

## Here Be Monsters

### The Monstrous-Feminine, The Abject, and The Book of Lamentations

*Peter J. Sabo, University of Alberta*

#### Abstract

This article argues that Daughter Zion in the book of Lamentations can be read as an example of the monstrous-feminine. Particular attention is paid to Daughter Zion's abject body that spews fluids (like liver-bile and menstrual blood), is dying and decaying, and is cannibalistic. Like many horror films, Lamentations uses a female monster to bring about a confrontation with the abject. More specifically, the abject is confronted in order to *eject* the abject. Thus, the principal intent of this exorcism of the abject in Lamentations is assurance of survival for the readers of the text. This affirmation of survival in the face of the monstrous-feminine, however, is precisely what most reveals the deeply patriarchal and misogynistic ideology of the text.

#### Keywords

Lamentations, Daughter Zion, monstrous-feminine, monsters, Barbara Creed, Julia Kristeva

*Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?*

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

In the first two chapters of the book of Lamentations, the personified figure of Jerusalem, Daughter Zion, is presented as an abused virgin (1:15; 2:13), a bereft widow (1:1), a jilted lover (1:2, 19), and a grief-stricken mother (1:5, 16; 2:22). These images reveal how the book seeks to evoke sympathy for the destruction of the city and her people. To focus only on these metaphors, however, ignores another essential aspect of her personification: her monstrosity. Indeed, I argue in this article that Daughter Zion can be read as an example of the monstrous-feminine. I focus particularly on the imagery of her abject body. Lamentations, for instance, repeatedly describes Zion's discharging bodily fluids, from her numerous tears and troubled bowels to her spilled out liver-bile and menstrual blood. Moreover, she is not just a symbol of the dying bodies in her streets, she is an embodiment of them. In this way, she is the living dead, comparable to a zombie. This connects to the disturbing cannibalistic maternal imagery that runs throughout the book—imagery that works in tension with the depiction of Zion as a caring mother.

In her study of the monstrous-feminine in Jeremiah, Amy Kalmanofsky (2011b) proposes that the book uses such imagery for three purposes: 1) to expose the female monster as evidence of Israel's defiling and polluting sins; 2) to initiate an exorcism of the female monster—thus, the intent is that Jeremiah's audience, like God, would reject monstrous Israel and reform its behaviour; and 3) to make Israel's monstrous behaviour into a justification for her punishment.<sup>1</sup> I contend that the monstrous-feminine is used for some related, but ultimately rather different, purposes in Lamentations. Like Jeremiah, Lamentations wants to expose Zion as a female monster; however, it does not dwell on the reasons for Zion's suffering, and therefore does not call for reform or seek to justify why she was punished. If anything, the book questions why the punishments were necessary or why they needed to be so extensive, given its focus on the victims of destruction. Thus, even though it is Daughter Zion's monstrous body that is on display, Lamentations shows that she has been made this way by other monsters. These other monsters are the enemies of Israel who caused the destruction—and this includes God, who is viewed as the ultimate cause of the calamity.

To be clear, I am not claiming that Daughter Zion's abject representation in Lamentations is being used for more "feminist" purposes than those of Jeremiah. The monstrous-feminine speaks to male anxieties and fears as much in Lamentations as it does in other prophetic books. I am, however, suggesting that its specific rhetorical function differs, because reform and justification for Zion's punishment are not the primary concerns of the book. Like many horror films, I submit that Lamentations uses a female monster to bring about a confrontation with the abject. More specifically, the abject is confronted in order to *eject* the abject. Thus, the principal intent of this exorcism of the abject in Lamentations is assurance of survival for the readers of the text. The threat and description of monstrous instability provides, somewhat paradoxically, a comfort in the reader, a reassurance that they have survived and that their symbolic order is intact. This affirmation of survival in the face of the monstrous-feminine, however, is precisely what most reveals the deeply patriarchal and misogynistic ideology of the text.

## The Abject and the Monstrous Feminine

The abject is a concept that is used to describe bodies and things that one finds repulsive. In Julia Kristeva's analysis in *Powers of Horror*, the abject is that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982, 4); it is the "other" against which normality is defined. For Kristeva, abjection is rooted in the relationship that every

---

<sup>1</sup> Kalmanofsky's work offers perhaps the most sustained analysis on monster theory and the Hebrew Bible; moreover, it served as the springboard to my own interest in this topic (see Kalmanofsky 2008a, 2008b, 2011). For a broad overview of work on monsters and the Hebrew Bible see Grafius (2017).

human being carries on with the mother. It is linked to the process by which an infant forges boundaries between itself and its mother. In the beginning, stages of the infant's becoming a subject, according to Kristeva, the boundary between child and mother are uncertain. During this initial stage, when there is fusion between mother and nature, bodily wastes are not seen as objects of embarrassment or shame. After this stage, however, symbolic order is maintained by keeping the body clean and proper—the abject is rejected and cast out. Thus, in the effort to form and maintain bodily borders, one must constantly affirm what is properly inside and outside. It is for this reason that the abject is signified by bodily wastes such as faeces, blood, urine, pus, and so on.

In her seminal work, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), Barbara Creed draws on Kristeva's notion of the abject to develop the idea of the monstrous-feminine.<sup>2</sup> For Creed, the monstrous-feminine speaks to the distinctly feminine aspect of abjection; it refers to the patriarchal and misogynistic use of the female body, especially its association with fecundity, to evoke horror, disgust, and fear. She notes that “the reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience” (1993, 3). The term monstrous-feminine speaks to these differences, as it “emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity” (1993, 3).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Creed challenges Freud's assertion that man's fear of the female body is linked to the infantile belief that the mother is castrated, as she argues that this castration anxiety actually comes from the fear that woman is a potential (and powerful) castrator (1993, 1-7). Hence, Creed devotes much analysis to the *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina (1993, 105-21). Evidence of this is found in mythology, as in the Medusa's head: the open-mouthed writhing snakes that

---

<sup>2</sup> Much scholarly analysis has preceded and followed the pioneering work of Creed. Creed herself signals Carol Clover's work (1989, 1992) on the importance of gender in slasher films as an important precursor to her own insights. On the other end of the spectrum is the recently published edited volume *Re-reading the Monstrous Feminine* (Chare, Hoorn, and Yue 2020), which offers a series of essays on the continued relevance of the concept of the monstrous-feminine. Other notable works include Arnold (2013), Grant (1996), Harrington (2016), and other projects by Creed (2003, 2005). My purpose in this essay is to apply the concept of the monstrous-feminine to the book of Lamentations and not primarily to contribute to the theory of the monstrous-feminine itself. As a result, I deal almost exclusively with Creed.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Ussher's thought-provoking work, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (2006), draws attention to the way that the monstrous feminine exists not just in popular culture and mythology but also in medicine, science, and law. One of Ussher's underlying assertions is that the idealized vision of women in art, cinema, commercials, and so on is not a glorification of women, but a reflection of man's desire to conceal his dread: “the woman positioned [on this pedestal] has to remain perfect, in order to avoid falling into the position of monster incarnate” (2006, 3). This extends even to the representation of women in pornography: “[i]n pornography, we see the recurring representations of the female body most graphically exposed, the splayed vagina revealing pink glistening flesh—reassurance that there is nothing to recoil from here; no teeth to bite” (2006, 3).

make up her hair are interpreted as a representation of female genitals ready to bite, and the fact that her face turns men into stone reveals the castration anxiety associated with this. Another striking example is Kali, the Hindu folk goddess, who is often depicted with *vagina dentata* devouring the phallus of the male god Shiva (it is also worth noting that Kali eats the children to whom she gives birth).

Creed's primary area of analysis, however, is not ancient mythology but horror films. In what follows, I will briefly summarize Creed's analysis of the monstrous-feminine in three different classic horror films: William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). These summaries help flesh out how the concept of the monstrous-feminine may be usefully applied to a text. My primary purpose, therefore, is to highlight in each summary the features of the monstrous-feminine that relate to how it is similarly used in the book of Lamentations.

*The Exorcist* is about the possession of a young girl named Regan and her resulting transformation into a monstrous figure. Central to the film is the graphic display of Regan's body as abject through fluids she excretes. She urinates on the floor during the middle of a party hosted by her mother; she spews green bile and spits on priests; and she covers her face with blood as she masturbates with a crucifix. Creed relates this to Kristeva's assertion that the abject is that which must be expelled or excluded in the construction of the self:

A crucial area of the subject's personal history which must be rejected relates to infantile bodily experiences and toilet training. All signs of bodily excretions—bile, urine, shit, mucus, spittle, blood—must be treated as abject, cleaned up and removed from sight. It is this aspect of abjection which is central to *The Exorcist*. (Creed 1993, 37-38)

This extends even to Regan's use of obscene language and beastly growls and grunts, which contrast with the clean and proper language of the symbolic.

In *Carrie*, the female monster is also an adolescent, but the focus is on how she is a "menstrual monster" (Creed 1993, 78).<sup>4</sup> Carrie develops supernatural telekinetic powers whenever blood flows around her. Her first supernatural experience, for instance, occurs when she gets her period for the first time. Showering in the locker room with her classmates after gym class, Carrie sees her menstrual blood but does not know what to do. As she panics and pleads for help, her classmates pelt Carrie with tampons and chant "Plug It Up!" Another central moment occurs when her classmates throw pig's blood on her during the prom. Creed describes the prom scene thusly: "Standing above the crowd, her body covered in blood, her eyes bulging with fury, she wreaks destruction ... Like the witches of other horror films, Carrie has become a figure of monumental destruction, sparing no one

---

<sup>4</sup> While there are other more recent adaptations of the film (2002 and 2013), I focus on the original 1976 adaptation of the Stephen King novel, as this is the version with which Creed works.

in her fury” (1993, 81). Carrie is a personification of the notion of the female body and menstrual blood as sources of power and malevolence. A central theme of the film, however, is that Carrie has been turned into this revengeful monster not only because of the torture of her classmates but because of her abuse at the hands of her fanatically religious mother (who conceived Carrie after being raped by a drunk man). Carrie is thus simultaneously a sympathetic and monstrous figure.

The female monster in *Alien* is not a young girl but the “archaic mother,” which Creed defines as “the parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end” (1993, 17). The film centres around the crew of a commercial star ship and an alien (known as the Xenomorph) that terrorizes the crew. The lifecycles of the alien are full of maternal imagery. It begins as an egg and then transitions to a facehugger—a small arachnid life-form which launches itself onto a host’s face and impregnates it through the mouth (the facehugger attaches itself to the host by its vertical mouth with long teeth, unmistakable *vagina dentata* imagery). The parasite undergoes gestation until it violently emerges from the chest of the host. It then rapidly grows into a large Xenomorph—a bipedal organism that feeds on humans and has a phallic shaped head with a mouth that constantly drips fluids. The maternal imagery is intermingled with themes of death throughout the film, as is exemplified in the threat of castration and cannibalism from the Xenomorph:

Mother Alien is primarily a terrifying figure not because she is castrated but because she castrates. Her all-consuming, incorporating powers are concretized in the figure of her alien offspring; the creature whose deadly mission is represented as the same as that of the archaic mother—to tear apart and reincorporate all life. (Creed 1993, 22)

The Xenomorph disturbs the borders of the symbolic. On the one hand, it is a parasite needing a host to live, thereby emulating the status of the infant feeding from its mother. On the other hand, it is also a mother seeking to procreate and raise offspring.

This short examination of *The Exorcist*, *Carrie*, and *Alien* helps situate the following analysis of how the monstrous-feminine is used in Lamentations. In each film, the female body—particularly its relation to reproductive and maternal functions—is portrayed as monstrous in ways that the male body is not. In *The Exorcist*, there is a possessed girl who spews abject bodily fluids; in *Carrie*, the pubescent female body and menstrual blood are foregrounded; and in *Alien*, the archaic mother threatens to cannibalize and take back the life to which she once gave birth. All three films relate to the way that Daughter Zion’s abject body is presented in Lamentations, for the ancient biblical book likewise seeks to shock and terrify its audience with the monstrous-feminine.

## Daughter Zion’s Abject Bodily Fluids

---

Like the young female monsters from *Carrie* and *The Exorcist*, Daughter Zion does not start off as a monster. The opening passage of Lamentations portrays her transformation from populous city to ghost town (1:1a), from wife to widow (1:1b), and from princess to slave (1:1c). Right away, therefore, a series of metaphors contrast her former glory to her current broken condition. The very next verse describes an important bodily reaction that she displays in order to reflect her destitution: “She weeps bitterly in the night, and her tear is upon her cheek” (1:2a).<sup>5</sup> In 1:16, emphatic weeping is again displayed, but this time in Daughter Zion’s own voice. After describing God’s actions against her mighty ones and her youth, she laments: “For these things do I weep; my eye, my eye flows down with water.”<sup>6</sup>

One may not intuitively associate crying with the abject, but this is to mistake all examples of the abject as polluting. Kristeva explicitly mentions in *Powers of Horror* the need to differentiate between the polluting abject (like excrement) and the non-polluting abject (like tears) (1982, 71). Weeping, therefore, is indicative of the abject; it is, after all, in its most basic sense, a fluid expelled and excreted from the body. Tears are a bodily waste that test the notion of the self/other split upon which subjectivity stands. Kristeva thus asserts, “I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs,” and views crying as an abject process of bodily abreaction (1982, 3).

Emphatic weeping, moreover, has a violence to it that can become monstrous—think of the sobbing that is accompanied by erratic inhalation, occasional breath holding, bodily tremors and convulsions, and broken blood vessels in the eyes. This, in fact, is a common trope not just in Lamentations but throughout the Hebrew Bible. As Terence Collins elaborates in his study of the physiology of tears in the Hebrew Bible (1971), biblical weeping does not distinguish emotional disturbances from physical ones. Describing the presentation of weeping in the Bible, he writes:

Distressing, external circumstances produce a physiological reaction in a man [*sic*], which starts in his intestines and proceeds to affect his whole body, especially the heart. This physiological disturbance is actually a change in the physical composition of the inner organs, a general softening up, which initiates an outflow of the body’s vital force. This outflow proceeds through the throat and eyes, and issues in the form of tears which are nothing less than the oozing out of the body’s vital substance. (Collins 1971, 18)

The body that weeps in the Bible is a physically disturbed body.

From this perspective, it is significant that the first image of Lamentations is of a weeping woman. It speaks to the gender ideology of the text, as its purpose is to emphasize sympathy and the presentation of Daughter Zion as a victim. In discussing slasher films, Creed builds on the

---

<sup>5</sup> All biblical translations are my own.

<sup>6</sup> The imagery of weeping is continued in the second chapter in which the poet commands Zion to keep crying without respite and throughout the night (Lam. 2:18-19).

---

work of Carol J. Clover (1989, 1992) who points out the different ways in which the victimization of men and women are treated in the horror genre (Creed 1993, 124-25). Clover suggests that women are chosen more often as victims because they are permitted a greater range of emotional expression: “Angry displays of force may belong to the male, but crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, begging for mercy belong to the female. Abject terror, in short, is gendered feminine” (Clover 1989, 117). Though this description does not perfectly fit Daughter Zion (for she has her moments of angry outbursts), it generally applies to her depiction as a victim. What is interesting, moreover, is how her victimization is combined with her monstrosity.

This combination is perhaps exemplified in another instance of crying found in Lam. 2:11. I translate this passage rather literally, so as to give a better sense of the bodily imagery found in it.

My eyes are worn out from tears,  
my bowels murmur.  
My liver-bile is spilled out onto the ground  
because of the destruction of my dear people.

At first glance, it may seem strange to pair the external organ of the eyes with bowels and the liver, both internal organs. But what they have in common is that they all speak of secreting fluids: tearing eyes, upset bowels, and a bilious liver (Berlin 2002, 72).<sup>7</sup> They are all physical reactions to an emotional state—discharges analogous to other abject actions, like urinating from fear or vomiting from nervousness. Churning bowels and spilled-out liver bile also add a sense of the grotesque to the imagery of crying. Like Regan from *The Exorcist*, Daughter Zion is excreting fluids all over the place.

There is yet another fluid associated with Daughter Zion that is centrally important: blood. Blood can function as a polluting fluid, and thus operates on a different level than tears (see Milgrom 1991, 948-53; Biale 2007, 9-43). A good example of this is found in the fourth chapter of Lamentations in which the prophets and priests of Jerusalem who have shed innocent blood are defiled by this very blood (Lam. 4:13-14). They wander aimlessly in public and people avoid touching them as they chant: “Away! Unclean! Away! Away! Do not touch!” (4:15).

When it comes to Daughter Zion, however, gender again plays a role, for the blood we find in connection with her is menstrual blood. Take, for instance, Lam. 1:17:

Zion stretches out her hand,  
but there is no comforter for her.  
YHWH has commanded against Jacob  
that his neighbours should be his foes.  
Jerusalem has become  
a menstruating woman (*niddâ*) among them.

---

<sup>7</sup> As Collins sees it, crying originates in the liver and heart, and that is why the three fluids are linked here (1971, 22-23).

I cannot read this verse without thinking of Carrie in the locker room or at her prom night. Both Daughter Zion and Carrie look for comfort but find none—there are only tormentors. They stand among these oppressors, covered in blood, as an abominable sight.

Many readers of Lamentations might miss the menstrual imagery, as most translations render *niddâ* as “filthy thing” or “unclean thing” (NRSV, NIV, NJPS, NKJV). Like Adele Berlin, however, I would assert that these translations miss the mark, for “[t]he term has as its basic meaning a menstruating woman, and it continues the metaphor of Jerusalem as a woman” (Berlin 2002, 58).<sup>8</sup> The implication of the verse is that just like Lev. 18:19, which forbids approaching a woman in her menstrual impurity, none of Zion’s neighbors want to have relations with her (see Salters 2010, 89). She is not just a jilted lover; she is also an outcast.

This same combination of sexuality and impurity occurs in Lam. 1:8:

Jerusalem has sinned grievously;  
therefore, she has become a menstruating woman.<sup>9</sup>  
All who honoured her treat her as worthless,  
for they have seen her genitals.<sup>10</sup>  
Even she herself groans  
and turns away.

Jerusalem’s status as a menstruating woman is tied to her sins—menstruation, in other words, is her punishment for her sins. To be clear, the text is not suggesting that menstruation is a sin; it is, however, presenting menstruation as something shameful. The misogynistic logic is that Zion has become an impure menstruant because of her misdeeds. This misogyny is furthered in the next lines about Zion’s genitals, which again connects her diminished status with her female body. The image is rather blunt: Jerusalem’s genitals have been seen and she is thereby disgraced. Indeed, the shame is so great that even Daughter Zion turns away from herself.

The focus on the female body continues in Lam. 1:9: “Her impurity is in her skirts; she had no regard for her future.” The meaning of this line is ambiguous. It could be a further remark on the imagery of 1:8 and thereby

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen O’Connor tries to tie together filth and menstruation with her translation of “menstrual rag” (2002, 27); however, I still see no reason to adopt this translation and needlessly deviate from the basic meaning of “menstruating woman.”

<sup>9</sup> I interpret *nîdâ* here as a variant spelling of *niddâ*, and hence my translation of “menstruating woman.” I remain unconvinced of arguments like those of Berlin who suggest that the word comes from another root and means something like “wanderer” or “banished one” (2002, 53-54). Such a translation does not fit with the wider context of (misogynistic) sexual shaming (see Provan 1991, 44; Salters 2010, 61). Even Berlin agrees that *nîdâ* at the very least evokes *niddâ* given the context of the verse.

<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew here is *’erwâ*, which is often translated as “nakedness” (NRSV, NIV, NJPS, NKJV). Again, these translations unnecessarily shy away from the more corporeal meaning of the text, as the exposure of the genitals was a horror and disgrace in the ancient Near East (see Salters 2010, 61).



refer to menstrual blood on Zion's skirts. Another possible interpretation is that it is a reference to sexual immodesty, displaying the common prophetic metaphor of Daughter Zion as a whore (Berlin 2002, 54). A common intertext cited, for instance, is Jeremiah's discussion of God lifting Jerusalem's skirts so as to expose her shame (Jer. 13:22, 26). But there is also the possibility that this is blood from an attack, for certainly a central theme of the first two chapters is the image of bodily blows sent against Daughter Zion (Dobbs-Allsopp 2002, 64). The ambiguity of the text allows for the possibility of all these interpretations, and I would assert that the potential mixing of metaphors only highlights the ghastly imagery.

## Death, Corpses, and Daughter Zion the Zombie

Adding to Daughter Zion's monstrosity is her recurrent association with death and dead bodies. The first two chapters of Lamentations are full of references to the dead bodies found within Daughter Zion: God has trampled her warriors and crushed her youth (1:15); the lives of priests and elders has expired because they could not find food (1:19); priests and prophets were killed in God's sanctuary (2:20); young and old lie dead on the ground in the streets (2:21); and children have starved to death (2:12, 20). Lamentations 1:20 succinctly summarizes the omnipresence of death in the book: "Outside the sword slays; inside—death."<sup>11</sup> The line is probably speaking in reference to the reality of city sieges. Outside the city, one faces death from the enemy's sword; inside the city, one faces death from starvation and disease. One cannot escape from death anywhere. Lamentations 2:22 furthers this very point: "On the day of the anger of YHWH, none escaped or survived."

The focus on death and corpses is a forceful portrayal of the abject. The corpse, according to Kristeva, "is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (1982, 4). Like other forms of bodily waste, the cadaver is violently cast out of the cultural world, the symbolic order, having once been part of what constitutes a subject but no longer.<sup>12</sup> The problem, however, is that Daughter Zion cannot ignore these abject bodies, for there is so much death within her walls that corpses lie in the street. Indeed, the poet of Lamentations wants to show the reader over and over these abject sights, for this is one of the primary features of the genre of horror—to expose the reader to death and the abject. In relation to this, Creed states:

---

<sup>11</sup> There is a particle *k-* attached to the Hebrew word for death here, and thus the common translation of "like death" (e.g. NRSV). Like Berlin, however, I take this to be an emphatic particle (2002, 47). "Like death" implies something not as severe as death, but the force of the phrase is that one dies whether outside or inside.

<sup>12</sup> In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva famously analyses the abject in relation to biblical impurity. Accordingly, she devotes several pages to the function of the corpse within the Hebrew Bible (1982, 108-12). She writes: "it is the corpse ... that takes on the abjection of waste in the biblical text. A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is indistinguishable from the symbolic—the corpse represents fundamental pollution ... [I]t is to be excluded from God's *territory* as it is from his *speech*" (1982, 109).

[T]he corpse is constructed as the abject of virtually all horror films; and bodily disfigurement as a religious abomination is also central to the slasher movie, particularly those in which woman is slashed, the mark a sign of her “difference,” her impurity. (1993, 11)

Daughter Zion can thus be read as a mutilated female body analogous to those of slasher films: her appendages are decaying, and she visibly carries the marks of violence against her. This mutilated body is not just a sign of her victimhood; it is also, as Creed would put it, a sign of her impurity and difference.

Thinking in this way, however, leads to an important question: if the city of Jerusalem is full of death and corpses, then what does that say about personified Daughter Zion? That is, if Daughter Zion is a personification of the people within her, then how does she personify the dead that are part of the populace? We arrive here at the ambiguity of what it means to survive, and thus what it means to refer to Daughter Zion as a “survivor.”<sup>13</sup> How alive is she? How dead is she? In *Surviving Lamentations*, Tod Linafelt explores the fundamental paradox common to Lamentations and all literature of survival: someone or something that is dead, or ought to be, is still alive: “death in life, life in death” (2000, 21). To survive is not just to live but to “live beyond,” or “over-live,” to sur-vive. Linafelt draws attention to the fact that from a form-critical perspective, Lamentations reads as a funeral dirge. It thus presents itself as a song for the dead. There is, however, one key element missing: the announcement of a death (Linafelt 2000, 35-38).

While Linafelt takes this to be part of the book’s theme of the intermingling of life and death, he does not explore its potentially monstrous implications. That is, since Daughter Zion is a representation of both the dead and the living within her, why not think of her as a being that hovers between life and death? Why not think of her as a zombie of sorts—an undead being, the reanimated corpse of the dead bodies within her? If we go along with this, then we could point out the significance that Daughter Zion is a *female* zombie. As Creed observes, horror films represent abjection in the form of bodies with unstable boundaries. The female body, because of its maternal functions, “acknowledges its ‘debt to nature’ and consequently is more likely to signify the abject” (Creed 1993, 11). Daughter Zion is made into a monstrous zombie in order to contrast with the clean and proper body which maintains its form and integrity.

Unlike most representations of zombies, however, Daughter Zion is not deprived of speech. To be sure, she does her fair share of groaning and non-semantic outbursts (e.g. 1:8, 21, 22; 2:8, 18-19), but she is also expressive

---

<sup>13</sup> In a forthcoming work, *Texts after Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence, and the Hebrew Bible*, Rhiannon Graybill reads Daughter Zion as a survivor of sexual violence (and her story in Lamentations 1–2 as a “survivor story”). Graybill draws attention to how scholars seek to sanitize Daughter Zion’s words, reading her speech as an “already-read” survivor story devoid of the grit (the complicity, guilt, and rebelliousness) that one actually finds in the text.

and articulate.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Daughter Zion is a good example of what Timothy Beal refers to as the monster who represents “the audacious voice of theodicy” (2002, 3). Frankenstein’s monster, for instance, questions the reasons for his creation and unjust suffering at the hands of his creator. In doing so, he questions the reasons for all creation and suffering, and thus moves into the realm of theodicy. In reference to this, Beal writes:

Why did you make me? Why did you put me here? What were you thinking? What kind of a world is this? What kind of a God are you? The monster in Shelley’s novel ... stands for these questions and terrifying religious uncertainties ... In this unhallowed space of theodicy, opened by the creature’s tragic appeals to its creator, clear distinctions between gods and monsters get awfully blurry. (2002, 3)

Daughter Zion asks similar questions. While she occasionally enacts the common prophetic trope that she “deserved” her fate (Lam. 1:18), her focus is on her suffering (see Mandolfo 2007). In other words, she continually questions why she was made into the monster she has become.<sup>15</sup> This is captured nicely in the questions found in Lam. 2:20:

Look, YHWH, and consider:  
to whom have you done this?  
Shall women eat their own offspring,  
the sucklings they care for?

These questions point to one of the central paradoxes of Lamentations. If God has specially chosen Jerusalem and its people, then their destruction by God is on some level a divine self-destruction. Thus, the questions call for God to consider the fact that by punishing Zion he is punishing his own people and his own reputation. They also draw attention to the issue of whether this punishment is fair and just, for it extends even to innocent babies. In this sense, even if the destruction is justified, the *extent* of the punishment is questioned. The reader, accordingly, is left wondering who the true monster is here. Is it the mothers who eat their own babies? Or is it God, who allowed for, even orchestrated, this situation?

### **Cannibalism and The Archaic Mother**

Lamentations 2:20 contains another motif that is found throughout the book: cannibalism. The other most explicit reference is found in Lam. 4:10:

With their own hands, caring women

---

<sup>14</sup> This contrast speaks to a central formal theme of Lamentations in which primal outpouring of grief and suffering is structured in acrostic poems (the first four poems are all alphabetic acrostics). For an analysis of how this displays Kristeva’s concepts of the semiotic and the symbolic, see Sabo (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Kalmanofsky (2011b) notes how monsters always create more monsters. In particular, she analyses the trope of male monster meeting female victim thereby making the victim into a female monster. The same pattern is repeated in Lamentations, as YHWH and Zion’s neighbouring enemies (the male monsters) make Daughter Zion into a monstrous creature.

have boiled their offspring;  
they became their food  
when my dear people were destroyed.

There may also be a hint of cannibalism in 2:12, which mentions the lives of babies slipping away at the bosom of their mothers. On the one hand, these verses reflect the fact that cannibalism inevitably happens during city sieges, as people are slowly starved (see Lev. 26:29; Deut. 28:53-58; 2 Kgs 6:24-32; Jer. 19:9; Ezek. 5:10). Indeed, Lam. 4:9 provides a powerful image by claiming that those who die from the sword are better off than those whose endure the prolonged experience of death by starvation. Despite this realism though, this is a poetic rendition of sieges and the conditions of famine (Berlin 2002, 103). Notice, for instance, the common aspect behind each mention of cannibalism in the book—in each case, it is *maternal* cannibalism. Thus, the theme of maternal cannibalism plays with the repeated imagery of Daughter Zion as a grieving mother who mourns over the captivity of her children (1:5), weeps over her desolate children (1:16), and bemoans that enemies have destroyed those whom she cared for and reared (2:22). While this serves to contrast the caring mother versus the cannibalistic one, it also blurs the difference between the two—for 4:10 points out how even “caring” mothers can resort to these desperate measures.

Cannibalism itself is abject and monstrous. It blurs the boundary between self and other, between that which you incorporate into yourself and that which you expel. Accordingly, the horror genre is full of flesh-eating zombies and frightening figures like Hannibal (the cannibal) Lecter. Maternal cannibalism, however, *especially* evokes the abject and monstrous-feminine. As we have seen, abjection is rooted in the infant-mother relationship. Separating from one’s mother is an ambivalent process. The mother is the first source of nourishment; she is equated with life and sustenance. At the same time, the withdrawal of this nourishment is a source of fear, and the trauma of weaning also makes the mother the target for the first sense of rage and betrayal (see Pyper 2001, 57-61). Maternal cannibalism conjures this sense of rage and betrayal because it reverses the natural order in which children feed from the body of their mother. It evokes horror and disgust, for rather than nourishing her offspring, the mother uses her offspring for her own nourishment. Hugh Pyper (2001, 61) furthers this observation by noting that mothers who eat their children strike at a fundamental fear of paternity and patriarchy, for if the woman who controls birthing and life devours her own children, then what hope does man have for survival?

Maternal cannibalism thus stands as a potent symbol of the archaic mother—the mother who both births and threatens to reabsorb her offspring. Lamentations, from this perspective, is like the film *Alien*. We noted above how Creed views the archaic mother as the primary monster in the film, and thus she writes: “It is the notion of the fecund mother-as-abyss

that is central to *Alien*; it is the abyss, the cannibalizing black hole from which all life comes and to which all life returns that is represented in the film as a source of deepest terror” (1993, 25). The cannibalistic mothers of *Lamentations* are comparable to the Xenomorph in *Alien*, as both are maternal cannibalizing black holes. More than this though, Creed sees the archaic mother as something common to all horror:

The archaic mother is present in all horror films as the blackness of extinction—death. The desires and fears invoked by the image of the archaic mother, as a force that threatens to reincorporate what it once gave birth to, are always there in the horror text—all pervasive, all encompassing—because of the constant presence of death (1993, 27).

So, while books like *Lamentations* and films like *Alien* foreground the archaic mother more than other texts, the possibility of death always leads to the archaic mother. Death represents the desire to return to the original oneness of things, “to return to the mother/womb,” which is “primarily a desire for non-differentiation” (Creed 1993, 27). Of course, this desire is mixed with repulsion, for the return to the mother/womb is also a return to the place of bodily wastes and self-disintegration.

Evidence of the omnipresence of the archaic mother is displayed in the fact that cannibalism occurs in every act of birthing and nourishment. The foetus, parasite-like, depends on the mother’s body for its nourishment. This continues into infancy with the child feeding on the mother’s body by nursing from her breasts. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the two most common words for children in *Lamentations*—*’ôlêl* (suckling; 1:5; 2:11, 19, 20; 4:4) and *yônêq* (nursling; 2:11; 4:4)—are both derived from roots that refer to this dynamic. The effect is that whenever children are mentioned, their need for maternal nourishment is highlighted. In 4:3-4, this very theme is underlined, as the poet laments:

Even the jackals/the sea-monster<sup>16</sup> offer(s) the breast  
to nurse her young,  
but my dear people have become cruel,  
like the ostriches<sup>17</sup> in the desert.  
The tongue of the nursling (*yônêq*) cleaves  
to the roof of its mouth because of thirst.  
Sucklings (*’ôlâlîm*, plural of *’ôlêl*) begged for bread,  
but no one gives them a crumb.

These verses speak to the horrible fate of children during city sieges. The care they receive is worse than animal offspring, as their thirst and hunger go unquenched. The pairing of jackals and ostriches foregrounds this. The two animals often occur together as an associated pair (Isa. 34:13; Mic. 1:8;

<sup>16</sup> See below for the reason I offer the translation of both “jackals” and “sea-monster.”

<sup>17</sup> The *Kethib* (*kay ’ênîm*) makes little sense here, so I translate from the *Qere* (*kay’ênîm*) “like ostriches.” As I outline below, the reference to ostriches fits with the context of the passage as well, given its animal imagery and the association of ostriches as being cruel to their young.

Job 30:29) and appear to share the characteristics of inhabiting ruins and uttering strange cries (Berlin 2002, 106). The poet of Lamentations, however, points out that even the despicable jackal will nurse its young; moreover, the people of Zion have become cruel like ostriches, who were believed to abandon their eggs (Job 39:13-17).

What is also interesting about this passage is how the maternal body is paralleled and contrasted with animals, for associating woman's maternal function with the animal world is a common trope in the horror genre. For one, it plays with the more general trope of mixing the human and the animal and creating hybrid monsters (the bipedal Xenomorph in *Alien* is an example of this). Creed, however, notes how this works on another level, as she asserts that woman's "ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and to the great cycle of birth, decay and death. Awareness of his links to nature reminds man of his mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order" (1993, 47). This link between woman, animal, and abject monster is perhaps displayed in a common interpretive crux in Lam. 4:3. If we take the text as is, the noun *tânnîn* means "sea-monster," or something of the like—the Septuagint translates it as "dragons" (Salters 2010, 289). Thinking that "sea monster" makes little sense, most translations understand the noun to be *tânnîm*, "jackals" (NRSV, NIV, NJPS). Perhaps the text is playing, however, with the link between animal and monster in reference to the mothers of Jerusalem who do not nurse their babies. That is, the verse might be suggesting that Zion is not just worse than jackals, she is also more monstrous than a sea-monster.

## Conclusion: The Comfort of Monsters

Like Regan in *The Exorcist*, Daughter Zion is a body that leaks abject fluids. Like Carrie in *Carrie*, Daughter Zion is a menstruating body that evokes disgust and horror from those around her. Like the Xenomorph in *Alien*, Daughter Zion is a maternal cannibal. In short, Daughter Zion is a female monster in the book of Lamentations. Her monstrosity is consistently related to the abject status of the female body and her maternal functions. This imagery contrasts and combines with other metaphors used in the book—her portrayal as a widow or jilted lover, for example—that highlight Daughter Zion's victimhood. Lamentations is also somewhat unique, in comparison to other prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible, by presenting her monstrosity not primarily as the result of her sins and transgressions but because of the monstrosity of her enemies, and, ultimately, God.

Creed claims that the purpose of the horror genre is to confront the abject in order to eject the abject, and this is precisely why the monstrous-feminine is used in Lamentations. There is a psychological purpose, a comfort, in seeing the abject or reading about it (and then rejecting it). Freud, for example, famously took note that viewers of horror often become stiff and rigid, as if frozen in fear—the purpose was that the spectator, who is

implicitly male (as is always the case for Freud), becomes stiff in order to imitate an erection. He is, Freud states, “still in possession of his penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact” (1955, 273). Creed observes, however, that the experience of horror conjures a variety of other reactions too, as evidenced in the common expressions: “It scared the shit out of me”; ‘It made me feel sick’; ‘It gave me the creeps’” (1993, 3). All of these reactions, Creed suggests, relate to abjection. And the curious thing about them is that they are precisely why the horror genre is appealing and popular. Creed thus writes:

Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images/being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator’s seat). (1993, 10)

Perhaps the same could be said about *Lamentations* and its readers. For one, the use of horror in the book may actually offer comfort. If the imagery of the book causes the reader’s skin to crawl, or if it makes them sick to their stomach, then they are simultaneously reassured of their own survival. More than feeling comforted, though, readers might also find a perverse pleasure in reading about Daughter Zion’s abject body. For, once filled with the perverse images in the book, the abject can safely be ejected. In other words, one of the purposes of *Lamentations* is to “scare the shit” out of its readers.

Readers and spectators, however, do not come to the text with one gender or body. The implied author of *Lamentations* is masculine, and the implied readers are male. For these male readers, the abject body of Daughter Zion can create the comfort and pleasure just mentioned, for she may easily be ejected. They are reassured that their own masculine body is not monstrous in this way—it does not menstruate, give birth, or nourish infants. The experience is quite different for many women whose bodies can do precisely these things. The misogyny of the text becomes even more apparent when this perspective is taken into account. Indeed, the ultimate reason that Daughter Zion is made into a female monster is not because of God or Israel’s enemies but because of male fears and anxieties. This patriarchal and misogynistic ideology is the real monster.

## References

- Arnold, S. 2013. *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Beal, Timothy K. 2002. *Religion and Its Monsters*. New York: Routledge.
- Berlin, Adele. 2002. *Lamentations: A Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press.

- Biale, David. 2007. *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol Between Jews and Christians*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chare, Nicholas, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue, eds. 2020. *Re-reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Clover, Carol J. 1989. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." In *Fantasy and the Cinema*, edited by James Donald, 91-133. London: BFI.
- Clover, Carol J. 1992. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Collins, Terence, F.S.C. 1971. "The Physiology of Tears in the Old Testament: Part I." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1): 18-38.
- Creed, Barbara. 1993. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Creed, Barbara. 2003. *Media Matrix: Sexing the New Reality*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Creed, Barbara. 2005. *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- De Palma, Brian, and Paul Manosh. 1976. *Carrie*. Film. Los Angeles: United Artists.
- Dobbs-Allsopp, F.W. 2002. *Lamentations*. Louisville: John Knox Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1955. "The Medusa's Head." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated by James Strachey. Vol. 18, 273-274. London: Hogarth.
- Friedkin, William, and William Peter Blatty. 1973. *The Exorcist*. Film. Los Angeles: Warner Bros.
- Grafius, Brandon R. 2017. "Text and Terror: Monster Theory and the Hebrew Bible." *Currents in Biblical Research* 16 (1): 34-49.
- Grant, B.K., ed. 1996. *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Graybill, Rhiannon. Forthcoming. *Texts after Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence, and the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harrington, E. 2016. *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror*. London: Routledge.
- Kalmanofsky, Amy. 2008a. "Israel's Baby: The Horror of Childbirth in the Biblical Prophets." *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (1): 60-82.
- Kalmanofsky, Amy. 2008b. *Terror All Around: Horror, Monsters, and Theology in the Book of Jeremiah*. New York: T&T Clark.
-



- Kalmanofsky, Amy. 2011. "The Monstrous Feminine in the Book of Jeremiah." In *Jeremiah (Dis)placed: New Directions in Writing/Reading Jeremiah*, edited by A. R. Pete Diamond and Louis Stulman, 190-208. New York: T&T Clark.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by L. S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Linafelt, Tod. 2000. *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Laments, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mandolfo, Carleen. 2007. *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Milgrom, Jacob. 1991. *Leviticus 1–16*. New York: Doubleday.
- O'Connor, Kathleen M. 2002. *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Provan, I. W. 1991. *Lamentations*. London: New Century Bible Commentary.
- Pyper, Hugh. 2001. "Reading Lamentations." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 95 (1): 55-69.
- Sabo, Peter J. 2015. "Poetry Amid Ruins." In *Poets, Prophets, and Texts in Play: Studies in Biblical Poetry and Prophecy in Honour of Francis Landy*, edited by Ehud Ben Zvi, Caludia V. Camp, David M. Gunn, and Aaron W. Hughes, 141-57. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Salters, R. B. 2010. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Lamentations*. New York: T&T Clark.
- Scott, Ridley, David Giler, Walter Hill, and Dan O'Bannon. 1979. *Alien*. Film. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Ussher, Jane M. 2006. *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*. New York: Routledge.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License.