

SPECTRES OF YHWH: SOME HAUNTOLOGICAL REMARKS ON LAMENTATIONS 3

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Abstract

In this article, the author offers a brief hauntological perspective on Lamentations 3. After discussing some of the rudiments of the relevant type of Derridean philosophy of history/literature, the hauntological layers of Lamentations 3 are extracted by way of reconstructive informal philosophical commentary. This is followed by a closer look at the representation of Yhwh in Lamentations 3 as a spectre in the Derridean sense of the word. The conclusion is that, from the perspective of hauntology, Lamentations 3 is a good example of ancient spectral theology.

Key Words: Lamentations, Yhwh, Derrida, hauntology, Spectral Theology

One may always take the quasi-atheistic dryness of the messianic
to be the condition of the religions of the Book,
a desert that was not even theirs
(but the earth is always borrowed, on loan from God,
it is never possessed by the occupier,
says precisely [*justement*] the Old Testament
whose injunction one would also have to hear)¹

Introduction

A fragment 5:18 of the NLT of the Book of Lamentations in the Old Testament reads as follows:

Jerusalem is empty and desolate, a place haunted...

In many ways, the Book of Lamentations indeed depicts a 'haunted' space, also in a rather specific postmodern literary-critical sense of the concept. In this world the character of Yhwh is like a ghost who never speaks yet is spoken to by those who can neither reach nor escape him. The uncanny result is a deconstructive quest for selfhood by speakers (be it singular or collective) who, in writing of conjoined suffering and hope, provide us with what the philosopher Jacques Derrida calls a 'spectral theology'.²

Though controversial, Derrida's philosophical strategies still seem to have a role to play in postmodern biblical interpretation, as is evident in Yvonne Sherwood's *Derrida's Bible*

¹ J Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 1994:37).

² Cf. D Cupitt, *Above us Only Sky* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2008:99).

and the co-edited *Derrida and Religion*.³ This is very different from the days when David Clines⁴ ‘on the way to the post-modern’ during the early 1990s could still lament the absence of Derrida (amongst others) from conference presentations in Old Testament scholarship. In 2000, by contrast, James Barr⁵ could note the increased impact of Derrida’s ideas on Biblical Studies. At present, Derridean perspectives still pop up in research on the reception history of ancient Israelite religious ideas.

Not surprisingly, the Book of Lamentations too has been approached via Derrida, amongst others by Tod Linafeldt.⁶ As for spectral theology, it did pop up in Timothy Beal’s *Spectres of Moses*⁷ and more recently in an article by Jaco Gericke on the construction of Yhwh in Deuteronomy.⁸ Its application to the study of Lamentations, however, is practically non-existent and, to my knowledge, there has never been what can be called a ‘hauntological’ perspective on the characterization of Yhwh in the poem of chapter 3. In light of this gap in the research, the present article seeks to offer a very brief and general introduction to the spectral theology of that chapter (henceforth L3).

The hypothesis put forward is that the poem of Lamentations 3 can be decomposed to expose what appears to be a hauntological structure. That is, the poet’s description of Yhwh’s actions and attributes can be shown to feature both layers of idealized memories of Yhwh as a god of steadfast love and mercy in the past and deconstructive hauntological layers in which present disillusionment and suffering are the main themes. The result of juxtaposing the two types of layers gives the character of Yhwh the identity of a ‘spectre’ in the Derridean sense whose presence is made to appear all the more poignant in the implied author’s experience of his absence. But before presenting the arguments in favour of this theory, it is only apt to clarify some of the relevant esoteric jargon typical of hauntology.

Hauntology

Hauntology is a concept located in the philosophy of history and was coined by Derrida in his 1994 work *Spectres of Marx*.⁹ It concerns the paradoxical state of what he calls ‘spectres,’ fictional entities which allegedly cannot be subsumed under the categories of being and non-being. The theory does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist but refers to the psycho-analytic fact that “the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be” and that “we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.”¹⁰

³ Y Sherwood, *Derrida’s Bible: Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Y Sherwood and K Hart (eds.), *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (London: Routledge 2005).

⁴ DJA Clines, *On the Way to the Postmodern (1967-1998)* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998).

⁵ J Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of the Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶ T Linafeldt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁷ TK Beal, Spectres of Moses – Overtures to Biblical Hauntology, in D Gunn and P McNutt (eds.), *Imagining Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social and Historical Constructs in Honor of James Flanagan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002:171-189).

⁸ J Gericke, The Spectral Nature of YHWH, *OTE* 25(2) 2012:303-315.

⁹ Wikipedia contributors. Hauntology, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, n.p. [Cited 27 July 2011]. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hauntology&oldid=421394651>

¹⁰ C Davis, *Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms, French Studies* 59(3) 2005:373.

As provocative metaphors, spectres are seen as challenging basic binary oppositions like ‘alive/dead’, ‘present/absent’ and ‘past/present’. In this sense, they can be linked to the methodology of deconstruction popularly associated with Derrida’s mode of literary analysis. But there is more to this than ontological paradoxes: hauntology is also part of the ethical turn of deconstruction during the last three decades so that spectres as literary ghosts are made to refer to the Levinasian Other.¹¹ They are incomprehensible within available western Christian intellectual frameworks and we are responsible for preserving their otherness.¹² Also in literary critical circles outside of biblical interpretation, hauntology has proved exceptionally fruitful.

Derrida’s notion of the spectre was originally adapted from the concept of the ‘phantom’ in the work of the psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok.¹³ They had become interested in the ways in which traumas of previous generations disturb the lives of descendants who know nothing about their distant causes. The ‘phantom’ here represents “the introjected ‘presence’ of a dead ancestor in the living Ego, still intent on preventing its traumatic and shameful secrets from coming to light.”¹⁴

Derridean hauntology, however, diverts somewhat from the notion of the phantom when he seeks, by contrast, to trace literary communication with ‘spectres.’ Derrida suggested the presence of desire in the author to encounter what is strange, unheard, *other*, about the ghost. For Derrida, the ghost bears a secret, which is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future.¹⁵ “The mystery the spectral hides is not unspeakable because it is taboo; it simply cannot (yet) be articulated in the languages available to the mourner.” Hauntology therefore is part of an endeavour to access the once-inaccessible, thereby raising the stakes of literary studies to make it a place where we may see how characters interrogate their relation to ‘the dead,’ examine the elusive identities of the living, and explore the boundaries between thought and unthought.¹⁶

For a hauntological analysis of L3 to be successful, the spectral theology should reveal a focus for competing epistemological and ethical positions; and the speaker’s addressing it should represent a gesture towards a still unformulated future. At this most basic level, hauntology in L3 will also tie in with the theme of, amongst others, abandoned spaces elsewhere in the scroll. In the expose of the section to follow – and before we come to the discussion of Yhwh (L3) as spectre – the aim will be to discern the hauntological layers in the discourse of the chapter. For this purpose, the use of an English translation (RSV) is sufficient since we are dealing with general contents and with reception history rather than with the minute details of specific verses. The interpretation below therefore involves commentary rather than exegesis in line with a postmodernist agenda of the interpretation that seeks to depart from modernist assumptions about meaning, reference and method.

¹¹ Davis, *Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms*, 374.

¹² Davis, *Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms*, 374.

¹³ See J Derrida, *Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok*. Trans. B Johnson, in N Abraham and M Torok (eds.), *The Wolfman’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*. Trans. N Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xi-xlix.

¹⁴ Davis, *Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms*, 375.

¹⁵ Davis, *Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms*, 376.

¹⁶ Davis, *Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms*, 376.

L 3's Two-layered Hauntology

From a hauntological perspective (which is not the same as structural or source-critical distinctions), L3's spectral theology can be thought of as being represented by two stages, or layers.¹⁷ The first layer refers to whatever in the chapter depicts Yhwh (L3)'s profile in such a manner that it seems to be idealized. Here we may note the reiterations of and allusions to the age-old Yahwistic confession of the god's loving-kindness and mercy. Two sections in Lamentations 3 reflect this spectral setting, though the chapter does not start with either, nor are the two sections directly connected by verse. The first section is found in verses 21-36 (with references to Yhwh in bold); it seems quite uncanny in the context of the book as a whole and next to charges of violence, persecution and destruction.

[21] But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:

**[22] The steadfast love of Yhwh never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;**

**[23] they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.**

**[24] "Yhwh is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."**

**[25] Yhwh is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.**

[26] It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of Yhwh.

[27] It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.

[28] Let him sit alone in silence
when he has laid it on him;

[29] let him put his mouth in the dust --
there may yet be hope;

[30] let him give his cheek to the smiter,
and be filled with insults.

**[31] For Yhwh will not
cast off for ever,**

**[32] but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;**

**[33] for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve the sons of men.**

**[34] To crush under foot
all the prisoners of the earth,**

**[35] to turn aside the right of a man
in the presence of the Most High,**

**[36] to subvert a man in his cause,
Yhwh does not approve.**

¹⁷ Cf. A Harper, Hauntology: The Past Inside the Present, *Excessive Aesthetics* 2009:n.p. [cited 21 July 2011].
Online: <http://rougesfoam.blogspot.com/2009/10>.

A hauntological analysis of Lamentations 3 must attend to the layers of fizz, crackle, hiss and white noise that haunt the text – the places where hegemony attempts to assemble and join.¹⁸ The ‘But’ with which the above section began is ominous, revealing that something was just uttered that needed to be qualified. What it was we shall soon see, but first we should take note of the second part of the idealized first layer, i.e., verses 55-66. Whereas section one of the first layer was a confession, the second section is an attempt to communicate with the ghost of Yhwh in prayer:

**[55] “I called on your name, O Yhwh,
from the depths of the pit;
[56] you heard my plea, ‘Do not close
your ear to my cry for help!’
[57] You came near when I called on you;
you said, ‘Do not fear!’
[58] “You have taken up my cause, O Yhwh,
you have redeemed my life.
[59] You have seen the wrong done to me, O Yhwh;
judge you my cause.
[60] You have seen all their vengeance, all their devices against me.
[61] “You have heard their taunts, O Yhwh,
all their devices against me.
[62] The lips and thoughts of my assailants
are against me all the day long.
[63] Behold their sitting and their rising;
I am the burden of their songs.
[64] “You will requite them, O Yhwh,
according to the work of their hands.
[65] You will give them dullness of heart;
your curse will be on them.
[66] You will pursue them in anger and destroy them
from under your heavens, O Yhwh.”**

Both of the two sections above, different as they are, represent the first idealized layer of the chapter’s spectral theology. There is no room to go into details of meaning here with reference to the words of each verse, as this is not the aim of this paper. It must suffice for our purposes to note that the first layer assumes an abiding presence, but it is the presence of what is actually felt to be absent. This can be seen in the second or ‘hauntological’ layer in the chapter where idealizations are deconstructed. The hauntological layer also comes in two sections. Its first part is found in verses 1-20:

**[1] I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;
[2] he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
[3] surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.
[4] He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,**

¹⁸ Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

**and broken my bones;
[5] he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
[6] he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.
[7] He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;
[8] though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
[9] he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.
[10] He is to me like a bear lying in wait,
like a lion in hiding;
[11] he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;
[12] he bent his bow and set me
as a mark for his arrow.
[13] He drove into my heart
the arrows of his quiver;
[14] I have become the laughingstock of all peoples,
the burden of their songs all day long.
[15] He has filled me with bitterness,
he has sated me with wormwood.
[16] He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
[17] my soul is bereft of peace,
I have forgotten what happiness is;
[18] so I say, "Gone is my glory,
and my expectation from Yhwh."
[19] Remember my affliction and my bitterness,
the wormwood and the gall!
[20] My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.**

As is clearly evident, the hauntological layer problematises, compromises and obfuscates the first layer, undermining or damaging it in some way and introducing irony into the work, and represents the opinionated viewpoint of the present.¹⁹ Whereas the first layer expressed hope and confidence (justice, comfort, expected blessings), the voice of the hauntological layer contradicts and undoes this by expressing a satirical doubt and disillusionment (e.g. via references to divine violence).²⁰ More of the same is found in the second section of the hauntological stratum in verses 37-54:

¹⁹ Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

²⁰ Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

**[37] Who has commanded and it came to pass,
unless Yhwh has ordained it?**

**[38] Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and evil come?**

[39] Why should a living man complain,
a man, about the punishment of his sins?

**[40] Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to Yhwh!**

[41] Let us lift up our hearts and hands
to God in heaven:

[42] “We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven.

**[43] “You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us,
slaying without pity;**

**[44] you have wrapped yourself with a cloud
so that no prayer can pass through.**

**[45] You have made us offscouring and refuse
among the peoples.**

[46] “All our enemies
rail against us;

[47] panic and pitfall have come upon us,
devastation and destruction;

[48] my eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.

[49] “My eyes will flow without ceasing,
without respite,

**[50] until Yhwh from heaven
looks down and sees;**

[51] my eyes cause me grief
at the fate of all the maidens of my city.

[52] “I have been hunted like a bird
by those who were my enemies without cause;

[53] they flung me alive into the pit
and cast stones on me;

[54] water closed over my head;
I said, ‘I am lost.’”

As in all hauntological literature, the second hauntological layer of Lamentations 3 thus ‘deconstructs’ the first layer of idealized spectral theology. Lamentations 3’s hauntological effects alienated and estranged the familiar and the idealistic views of Yhwh so that these may be reassessed. The events of the exile left the poet and his audiences wanting to ask a highly important question: was Yhwh’s Utopia dead or alive?²¹ What is uncanny is the way in which it was rarely explicitly or decisively clear one way or the other whether the ghost of Yhwh (L3) within the larger context of the Book of Lamentations as a whole was satirising the people by accusing them of betraying and derailing the future, or whether the

²¹ Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

poet of chapter 3 was satirising the ghost of Yhwh by accusing him of being tragically idealistic or 'wrong'.

Indeed, a major part of Lamentations 3's hauntology's nature (indeed, its aesthetic power) concerns the ambiguity over who was haunting who and why, or more specifically, the finality that that which haunts is *irresolvable*, unreachable, always ambiguous, suspended in time.²² The hauntology in Lamentations 3 therefore does not directly show the way to Utopia, nor was it ever able to truly 'show' anything except a lack. This lack was represented by the ghost of Yhwh (L3) and it is to the subject of its spectral theology that we now turn.

Yhwh (L3) as Spectre

Despite the insights of hauntological analysis above, it is impossible to pin down the ghost of Yhwh (L3) conceptually, even with theological exegesis. One cannot really separate the characterizations of Yhwh in the opposing layers of Lamentations 3 as they occur simultaneously in the chapter's current form. The ghost of Yhwh (L3) in the two sections of the first idealizing layer is 'inside' the ghost of Yhwh (L3) in the sections of the second hauntological layer ('the past inside the present'). The idealized Yhwh (L3) of the first layer ('the past') can only be seen through the medium of the second hauntological layer ('the present'). Hence, the reader cannot be entirely sure of the image portrayed by the first layer, thus making the theology of the chapter ominously spectral.

In the theology of the chapter under consideration, Yhwh (L3) explodes like a spectre the neat symbolic binaries the speaker put his faith in by being both nice and nasty, wrong and right, innocent and guilty, present and absent. Yhwh (L3)'s spectral theology also became a ghost of faith and spirituality, of innocence personal or ideological, imploring the poet to know its 'killer,' manifesting itself to him so as to haunt and correct injustice in the same way that ghosts traditionally do.²³

The spectral nature of Yhwh (L3) is readily apparent if we follow Derrida in considering two models of the type of encroachment between self and other regularly associated with mourning. Borrowing from post-Freudian theories of mourning, he posits (although later undermines) a difference between introjection, which is love for the other in oneself, and incorporation, which involves retaining the other as a pocket, or a foreign body within one's own body. Derrida's point was that in mourning the otherness of the Other resists both the process of incorporation as well as the process of introjection.²⁴

In L3, the ghost of Yhwh was neither preserved as a foreign entity, nor introjected fully within.²⁵ If the author of Lamentations 3 refused to engage with the ghost of Yhwh, he would also have excluded its foreignness from himself and hence have prevented any transformative interaction with him. The ghost of Yhwh (L3)'s hauntological nature therefore did its job in as much as it alienated implied audiences from the temporal status quo. Yhwh (L3)'s character "did not merely show or recall an image of the past, its ghost also showed the present – or more specifically, it showed the past as it existed and was perceived from inside the present."²⁶ The spectre of Yhwh (L3) illustrated the present's

²² Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

²³ Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

²⁴ See J Reynolds, Jacques Derrida, *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, n.p. [cited: 20 Jan 2012]. Online: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/>

²⁵ Reynolds, Jacques Derrida.

²⁶ Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

problems as it approached the future. In this way, time was felt to be out of joint and there seemed to be a tenuous connection between past, present and future.

The mourning of Yhwh's presence in absence and absence in presence was therefore a constituent element in the implied author of L3 and his audience's social life. Yhwh seemed to be both absent and present and this was the sign that a haunting is taking place. It is also evident given the ways in which Yhwh (L3)'s character produced material effects. It is through these material effects (textual production) that we can locate the presence of the ghost and analyze the effects of its hauntings. Its ontology is textural and the implied reader can sense Yhwh's presence only in the textured absence of the text. Hauntological analysis requires sensitivity to these layers of textures.²⁷

The spectre of Yhwh (L3) thus figured a state of ontological undecidability or tension, where there was an insistence, a presence of whatever resisted the poet, recalcitrant to his understanding. Yhwh (L3) is a literary ghost, which exceeded every narrative modality, genre or textual manifestation. The underlying spectral theology, which makes textual reproduction possible, was clearly visible as also fragmenting it, thus ruining the very possibility of guaranteeing a fixed representation of what is no longer there fully. In consequence of this, the mourning in L3 is spectral to the extent that the speaker's telling of his story of suffering invokes the ghost of Yhwh (L3), thus opening up a space through which it returns.

Conclusion

In this contribution we saw that by reading the two layers of Lamentations 3 as trauma texts and viewing Yhwh (L3) as literary spectre we can properly understand the poet's wounds from the destruction of the city and the self as time out of joint. The traumatic event of the exile should have properly killed trust in Yhwh (L3) but failed to do so. Consequently, the idealized deceased version of Yhwh lived on as a spectre and time became out of joint.²⁸ The perceived inability of the poet to adequately express the 'truths' about the exile can therefore be referred to as a sort of 'death', as in 'the Death of God'. A hauntological text like Lamentations 3 might thus be seen as negotiating this 'death', thereby making Yhwh (L3)'s presence-by-absence all the more poignant.²⁹

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²⁷ Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

²⁸ Cf. Harper, *Hauntology: The Past inside the Present*.

²⁹ Cf. Cupitt, *Above us Only Sky*, 52-57.

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