

2016

Book Review: Prophetic Lament: A call for justice in troubled times by Soong Chan Rah

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Recommended Citation

Kinoshita, Glen (2016) "Book Review: Prophetic Lament: A call for justice in troubled times by Soong Chan Rah," *Justice, Spirituality & Education Journal*: Vol. 2016, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.biola.edu/jsej/vol2016/iss2016/6>

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PROPHETIC LAMENT: A CALL FOR JUSTICE IN TROUBLED TIMES (SOONG-CHAN RAH)
BY GLEN KINOSHITA

Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times by Soong-Chan Rah is a commentary on the book of Lamentations and is a recent publication in the Resonate series, a series of publications which seeks to address the need to bring the biblical message to Christ-followers in a culturally relevant manner.

The fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. paints the backdrop for the content of the book of Lamentations. The Israelites, once prosperous in their land, are now captive to the Babylonians. This causes many questions to arise in the minds of the Israelites. Where is God at a time such as this? Is there hope for our future?

Lament is the proper response to such a crisis. In the opening chapter, Rah addresses genres found in the Old Testament, one being poetry: “Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann situates the Hebrew poetic material into two broad categories: praise and lament. Westermann asserts that ‘as the two poles, they determine the nature of all speaking to God.’ Psalms that express worship for the good things that God has done are categorized as praise hymns. Laments are prayers of petition arising out of need” (p. 21). Lament is thus found throughout the Psalms as well as much of the Old Testament. By writing this commentary on Lamentations, Rah seeks to make lament a visible and prominent theme to the reader.

Prophetic Lament is also a commentary on contemporary culture as it relates to the Church and challenges the Church to confront its deficiencies. After making the point that lament is a significant theme throughout the Bible and Hebrew literature, Rah emphasizes that churches in the United States typically do not emphasize or engage in lament. Currently, a culture of triumphalism and exceptionalism permeates the church. In addressing this imbalance, Rah writes, “American Christians that flourish under the existing system seek to maintain the existing dynamics of inequality and remain in the theology of celebration over and against the theology of suffering. Promoting one perspective over the other, however, diminishes our theological discourse” (p. 23). By neglecting lament, we lose a gospel that is holistic and in turn embrace the culture around us that maintains injustice and oppression. Lament requires us to face the reality of injustice and thus causes us to turn to God for hope.

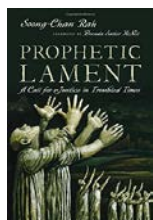
Rah highlights racial injustice in our nation throughout the book as a prime example of how lament should be applied. In particular, many in the African American community have been rendered invisible because they do not fit into the dominant narrative in the West. After some background on the events leading up to racial unrest in our nation (i.e. the deaths of Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner and the

uprising in Ferguson in response to court cases involving the use of force by police officers), several points are offered as to how the events suffered by Jerusalem in Lamentations applies to this recent situation. The non-indictments in the court cases make it essential that we make a priority of hearing from those in the African American community, especially those of African American women who have lost their sons at the hands of police brutality. Rah makes the case that in Lamentations we hear a wide variety of voices, particularly the “voices of those in our society who often bear the greatest burden of suffering” (p. 207). The relevance of applying *Prophetic Lament* to racial injustice is as timely as ever.

Throughout the book, the theme of “shalom” (Hebrew for well-being) arises and its connection to lament. In summing up the many aspects of suffering in lament, Rah writes, “True reconciliation, justice, and shalom require a remembering of suffering, an unearthing of a shameful history and a willingness to enter into lament. Lament calls for an authentic encounter with the truth and challenges privilege, because privilege would hide the truth that creates discomfort” (p. 58). In another section of the book Rah comments, “Trust in God’s sovereignty leads to a hope in new life and transformation ordained by God. This new life is characterized by the shalom of God” (p. 105). Hope is tied to the concept of shalom. The significance here is that lament is not an end in itself but a path to a fuller experience with God and faith community: “Shalom requires lament” (p. 21).

Despite the relevance of the content in *Prophetic Lament*, much of the application Rah focuses on is a ministry context. Educators who read this book must frame the content of *Prophetic Lament* into their vocational context. Whether in the classroom, constructing assignments, or dealing with students face to face, the practice of biblical lament can be utilized in the context of education. The classroom must become a safe space for brave conversations. Rah focuses on application to the Church in the West; however, the issue of triumphalism is found in churches around the world, not just in the West. One example of triumphalism is the prosperity gospel, which can also be found in many Christian circles, not just in the U.S. but also around the globe. The message of *Prophetic Lament* is thus applicable beyond a western domestic context. Readers can therefore contextualize these timely principles to a global context.

Rah does a commendable job providing biblical background and making connections with regard to the fall of Jerusalem from its original historical context to contemporary events, thereby connecting the reader to both worlds: the biblical world and the world we currently live in. A major benefit of *Prophetic Lament* is its overarching challenge to consider how our biblical frame of reference may be in need of being expanded. Paradigm shifts and engaging in critical thought can lead to growth and spiritual formation that is truly transformative. Thus *Prophetic Lament* invites the reader to enter a journey of deep reflection and change.



PROPHETIC LAMENT: A CALL FOR JUSTICE IN TROUBLED TIMES (RAH)

Soong-Chan Rah

\$9.99 eBook ([amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)), \$13.04 paperback ([amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com))

ISBN #: 978-0830836949

Binding: eBook or paperback



SOONG-CHAN RAH

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Glen Kinoshita (B.A. Biola University, M. Div. Talbot School of Theology), is currently the Director of Imago Dei Initiatives at Biola University. Through his current role, Glen seeks to enhance Intercultural awareness and competence for faculty, staff and student leaders across the Biola campus. Glen has been engaged in diversity in Higher Education for the past 25 years. He is the founder and current Director of the national Student Congress on Racial Reconciliation (SCORR) and presents on diversity related topics to various Christian organizations, conferences, and Christian Colleges and Universities across the country. Glen is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Sociology at Biola University where he teaches classes on race and ethnicity in America.