drs. Judith Cohen, Anthony Mannarino, and Esther Deblinger began the foundational work of trauma-informed cognitive behavioral therapy, or TF-CBT, in the 1990s.[2]

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[1] Joan Granucci Lesser and Donna Saia Pope, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2011), 80-82**.**
[2] Lesser and Pope, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, 478.

There is often a temptation to apply modern approaches, concepts, and theories to old texts. Sometimes it's appropriate, and sometimes it's not. The approach proposed below is modern yet appropriate, as it serves as a lens for understanding the biblical text. The terminology may be modern, but as we see across the biblical narrative, the concepts aren't foreign to the writers- perhaps the words are different, but the principles are present.

Although Lamentations is not a therapeutic text or even a trauma narrative in the modern sense, read through the contemporary lens of processing trauma therapeutically, such as that of Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, it provides a constructive interpretive lens whereby its poetry can be understood as a communal trauma narrative that provides language through which a community of people collectively identify and express their suffering, process the meaning of catastrophic loss, challenge theological interpretations of their trauma, and begin to recover a sense of connection, agency, and hope.

The purpose of this reading is not to diagnose the author of the text with PTSD or any other mental health condition. It is not the intention to suggest that ancient Israel possessed modern trauma therapy psychological categories. The intention is to reflect on how TF-CBT provides a contemporary interpretive lens for identifying patterns of trauma narration, emotional expression, cognitive processing, and meaning-making that can be observed within the text of Lamentations 3.

To begin, it is first important to gain an understanding of the ways in which professional therapists and social workers help their clients to process trauma. There are myriad techniques, one of which is Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT).[3] TF-CBT is one mental health treatment modality, amongst several, that has been proven effective in working

[3] Lesser and Pope, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, 478.

with children and adolescents who have experienced traumatic events.[4] There are several key components, one of which is the creation of a trauma narrative. It is important to note that not every component of TF-CBT can be mapped directly onto Lamentations 3. The aim is to show that there are two interconnected concepts that are particularly useful for the interpretation of this text: the trauma narrative and cognitive processing.

While this modality is heavily used for children, the foundational Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Principles found in TF-CBT are often used for adults who have experienced trauma. One of those is referred to as the Cognitive Triangle. This triangle describes a reciprocal relationship that often exists amongst thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Our thoughts can influence feelings and behaviors, while feelings and behaviors can also reinforce our or challenge our patterns of thinking.[5] One reason that this therapy is effective in treating trauma and other diagnoses is that extensive work is done to address this triangle. The goal of CBT and TF-CBT is to disrupt the cognitive triangle cycle.[6]

In discussing trauma narratives, there is an integral component: these narratives present the following: This is what happened. This is what I experienced. This is how it affected me. This is how I feel. Trauma narratives can be verbal, written, or artistic. It is through the creation and processing of these narratives that meaning-making, hope, and movement toward healing can begin to take hold.

In thinking about Lamentations 3, we can apply these principles to gain further insight into the text. Both CBT and TF-CBT recognize that trauma can fragment a person's

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[4] Greg Cook and Joan Littlefield Cook, *The World of Children*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2010), 241.
[5] Lauren B. Alloy, John H. Riskind, and Margaret J. Manos, *Abnormal Psychology: Current Perspectives*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 60.
[6] Lesser and Pope, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, 82.

understanding of what happened.[7] Trauma narratives help the survivor put words around the experience.

Lamentations does something similar to a trauma narrative, but on a communal level. Lamentations, as a whole, is one way that survivors of this trauma were able to put words around their experiences. In this book, the destruction of Jerusalem is not sanitized. Often, it is tempting to do the following: smooth out the edges of our pain. Instead, this text overtly remembers the struggle. It remembers: the destruction of the city, starvation, death, displacement, humiliation, the suffering of children, the loss of religious and social institutions, and the apparent absence of God. The community, therefore, refuses to create a false narrative in which everything is immediately explained, resolved, or smoothed out. Lament becomes a way of remembering trauma truthfully for this community of people

Looking at specifics, Lamentations 3 provides an especially interesting and useful example because it moves through several psychological and theological states within a few verses. Lamentations 3 does not demonstrate that if someone thinks positively, everything gets better. The movement of the text is powerful because hope can occur in the middle of continuing suffering, as we will see.

In the first verse of the text, the speaker begins with profound distress: "I am one who has seen affliction."[8] The speaker then describes feeling trapped, abandoned, and without hope. The speaker/author also writes about darkness, confinement, physical suffering, a loss of peace and hope.

In Lamentations 3:19-21, the author deliberately remembers the suffering of the community. They write, “The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and

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[7] Lesser and Pope, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, 82**.**
[8] The New Interpreter's Study Bible. Edited by Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, page 1147.

gall!"[9] However, they eventually arrive at hope when they write, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope."[10] What is seen here is a remembering that is not positive. It doesn't skip directly to sunshine, butterflies, and rainbows. This remembering likely would cause painful memories, yet this remembering becomes the mechanism through which hope becomes possible.

In this text, the trauma has not disappeared. The speaker continues to acknowledge suffering afterward. The movement is not: trauma, positive thinking, healing. The author does not state, "everything is okay now!", but rather states that "everything is not okay, but I can still imagine God's faithfulness within my current reality."

Moving on to the likely most well-known part of Lamentations 3, verses 22-24 states, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end."[11] This famous verse is not one that negates all that is written before it. The author isn't saying that God's love is something that invalidates the lament that precedes this verse. Powerfully, God's steadfast love becomes a source of hope that is both within and around lament.

Instead of positive thinking yielding healing, it is trauma, naming suffering, remembering, wrestling, and finally the possibility of hope. This distinction is important when applying TF-CBT. Healthy trauma processing is not the same thing as forcing a positive interpretation onto suffering. Processing trauma, both for the Israelites and us today, is not about a story that ends with "and they lived happily ever after." It is about naming, remembering, wrestling, and the possibility of hope- living in a new reality that is beyond the trauma, but also acknowledges the events at the same time. The lament that is found in the Book of Lamentations is a faithful response to trauma.

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[9] The New Interpreter's Study Bible. Edited by Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, page 1148.
[10] The New Interpreter's Study Bible. Edited by Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, page 1148.
[11] The New Interpreter's Study Bible. Edited by Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, page 1148.

Ultimately, reading Lamentations through the lens of Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy does not mean imposing a modern psychological framework upon an ancient text or suggesting that the biblical writers understood trauma in precisely the same way that we do today. By engaging in this overlay of TF-CBT to Lamentations 3, it allows us to recognize that the human experience of trauma has remained remarkably consistent across time. Lamentations gives voice to a community that has experienced such catastrophic losses while also refusing to minimize, sanitize, or quickly resolve that suffering.

Through remembering, naming, expressing, and wrestling with the meaning of what has happened, this community began to make sense of an experience that disrupted their understanding of themselves, their identity, their world, and even their relationship with God. In this way, Lamentations demonstrates that bearing witness to trauma can itself become an important part of processing trauma.

The movement of Lamentations 3 from affliction and despair and onward toward the possibility of hope does not erase, or even fully ease, the suffering that came before it. Instead, and perhaps powerfully, hope emerges within this reality of suffering.

There is an important lesson that can be gleaned from Lamentations for both the world of biblical interpretation as well as the world of contemporary trauma-informed care: Lamentations demonstrates that bearing witness to trauma can in and of itself become a form of meaning-making. This text does not present that the community has healed from their experiences. It presents that the community has found a language to articulate and remember their suffering while also creating a space for hope.

Read through the contemporary lens of TF-CBT, Lamentations suggests that movement toward healing can begin when our trauma, suffering, and human experiences are given

language; when suffering is acknowledged; when individuals and communities wrestle honestly with their experiences; and when hope becomes possible without denying the past. Lamentations, therefore, remains a powerful witness that the work of processing trauma is not only a modern concern for us in the present age; it is part of the enduring human struggle to remember, make meaning, reconnect, and find a way forward.

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