

Divine Silence and Human Suffering in Lamentations: A Theological-Canonical Reading

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Description

This article is a research project that takes the topic of Divine Silence and Human Suffering in Lamentations: A Theological-Canonical Reading. The study seeks to investigate how the poem's imagery, repetition, and voice structure negotiate divine hiddenness and human suffering.

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Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of divine silence as portrayed in the book of Lamentations, focusing particularly on Lamentations 3: 1-39. It argues that the silence of God in the text is not mere absence but a theological space that invites existential questioning, protest, and ultimately, the hope of the hidden presence of God. Employing a literary and canonical-theological approach, the study treats Lamentations as a final shape, attentive to its internal structure, canonical resonance, and poetic devices within the Hebrew Scriptures. It investigates how the poem's imagery, repetition, and voice structure negotiate divine hiddenness and human suffering. The analysis demonstrates that rather than silencing human lament, divine silence intensifies the tension between trust and human questioning. The article contributes to biblical theology by showing how Lamentations models a posture of holy protest and waiting before a God who is hidden yet not absent.

Keywords: *divine silence; lamentations; hiddenness of God; canonical theology*

INTRODUCTION

The problem of divine silence is a perennial theological and existential challenge, steering up imagination or question such as, why does God seem silent when human beings suffer? The book of Lamentations remains one of the most profound theological responses to human suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures. It captures the raw pain of a community devastated by divine silence and catastrophe. Among its chapters, Lamentations 3 stands out as the theological and emotional centre of the book, presenting a deeply communal and personal voice wrestling with divine hiddenness. The question that arises is not merely why God seems silent, but what theological meaning this silence holds. This article argues that divine silence in Lamentations is not simply abandonment or absence, but an intentional theological posture, one that invites a deeper faith expressed through waiting, hope, and protest amid despair.

In biblical theology, divine silence has long been read as a challenge to faith. Yet, within the canonical context of Lamentations, silence functions not as a void, but as a theological space. It shapes the experience of the lamenter of

suffering and becomes a medium for encounter with God. As Harris and Mandolfo suggest, interpreting divine silence is itself a communal act of faith (Harris & Mandolfo, 2013, pp. 133–143). This study builds upon such insight but extends it by exploring silence not only as a theme but as a poetic and structural dynamic woven into the very fabric of the text. The acrostic design, repetitive imagery, and layered voices of Lamentations 3 reveal that silence is built into the theological and architecture intent of the poem. Thus, silence becomes generative, rather than being a deficiency, an opening where lament, trust, and divine hiddenness coexist.

Previous scholarship on divine suffering and silence has approached the subject from several angles, like, historical-critical, form-critical, theological, and literary. Studies have focused on the genre of city laments and the function of mourning in Ancient Near Eastern literature, while others have examined the acrostic form and shifting voices within the poetry. For example, Kang reads Lamentations as a multi-voiced text in which divine communication operates through layered human expression (Kang, 2009, p. 278). Similarly, Gladson interprets Lamentation 3 as a dialogue of tension between hope and hiddenness (Gladson, 2010, p. 324). More recent scholarship has expanded the discussion, such as Fabrikant-Burke who explore the dual dynamics of divine hiddenness and hostility in Psalm 88 (Fabrikant-Burke, 2021, p. 161), also, Venter connects divine silence to communal trauma and pandemic spirituality, and Assis who examines the gendered and royal failures implied in the lament in Lamentations (Assis, 2024, p. 470; Venter, 2022, p. 12). Also, “the Ethics of Lament” of Ridlehoover, which engages how lament shapes discipleship and theological reflection on suffering (Ridlehoover, 2022, pp. 28–45). However, few studies integrate a canonical-theological reading that synthesizes poetic form, structure, and theological importance within the final shape of the Hebrew canon. This article seeks to fill that gap.

This study adopts a canonical-theological and literary-poetic methodology, combining close textual reading with theological interpretation. Drawing on canonical criticism of Brevard Childs, the text is read in its final canonical form, giving priority to its theological shape rather than its historical reconstructions. Thus, Lamentations is approached as a deliberate composition within the Scriptures of Israel, an interpretive whole that communicates theological meaning through its structure and canonical placement, following the book of Jeremiah.

A literary-poetic analysis complements this approach by examining how repetition, voice transitions, and imagery express silence and divine hiddenness. For instance, verses such as “He has led me and made me walk in darkness” (Lamentations 3:2) and “Let him sit alone in silence” (Lamentations 3:28) reveal how poetic devices intensify the tension between silence and speech. Intertextual resonance is also explored, especially with the Psalms, Jeremiah, and Job, to show how the theme of divine silence participates in a wider biblical theology of hiddenness, waiting, and lament.

This study proceeds in four major steps: First, Textual-Structure Analysis of Lamentations 3:1-39, used to identify how poetic and rhetorical forms convey silence. Second, theological interpretation of divine silence as a space of encounter, and not absence, third, canonical correlation with the broader scriptural witness like Psalms, Jeremiah, and Wisdom

traditions. Fourth involves the theological and pastoral implications for contemporary understandings of faith, silence, and suffering. This integrated approach ensures that the reading is textually grounded, canonically sensitive, and theologically responsible. The article thus moves beyond thematic treatment toward a theological synthesis, reading silence as an intentional, meaning-bearing dimension of the biblical text.

This research seeks to reveal that divine silence in Lamentations performs a theological function within the canonical text, it draws human lament into dialogue with divine mystery. The objectives are fourfold; one, to analyse how poetic and structural elements express silence, two, to demonstrate how silence shapes the theological meaning of suffering, three, to situate this reading within the canonical context of the Hebrew Bible, and four, to suggest implications for contemporary theological and pastoral reflection on suffering.

By approaching Lamentations canonically, the article emphasises that divine silence is not an interruption of revelation but part of its rhythm. The silence of God in Lamentations 3 intensifies human faith and voice, transforming despair into an act of covenantal persistence. In this way, silence becomes not a denial of divine presence but an alternative mode of divine communication, where absence speaks, and hiddenness becomes revelation

METHOD

This article adopts a literary-poetic and canonical-theological methodology, combining insights from canonical criticism, theological hermeneutics and narrative-poetic analysis. Canonical-Theological Approach: Drawing from the work of Brevard Childs and others, canonical criticism reads the text in its final form and gives its theological shape priority over purely historical reconstructions. This method treats the canonical text as authoritative for faith communities (Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*) and pays attention to how the text functions in its canonical setting. In this study, Lamentations is read as a deliberated shape in the Hebrew canon, and not as a collection of fragments.

Literary-Poetic and Structural Analysis: The article will perform close reading of the poetic text of Lamentations 3: 1-39 and its canonical neighbours, with attention to repetition, syntactic breaks, voice transitions, parallelism, and imagery as regard silence, darkness, absence or presence. Techniques from literary criticism, like structural coherence, rhetorical patterning, and voice analysis (polyphony), will surface how silence is functionally integrated into the architecture of the poem. For instance, exploring how the repeated "I have seen affliction" (lamed-he) motifs interplay with the absence of direct divine speech.

Intertextual and Canonical Resonance: The study will consider intertextual echoes e.g. Psalms, Isaiah, to enrich the theological reading, so as to show how silence in Lamentations resonates with other biblical texts. In addition, the canonical placement of Lamentations, which follows Jeremiah, is significant, expressing silence as part of the prophetic-traumatic journey within scriptures of Israel.

Theological Hermeneutics: Finally, the reading moves from description to theological reflection, how does biblical theology conceive of silence, protest, waiting, and hiddenness in

this text? The theological reflection engages theological, postmodern, and existential literature on God's hiddenness, e.g. *Deus absconditus*, and the role of lament as a posture of faith. Gladson's reading of Lamentations 3 as a voice in tension with divine hiddenness is a helpful interlocutor (Gladson, 2010, p. 327).

Procedural Steps: The first step taken was to identify key verses in Lamentations 3 that most accentuate silence, e.g. 3:28, 3:41-42, 3:55-57. Also, the second step was to perform close reading and poetic structure mapping. Likewise, the third step was to trace canonical and intertextual echoes. Furthermore, the fourth step was to reflect theologically on how silence functions in the economy of suffering and hope of the text. The fifth step was to draw implications for biblical theology and contemporary readers. This mixed methodology ensures that the reading is textually grounded, theologically responsible, and canonically sensitive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A structured presentation of the findings, that is organised thematically, and followed by theological discussion is as follow:

Silence Framed: The Absence of Divine Speech

The book of Lamentations opens with a haunting paradox, the people cry out, yet God does not speak. From the very first chapter, the city laments, "How deserted lies the city--- the Lord has afflicted her" (Lamentations 1:1, 1:5), but no divine voice responds. This striking absence of speech establishes silence as a core theological motif. As Brown (2023, p. 99) observes, Lamentations is dominated by human lament, not divine proclamation. Hence, the silence of God becomes the unseen horizon against which human anguish unfolds. This silence reaches its most intense and personal expression in Lamentations 3. The poet repeatedly addresses God, saying, "I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit" (Lamentations 3:55), yet, no audible reply comes. Gladson notes that although "God never responds," the divine name pervades the chapter (Gladson, 2010, p. 324). The paradox of presence and silence thus coexists, implying that, God is hidden but not absent, silent yet he is still invoked. This "negative space," as the poem constructs it, allows the voice of the lamenter to echo more deeply. Silence here becomes generative, as it deepens the dialogue and intensifies the longing.

Recent scholarship on divine hiddenness helps illuminate this tension. Fabrikant-Burke reveals in Psalm 88 that divine hiddenness in Hebrew poetry often signals not absence but a concealed or even hostile presence (Fabrikant-Burke, 2021, p. 161). This nuance resonates with Lamentations 3, where the silence of God is experienced as both possibility and punishment, as both waiting and wounding. The cyclical structure of fleeting hope and suffering, "I have seen affliction" (Lamentations 3:1) followed by "The Lord is my portion" (Lamentations 3:24), embodies this theological oscillation. Therefore, silence is not a gap to be filled but the very space in which faith struggles to breathe.

Poetic Techniques That Amplify Silence

The power of silence in Lamentations 3 is structural and not only thematic. The poetic devices of the poem, evident in its imagery, repetitions, and shifting voices, they all work together to dramatise the experience of divine hiddenness.

Imagery of Darkness and Concealment: the metaphors of the poem, like darkness, pit, brokenness, and hidden paths, construct spatial images of divine absence. “He has wailed me in so that I cannot escape” (Lamentations 3:7) portrays confinement not only physical but spiritual. Nguyen interprets these metaphors as signs of divine action that is deliberately obscured, inviting the suffering to wrestle with mystery rather than mastery (Nguyen, 2024, pp. 315–318).

Repetition and Cyclical Motifs: from verses 3:1-20 of Lamentations, repeated expressions such as “He has made me dwell in darkness” and “He has broken my bones” create an echoing rhythm that mirrors the persistence of suffering. These repetitions deny closure, they sustain the tension of divine silence. When the refrain “Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope” (Lamentations 3:21) interrupts the cycle, it does not abolish silence, it reframes it within a fragile trust. The structure itself suggests that faith arises not from resolution but from endurance within the silence (Waters, 2022, pp. 410–420).

Voice Transitions and Polyphony: Lamentations 3 moves between “we”, “I”, and direct address to “You.” These subtle shifts blur the line between communal and individual lament, reflecting the theological tension between collective trauma and personal suffering. Turner notes that this polyphony gives the poem its dialogical power, showing that silence is never total, because there are multiple voices that persist within it (Turner, 2024, p. 47).

The Command to Be Silent: Lamentations 3:28 issues a profound instruction, that, “Let him sit alone in silence, for the Lord has laid it on him.” Here, human silence mirrors divine silence. The quietness of the afflicted person becomes an act of waiting and surrender, not defeat. The silence of the sufferer and the silence of God meet in paradox, thereby forming a dialogue without words (Brown, 2023, p. 99). Together, these literary strategies make silence not an absence of sound but a theological rhythm within the architecture of the poem.

Silence as Theological Space

Silence in Lamentations functions as a theological interlocutor, and not merely as a background condition, a space where protest, hiddenness, and trust intersect. The questions of the poet, that, “Why have you forgotten us forever?” (Lamentations 5:20), do not signal unbelief but covenantal persistence. To question God is to remain in relationship with God, when it comes to biblical lament. Fleming argues that the pervasive use of the divine name within Lamentations implies hidden presence, not divine withdrawal. In this sense, silence becomes an apophatic theology in narrative form, highlighting the refusal of God to speak is itself a mode of revelation (Fleming, 2025, p. 25). Gladson connects this with the tradition of *Deus absconditus*, the God who hides precisely to preserve divine mystery and freedom (Gladson, 2010, p. 327). Then, the silence is not divine neglect but divine transcendence experienced through human limitation. Moreover, the posture of the poem of waiting,

affirming that, “The Lord is good to those who wait for him” (Lamentations 3:25), transforms silence into the ground of faith. Chen and Rodriguez suggest that waiting is not passive resignation but active trust. Within the economy of Lamentations, silence refines faith, it teaches the community to hope without proof and to trust without speech (Chen & Rodriguez, 2022, p. 451).

Canonical and Theological Resonance

Silence in Lamentations echoes and converses with other texts, when read within the Hebrew canon: *First*, Psalms of Lament: Silence is not foreign to the Psalter. Psalms often cry out, “Do not be silent” e.g. Psalm 109:1. The motif of pleading “Why are you silent?” recurs, for example, Psalm 22 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and Psalm 88 where hiddenness and non-response are predominant themes. Fabrikant-Burke shows that the hidden God of Psalm 88 is present, hostile, not absent, in a way in which Lamentations also suggests through its protest (Fabrikant-Burke, 2021, p. 165). The structure of lament invites expectation of divine speech, so silence is felt as anomaly (Waters, 2022, pp. 410–420).

Second, Prophetic Typologies: Lamentations follow Jeremiah, the prophet who often laments that God has been silent toward his pleas (Jackson, 2022, pp. 489–490). The prophetic tradition includes period of divine hiddenness. Thus, silence in Lamentations continues a trajectory within prophetic theology and the suffering of Israel (Gonzales, 2025, pp. 13–15). Jeremiah often expresses feeling unheard or that the word of God rebounds (Jeremiah 22; 20: 7-9), deeply informing voice of Lamentations.

Third, Wisdom Traditions and Hidden Counsel: In the wisdom books, .e.g. Job, silence is part of divine mystery (Hendricks, 2023, pp. 201–206). God sometimes answers through hidden wisdom, Job 38-41. Lamentations places itself in this tension, lament without easy answers. Thus silence in Lamentations is canonical, it does not stand alone but participates in the theological memory of Israel (Quintero, 2022, pp. 305–310). As Job eventually receives speech from God, chapters 38-41, shows that Lamentation does not resolve silence in that way, which shapes its unique theological posture.

Theological Implications for Suffering

The findings lead to several theological conclusions. First, silence sanctifies lament: It validates human emotion and protest as legitimate forms of faith. Second, hiddenness expresses divine sovereignty. The freedom of God includes the freedom not to speak, and this mystery resists reduction to human explanation (Davies, 2021, p. 322). Third, silence cultivates waiting, underscoring that faith in silence becomes formative, teaching hope and endurance amid uncertainty. Finally, for exile or communities of trauma, Lamentations models a faithful engagement with silence. Owens and Venter affirm that silence, when inhabited faithfully, can become a space of transformation and healing (Owens, 2021, pp. 410–412; Venter, 2022). Therefore, divine hiddenness is not the end of theology but its beginning, a call to speak, believe amid the unspoken, and wait.

Recommendations

Further intertextual studies: A deeper comparative study with Psalms, Jeremiah, Job, and Ecclesiastes could refine how silence functions across literature of Israel, enriching the canonical theological matrix in which Lamentations rests, especially, comparing different Hebrew words for “darkness”, “hide”, “silence”, etc., to map varied experiences of hiddenness.

Reception History Exploration: Examine how early Christian and Jewish interpreters, e.g. Dead Sea Scroll fragments, Qumran, Targums, and Christians e.g. Church Fathers, received the interpretations of divine silence in Lamentations. Did they supply speech to God? How did they cope with the silence? How did interpreters address unanswered lament?

Application in Trauma and Pastoral Theology: Use this reading as basis for a pastoral theology of silence in contexts of suffering, exile, war, social collapse. How might faith communities learn from Lamentations to inhabit silence rather than instantly fill it?

Comparatively Theology of Silence: Engage dialogue with other religious traditions, e.g. Jewish apophatic theology, Christian mysticism, Islamic theological negative on hiddenness, to deepen theological reflection on divine hiddenness, which may yield fruitful cross-theological insights.

Empirical Theological Research: Investigate how contemporary believers experience divine silence, e.g. via qualitative interviews, and see whether the biblical model of silence in Lamentations can offer interpretive categories for modern faith struggles.

Practical Liturgy and Worship: Liturgical resources should be developed which allow space for lament, silence, protest, peradventure drawing from Lamentations, for congregations in exile or crisis.

Pastoral Theology and Lived Experience: Empirical research through qualitative interviews should be carried out with communities experiencing long silence in aspects such as illness, exile, disaster, and application of Lamentations model to spiritual practice.

CONCLUSION

The investigation of divine silence in Lamentations, particularly within chapter 3, reveals that silence is a theological structure built into the architecture of the poem, and is not meaninglessness. This theological-canonical reading of Lamentations 3 shows that silence in the text is neither accidental nor merely rhetorical, it is integral. Through poetic structure, imagery of hiddenness, canonical resonance, and voice shifts, the text shapes a space where human suffering is expressed, faith is maintained, and protest is voiced even without audible divine speech.

The poet builds a negative space in which human voices of protest, trust, and yearning press against the void, rather than simply presenting God as absent. The silence intensifies voice, it frames suffering without stifling it. The canonical-theological lens shows that the silence of Lamentations is coherent with Israel’s scriptural trajectory, laments in the Psalter, prophetic silence, hidden counsel of wisdom, and the tension of suffering within covenantal memory. Silence in Lamentations is thus a canonical knot binding lament, hope, and hiddenness. Hence, in Lamentations, silence is not absence, God is present in hiddenness, in

the whispered hope amidst despair, in the enduring of covenant. The voice of the speaker, the canonical echoes, the repeated refrains with Psalms, prophets, Wisdom, make clear that absence of speech does not mean absence of relationship.

This reading challenges modern assumptions that God must always speak clearly or audibly in suffering. The Hebrew Scriptures sometimes honour the opaque. Theologically, the silence invites humility, human beings cannot exhaust the expectation or presence of God. The paradox is that, in silence God still is, and the faithful must learn to wait, trust and protest. Moreover, this model of silence has existential and pastoral import. In individual or communal suffering, silence can be a space for lament rather than forced coherence. Suffering communities may find that silence is not absence, but the arena of faithful waiting. Summarily, Lamentations does not resolve silence but dignifies it as a mode of divine engagement, a hidden presence that summons persistent lament, hope, and trust. This underscores its vitality as a liturgical response in modern worship.

Theologically, the silence of Lamentations invites a reimagining of divine-human encounter. Silence becomes a mode of revelation that both communicates and conceals. In Gladson's terms, this is the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God whose silence preserves divine mystery and freedom. Within this silence, the human response of lament, crying out, protesting, questioning, becomes a form of covenantal engagement. Faith endures not because God speaks, but because the relationship persists even when God does not. In this way, Lamentations models a mature theology of faith amid divine reticence.

Readers are therefore challenged to re-think expectations of divine transparency and immediate response. Faith may require lamenting, waiting, even anger, without forfeiting integrity or hope. This reading contributes to biblical theology by offering a model of suffering that holds space for divine hiddenness and human voice, rather than demanding premature answers. In pastoral terms, Lamentations offers solace for those in prolonged silence or suffering, it dignifies protest, invites trust, and allows ambiguity. Likewise, it offers a theological anchor, that silence may itself be faithful presence, and needs not be spiritual failure. This silence speaks within the canonical witness of Scripture, asserting that God is present, though hidden, faithful, though wordless. Absence becomes a paradoxical presence in Lamentations, and the covenant endures in that silence.

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