Covenant in Dialogue? The Case of Lamentations 3

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The Book of Lamentations presents five poems that cry out in response to the devastation of conquest. In each case, the poetry seems to brim with visceral urgency, reflecting the distress and disorientation experienced by those who had survived the onslaught and now had to survive the ramifications. And yet it juxtaposes cries of despair with theological reflection, and utilises controlling poetic devices, which suggest a more measured response than has sometimes been assumed. While the most notable controlling feature is the formation of at least four of the poems into acrostics, scholars have increasingly recognised the importance of multiple voices as a means through which the poetry brings a semblance of order to the chaos. However, no agreement has yet been reached concerning the number of voices that may be detected, and the first studies of the effect of these voices have only emerged in recent years. The PhD research behind this paper seeks to contribute to this discussion by asking whether different voices are used so that the poet may enable a dialogue to take place between conflicting theological responses. Specifically, it examines the presence and influence of ideas about covenant – a theme that looms large in the Golah community's theological response to the same events, but is conspicuously absent from the language of Lamentations – to contend that while the Jerusalem survivors did not share their exiled compatriots' drive to 'solve' theological conflicts (i.e., according to the covenant, should this have happened or not?), they were starkly aware of the same issues and engaged with them by drawing them into the dialogues that take place in each poem and across the book. This paper focuses specifically on Lamentations 3, the poem which most clearly includes both dialogue and language elsewhere associated with covenant, to explore the way this literary technique has shaped what has so often been identified as cornerstone of the whole book.