



# Lamentations

*Living in the Ruins*







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*Living in the Ruins*

*A Mentor Commentary*



John L Mackay

**MENTOR**





John L MacKay is Professor of Old Testament at Free Church College Edinburgh. He is an internationally respected Old Testament Scholar who has written several Old Testament commentaries including Focus on the Bible commentaries on *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk & Zephaniah* (ISBN 978-1-84550-345-1) and, *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi* (ISBN 978-1-85792-067-3) and Mentor commentaries on *Exodus* (ISBN 978-1-85792-6419) and two volumes on *Jeremiah* (Vol. 1 ISBN 978-1-857910-9379, Vol. 2 978-1-85792-938-6),

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## Introduction

The five chapters of Lamentations may easily be overlooked. Not only is the book brief, but it also nestles between the much larger prophetic works of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Furthermore, it deals with realities from which we would naturally wish to distance ourselves. Consequently, apart from the affirmation of faith in 3:22-24, the contents of the book are little studied.

However, there is much here to challenge faith and also to build it up. This is the case despite the fact that even a brief glance at the book confirms the aptness of the title for this collection of poems, for they are set in a dark world of catastrophe, misery and apparent hopelessness. Reading them compels us to assess our reaction to such circumstances, and all the more so because what is described here is not some accident which chanced to engulf the city of Jerusalem. Rather this was the deliberately imposed penalty of divine justice on sinful misconduct. Therefore there are many respects in which these events foreshadow God's promised final intervention in human affairs, and constitute a solemn warning to every generation regarding the bitter end which awaits those who stubbornly persist in defying God. 'The time is come that judgement must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?' (1 Pet. 4:17, AV).

But the book was not written in the first instance to serve as a warning for others, or for that matter as a means of keeping alive the memory of past suffering and disaster in the collective consciousness of the community. Clearly at one level these poems are a tribute to the past in that they recall all that Jerusalem had once been, and act as a reminder of what had been lost in the harrowing tragedy of a protracted siege and its aftermath. However, it is the present which dominates the thought of Lamentations with its repeated portrayal of Zion's pain and grief as the city endured the economic, social and political upheaval of enemy occupation and oppression. Indeed, the audience to whom the work is addressed is obviously the group presently enduring suffering. However, in all their affliction, the paramount question facing the community was religious. Their previous pattern of belief and expectation had been shattered. In retrospect it was evident that the LORD's action

against them had been justified, but there remained a lack of clarity as to where that now left them. Had God finally and completely broken off his relationship with them? Would there ever be an end to the indignities imposed on the community? to the agony? to the desolation? Could there possibly be a way forwards to restoration?

Through the measured structure of its poems Lamentations seeks to stem the swirling bewilderment and dismay which afflicted Zion, and to erect a framework in which thought can occur and where, perhaps, hope can be regained. The poet's careful presentation and his astute words of challenge and consolation also enable subsequent generations to extend legitimate comfort in many later situations of disaster, disorder and despair.

### A. Historical Setting

Lamentations is written in the traditional style of Hebrew poetry, naming no names and avoiding specific historical references even as it records very personal circumstances and unveils very personal and deeply felt emotions. So to appreciate its message fully we must set it in its original context which was, of course, well known to the poet and his audience. There can be no doubt that the backdrop for Lamentations is the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, in 586 B.C.<sup>1</sup> Historical accounts of these events are given in 2 Kings 24–25 and 2 Chronicles 36, and also in Jeremiah, but here we encounter the raw details of the personal tragedies which lay behind the generalised summaries found elsewhere.

Throughout their national history the people of Israel had frequently failed to live up to the requirements of their covenant relationship with the LORD. After the division of the kingdom on the death of Solomon in 931 B.C., conditions in the northern kingdom of Israel declined remorselessly into a syncretistic religion,

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1. Wilhelm Rudolph (*Das Buch Ruth—Das Höhe Lied—Die Klagelieder* [Kommentar zum Alten Testament 17. Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1962]) argued that the first poem was composed after the first capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. He based this on the fact that the poem does not speak of the destruction of the city or the Temple in the style of later chapters, but only of their capture. However, the first siege of Jerusalem was not a prolonged affair such as is needed to give rise to the descriptions in 1:11, 19.

and indeed halfway through the two centuries of its independent existence outright paganism from Tyre became dominant under Ahab and Jezebel. The prophetic ministries of Elijah and Elisha stemmed the declension in the north for a while, but after the death of Jeroboam II in 753 B.C. there was a precipitate decline into internal confusion which meant that the kingdom could not withstand intensified and relentless aggression from the Mesopotamian superpower of Assyria. Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 723 B.C. and the northern kingdom was no more.<sup>2</sup>

Decline in the south was slower, not least because of a number of reforming kings who initiated measures which checked and reversed a slide into paganism similar to that which had occurred in the north. Certainly such reform was needed after the reign of Manasseh (coregent from 697 B.C.; sole ruler, 686-642 B.C.), for he encouraged old Canaanite traditions including Baal worship and the erection of an Asherah, and tolerated the fertility cult with its sacred prostitution even in the Temple precincts (2 Kgs. 21:4-7; Zeph. 1:4-5). The king went further still by participating in the cult of Molech with its practice of human sacrifice — he offered his own son (2 Kgs. 21:6). Although in later life Manasseh personally repented (1 Chron. 33:12-13, he was unable to reverse the underlying trend in Judah towards paganism.

Manasseh's grandson Josiah (640-609 B.C.) tried in vain to stem the move away from loyalty to the LORD. Official policy promoted the removal of pagan cults and the renewal of the covenant (2 Kgs. 23:1-20). Outwardly at least the people were content to follow their king's lead, if only as an expression of nationalistic fervour. However, there does not seem to have been a genuine heart-attachment to the LORD, and after Josiah's untimely death (2 Kgs. 23:29) circumstances in Judah rapidly worsened, as Jeremiah's prophecy amply testifies (e.g. Jer. 7:1-15). Meanwhile the international

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2. While many conundrums in biblical chronology have been successfully resolved, there still remains a number of contested details. The dates used here are those given by Leslie McFall, 'A Translation Guide to the Chronological Data in Kings and Chronicles,' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991): 3-45, who refined those established by the seminal work of Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*. (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

situation around them deteriorated, and Judah became trapped in the middle ground between the superpowers of Egypt and Babylon. Babylonian dominance of the area was established by their victory at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., and Judah fell within their sphere of influence. But the regime in Jerusalem under Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.) was more disposed towards alliance with Egypt, which they felt would impose less oppressive conditions on them. Their revolt against Babylon led to Jerusalem being captured in March 597 B.C., and Jehoiachin, the young, newly enthroned king, was deported to Babylon after being on the throne for only a few months. His uncle, Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.), was installed by Nebuchadnezzar to rule in Jerusalem, but it was not long until he too was induced to revolt against Babylon. When the exasperated Nebuchadnezzar retook the city in 586 B.C., orders were given that it be looted and torched (2 Kgs. 25:8-17). It is against the background of the carnage and destruction experienced in the ruined city that Lamentations was written.

## B. Authorship

There are two traditions regarding Lamentations and its authorship. The Massoretes, the scholarly scribes who preserved the traditional text of the Old Testament in the seventh to the eleventh centuries A.D., used the first word of the book as its title, *ʿēkā*, ‘Ah, how!’ (1:1), and placed it not among the Prophets but in the Writings, the third section of the Hebrew canon. Eventually its location there was standardised in the *Megilloth* (‘scrolls’) which is a mini-collection comprising five briefer works (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther). These works were kept together because they were recited at the sacred festivals of the Jews. Lamentations was, of course, read at the time of the remembrance of the fall of Jerusalem, not only that of 586 B.C. to the Babylonians, but also, in the later synagogue, in commemoration of the events of A.D. 70 when the Romans captured Jerusalem. Indeed it was on the *ninth* of Ab (late July/early August), which Jewish tradition associated with the fall of the second Temple to Titus, that there was public mourning and the reading of Lamentations, and not on either of the dates connected with the earlier fall of Jerusalem (the seventh of Ab, 2 Kgs. 25:8-9; the tenth of Ab, Jer. 52:12).



In the Hebrew text as preserved by the Massoretes there is no attribution of authorship for Lamentations.

The other tradition regarding Lamentations is attested in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures made progressively in the century from about 250 B.C. Here the book is entitled *Threnoi*, 'Dirges'. This is unlikely to have been an innovation and probably reflected an even earlier practice. Furthermore, in the Septuagint Lamentations was placed after Jeremiah, among the prophetic writings, and such a position seems also to have been known to Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century A.D.<sup>3</sup>

More significantly, many manuscripts of the Septuagint have a prologue before the text of Lamentations, which from its style seems to reflect a Hebrew original. It reads: 'And it came to pass after Israel had been taken off into captivity and Jerusalem had been laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lament over Jerusalem and said ...'. The Vulgate entitles the book, 'Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet', and repeats the Septuagint superscription, adding 'with a bitter spirit, sighing and wailing'. A similar position is reflected in the Peshitta (the Syriac rendering made from the second century A.D. on), and in the Targum (an Aramaic translation and commentary, written down from the third century A.D. on but reflecting much earlier synagogue tradition). Jewish views on the matter are also recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (committed to writing in the sixth century A.D.) where it is noted that 'Jeremiah wrote the book which bears his name, the book of Kings, and Lamentations (*qînôt*, 'dirges')' (*Baba Bathra*. 14b-15a). However, it is unlikely that attribution of Lamentations to Jeremiah was part of the original Hebrew text since, in the light of the widespread Jewish acceptance of this tradition, it would then be difficult to account for it subsequently being dropped from the Massoretic Text.

Earlier western scholarship readily adopted the Septuagintal tradition, and it was this acknowledgement of Jeremiah as the author of Lamentations which contributed substantially to him being designated 'the weeping prophet'. In more recent centuries,

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3. This would seem to be implied by Josephus' account of the sacred books of the Jews in *Contra Apionem* 1.8.

however, most scholars have doubted that Jeremiah wrote the book. It has been argued that such an attribution merely reflects the scribal habit of assigning anonymous works to well known figures, and that it probably arose through a misunderstanding of 2 Chronicles 35:25: 'And Jeremiah composed/uttered a dirge for Josiah. And all the male singers and the female singers spoke in their dirges for Josiah until today. And they set them as an ordinance for Israel, and behold they are written in the Dirges.' Since the king is spoken of in very positive terms in 4:20, and Jeremiah commends Josiah's character in Jeremiah 22:15-16, some have supposed that chapter 4 is the dirge for Josiah mentioned in Chronicles. However, the reference in 4:20 is undoubtedly to Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, and the content of the chapter as a whole does not match the circumstances of Josiah's reign. Nonetheless the passage in Chronicles does show that Jeremiah was the author of at least one dirge.

Abandonment of Jeremianic authorship led to discussion as to when the book might have been written, with some early critics favouring a date as late as Maccabean times (second century B.C.). It is argued that the author of Lamentations used his extensive imaginative powers to evoke the much earlier situation of Jerusalem's fall. However, the vivid presentation of the devastated city and the absence of references to a return from the Exile or to the rebuilding of the Temple have convinced most commentators that the poems were composed during the exilic period, most probably on the basis of personal participation in the events described. The despairing tone of the work points to an origin between the fall of the city in 586 B.C. and the release of Jehoiachin from prison in 561 B.C., an event which provided a glimmer of hope for the final author of Kings (cf. 2 Kgs. 25:27-30). The poet did not even have that straw to grasp.

However, trends in modern Old Testament scholarship in general have resulted in many favouring multiple authorship of Lamentations. This is often associated with a liturgical origin for the poems, possibly among the temple singers.<sup>4</sup> Certainly Jeremiah 41:5 does refer to public mourning shortly after the catastrophe,

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4. Cf. Johan Renkema, *Lamentations* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 52–53.

and it is clear that mourning and fasting in the fifth month, Ab, had been instituted from an early date after the fall of the city (Zech. 7:3-5; 8:19). However, the poems have no obvious signs of an official or priestly origin but seem to arise out of personal reflection, though that does not preclude their subsequent use in a liturgical setting. Furthermore, there is no clear evidence of multiple authorship, and so in view of the many features shared by all the poems it remains reasonable to assume that one figure has been responsible for all five compositions as well as for the sequence in which they are now preserved.

But is the individual responsible for Lamentations to be identified as Jeremiah? The evidence is finely balanced. In favour of the identification is the similarity in tone and language to be detected in the two books. Instances include the use of the phrase 'daughter Zion' (see discussion at 1:6), references to eyes running with tears (1:16; 2:11; 3:48-49 as compared with Jer. 9:1, 18; 14:17), 'terrors from all around' (2:22 as compared with Jer. 6:25; 20:3, 10), the forgetfulness of Zion's lovers (1:2 compared with Jer. 30:14), and the cup of God's wrath being passed to Edom (4:21 compared with Jer. 49:12). No single occurrence provides irrefutable evidence of Jeremic authorship, but cumulatively they do point to the author as someone who, at least, was familiar with Jeremiah's writings.

On the other hand, there seem to be substantive differences in theological perspective between Jeremiah and Lamentations. One might note that the evidence of 4:17 — that 'we' looked in vain for help from foreign alliances — is at variance with Jeremiah's known views (cf. Jer. 2:18; 37:5-10). The great expectations entertained of the king (4:20) also reflect a different attitude from that of Jeremiah (cf. Jer. 37:17). Further it would seem from 4:19 that the author took part in the flight from the city recorded in 2 Kings 25:4-5, and that could not have included Jeremiah who was languishing in prison at that juncture (Jer. 38:28). It may well be questioned if Jeremiah have written 2:9 quite as it stands. While these differences might be accounted for by supposing that Jeremiah is presenting the outlook of the people in general, not his own, it is more natural to surmise that the author is someone whose viewpoint is closer to that of the populace as a whole than Jeremiah's would have been.

Jeremianic authorship is much more plausible than modern commentators are generally willing to concede, but it is not asserted by the text itself or elsewhere in Scripture. The point does not substantially affect the interpretation of the book provided the same general setting is maintained as would apply if Jeremiah was the author. However, I have adopted the more cautious practice of referring to the author as ‘the poet’, and assume him to have been one who was an eyewitness of the fall of the city, deeply affected by the suffering which occurred, and influenced by Jeremiah’s ministry in his subsequent interpretation of events. Under the inspiration of the Spirit the poet was given profound insight into the underlying causes of the judgement which had come upon his nation, and he was guided in leading his contemporaries to a true appreciation of their situation and of how hope might yet spring from the misery which engulfed them.

### C. Literary Structure

One advantage of referring to the author of Lamentations as ‘the poet’ is that it keeps reminding us that we are studying a work not only of deep theological significance but also of consummate literary craft, which is deployed to enhance the presentation of the message. Though it is not always possible to bring these literary features across in a translation, some understanding of the art and skill involved enhances our appreciation of the book. Indeed, the time and mental energy which the poet had obviously invested in composing his work functioned as a means of assuring his audience that he did not dismiss or minimise their agony. Their situation demanded careful treatment. The use of poetry rather than prose suggested the need for emotional therapy rather than (or, more probably, in addition to) philosophical or theological argument as the way to soothe shattered lives.

It is appropriate to mention here some of the techniques the poet used in achieving his aims.

#### *(1) Basic Structure*

The book of Lamentations consists entirely of poetry, with each of its five chapters being a separate poem. The first three chapters of Lamentations are of a similar length, but the verse structure is

<b>The Poetic Structure of Lamentations</b>		
<b><u>Chapter 1</u></b>	<b><u>Chapter 2</u></b>	<b><u>Chapter 3</u></b>
<b>acrostic</b>	<b>acrostic</b>	<b>acrostic</b>
<b>22 verses of three lines</b>	<b>22 verses of three lines</b>	<b>66 verses of one line with three verses per letter</b>
<b><u>Chapter 4</u></b>	<b><u>Chapter 5</u></b>	
<b>acrostic</b>	<b>not acrostic</b>	
<b>22 verses of two lines</b>	<b>22 verses of one line</b>	

different. Though there are some variations, the verses of chapters 1 and 2 consist of triplets of lines, each line of which is a bicolon, that is, it has two distinct parts or cola.<sup>5</sup> Chapter 3 is organised in three line stanzas, with each line numbered as a separate verse. Chapter 4 consists of couplets of bicola, whereas in chapter 5 each verse is simply a bicolon.

Many of the bicola in Lamentations exhibit the parallelism which is characteristic of Semitic poetry, in that the second member (colon) of a line (bicolon) echoes or modifies the first. Because of this parallelism, the poetic structure of the book is not merely a matter of artistic skill and embellishment, but it also provides significant indications as to how the work is to be read and understood. In chapter 5 almost every verse (only three are exceptions, and two of these, 5:9 and 5:10, appear to be in parallelism with each other) displays balanced parallelism.

5. The translation presented here adopts the convention of indenting the second colon in a bicolon (as also the second and third cola in a tricolon, such as those found in 1:1). This helps to bring out the original poetic structure.

*(2) Alphabetic Acrostics*

Apart from chapter 3, each chapter has 22 verses, the same as the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and in chapters 1, 2 and 4 the first word of each verse begins with a different letter of the alphabet in sequence.<sup>6</sup> In chapter 3 the acrostic pattern is more elaborate in that verses occur in groups of three, with each letter of the alphabet in initial position three times in succession. This intensification of the acrostic device focuses attention on the chapter and underscores its thematic (as well as its literary) centrality. In chapter 5, however, all that remains of the acrostic form is the number of verses.<sup>7</sup> As indicated below, this may contribute to a final plaintive note in the book.

Various proposals have been put forward to account for the use of an acrostic pattern. Its prevalence certainly gives to the book as a whole a coherence which might not otherwise easily arise between five separate poetic compositions. Acrostic devices were by no means innovative, and various sorts are widely attested in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature. They are also to be found partially or wholly worked out in other Biblical poetry (cf. Psalm 119).

But why did the author adopt it in Lamentations? Some have suggested that it was incorporated as an aid to memorisation of the poems. Others have proposed that it was simply a device for displaying literary proficiency. Yet again, others have emphasised that the technique contributed to the sense of the work, as well as the aesthetics of the composition, by embodying the idea of completeness (in a way comparable to our expression 'from A to Z'), and so presenting a claim that no aspect of the nation's trauma was exempted from this expression of its grief. Additionally, the use of acrostics may have commended itself to the poet as a means of establishing emotional control in the fraught and bewildering circumstances of Jerusalem. Certainly this literary feature does not

6. At 2:16-17, 3:46-51 and 4:16-17 there is a reversal of the order of the letters *pê* and *'ayin*, but not in chapter 1. For discussion, see on 2:16.

7. The fact that Psalms 33, 38 and 103 also consist of precisely 22 lines may indicate that this length was deliberately chosen on occasions even when there was no alphabetical constraint.

impart a sense of artificiality to the poems, but rather heightens their impact. Its use is quite compatible with the book being composed during the immediate aftermath of the great catastrophe.

Further, since acrostics are generally considered to be literary rather than oral devices, their repeated employment in these poems may well indicate a written origin for them.

### (3) *Qînâ*

Of necessity scholars remain far from certain as to how Hebrew poetry originally sounded, but there is agreement that many of the lines of poetry in Lamentations are in two parts, of which the first has more stressed syllables than the second, predominantly three stresses in the first colon and two in the second. This imbalanced structure is often termed *qînâ* ('lament') metre, though it is by no means confined to laments, and there are laments which do not employ it (most notably David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, 2 Sam. 1:17-27). This rhythm is best exemplified in chapter 3, and it is the dominant pattern throughout the book with the exception of chapter 5 which consists largely of the much more common balanced 3:3 rhythm.<sup>8</sup> The numbers are of the major word-stresses in each colon, with a *qînâ* pattern being typically 3:2, but 4:3 and 4:2 would also qualify.

The *qînâ* rhythm with its falling away in the second colon is often considered to have a limping effect, which may have made it appropriate for laments. While recent studies have shown how varied the stress patterns employed in Lamentations are, it is possible to see this as part of the craft of the poet and to consider that the *qînâ* provides 'an underlying structural control'.<sup>9</sup>

8. In fact 5:2 is an excellent illustration of the 3:2 stress pattern, and also of the synonymous parallelism (a correspondence of equivalence) between the two cola (half-lines) which is a notable feature of Semitic poetry. Hyphens join words which represent one stressed Hebrew term.

Our-inheritance has-been-turned-over to-strangers, (3 stresses)  
our-houses to-foreigners. (2 stresses)

9. Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Second edition. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1992), 22.

(4) *Concentric Analysis*

In an intriguing proposal Shea claimed that use of the *qînâ* pattern might helpfully be extended from analysis of the poetic line to the form of Lamentations as a whole. He considered that the complete book may be structured in a *qînâ* pattern of 3:2. The first colon would correspond to chapters 1–3, ending with the strong beat of chapter 3, and the second colon would correspond to chapters 4–5 with its abbreviated rhythmical form concluding the book as a whole with a sigh.<sup>10</sup> Further the more elaborate complete acrostic pattern of chapter 3 sets it apart from the two preceding chapters, so that here again there is evidence of the long:short pattern that is characteristic of the *qînâ*. The pattern might, Shea argued, also be reasonably detected in chapters 4 and 5, because the first of these, with its double verses, is twice the length of the second.

He also proposed that ‘the book of Lamentations was written in ... the *qinah* or lament pattern which “dies away”, because it was written in remembrance of Jerusalem, the city that died away.’<sup>11</sup> This, he concluded, is a strong argument against the view that chapter 5 comes from a later author than the first four acrostic chapters. However, focusing on the *qînâ* pattern as the only macrostructural constraint in the book does lead to deemphasising chapter 3 with its central message of hope and gives a more downbeat, pessimistic edge to the presentation in which hope is submerged beneath the pressing realities of suffering, mere survival, and the silence of God.

Many commentators argue that an alternative structure for analysing Lamentations is provided by concentric analysis, with a focus on chapter 3. Such an approach frequently leads to a more optimistic perception of the overall message of the book. For instance, Johnson identified seven units in Lamentations which he argued are arranged chiastically around 3:21-42 which functions as the focus of that chapter and also of the book. He also argued that chapters 1 and 2 are each composed of ‘fact’ halves (1:1-11; 2:1-11) and ‘interpretation’ halves (1:12-22; 2:12-22), an arrangement

10. William H. Shea, ‘The *Qinah* Structure of the Book of Lamentations,’ *Biblica* 60 (1979): 103–7.

11. Shea, ‘*Qinah* Structure,’ 107.



which is also echoed in chapter 4 (fact, 4:1-11; interpretation, 4:12-22).<sup>12</sup>

An elaborate literary structural analysis of Lamentations is presented by Johan Renkema.<sup>13</sup> He considers that it is misguided to analyse the construction of the individual poems and of the book as a whole in a linear fashion, expecting a climax at the end of each poem and at the end of the book. Rather the most significant poetic technique employed is a concentricity, and he provides evidence for this from verbal repetition throughout the poems. Renkema also subjects the individual poems to detailed analysis and division, and utilises the device of ‘responion’ to trace verbal and thematic links between similarly located verses in different poems. Various aspects of these latter features seem somewhat artificial, and are not adopted in this commentary. However, concentricity is established as a key aspect of the structure of Lamentations, and Renkema’s work in this respect is referred to in the discussion.

No analysis can claim finality, however, because the poet did not rigidly restrict himself to one technique. Instead, he combined a variety of methods in a skilfully wrought and subtle blend which gives structural coherence to the work as a whole.

##### (5) *Genre*

Form criticism does not seem to have much to offer in that, with the possible exception of chapter 5, most scholars consider the poems in Lamentations to be of mixed form. Even Hermann Gunkel, who initiated modern form critical studies, concluded that a mixture of several different literary genres were to be found in the book. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 were funeral songs, chapter 3 was an individual lament, and chapter 5 was a communal lament. But the

12. Bo Johnson, ‘Form and Message in Lamentations,’ *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 97 (1985): 58–73. For a more detailed concentric analysis of Lamentations, see David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 246–52.

13. Johan Renkema, ‘The Literary Structure of Lamentations (I–IV),’ in *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry* (JSOTSup 74; ed. Willem van der Meer and Johannes C. de Moor; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 294–396.

individual poems fail to conform to the patterns expected in such categories.

The word *qînâ* is used in the Old Testament of a dirge, which is uttered at a funeral or as a memorial, and is addressed to those who are mourning. A dirge is thus a narrower category than a lament which expresses grief over some tragic event, not necessarily a death. A complaint not only expresses grief but, as in so many of the psalms, seeks redress from God for the distressing situation. While chapter 1 possesses some of the features of a dirge with the introductory ‘Ah, how!’, the third person speaker in most of 1:1-11, and the description of reversed fortunes, it is still not a response to an actual death<sup>14</sup> nor does it call on those addressed to engage in mourning rites. Further, as regards chapter 3, direct address to God does not occur until its very end, and so it is difficult to view that poem simply as a complaint.

Consequently it is appropriate to maintain that throughout Lamentations there are elements of both lament and complaint. There has been irreparable loss, and yet Zion is in some sense still alive. In that the city has fallen to the enemy and been destroyed, its fate now seems irreversible, and yet there is petition and complaint with respect to the ongoing situation, seeking that the physical and spiritual agony of its remaining inhabitants be ameliorated. The mixture of these elements reduces the applicability of form critical categories and analysis in studying Lamentations.

#### (6) *City Laments*

Laments were not unique to the literature of ancient Israel. Many scholarly analyses of Lamentations focus on the genre of the individual poems and in this way try to establish their relationship to other ancient Near Eastern writings. Despite the extensive discussion involved it is unclear how helpful it is to understanding the poems to label them communal laments or whatever, and to compare them with Mesopotamian laments over a ruined sanctuary

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14. As Mintz perceptively remarks, ‘An image of death would have purveyed the false concept of finality; the dead have finished with suffering and their agony can be evoked only in retrospect’ (‘The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe,’ *Prooftexts* 2 [1982]: 3).

or over the destruction of a city.<sup>15</sup> We do not know to what extent the Mesopotamian examples were known about in Israel, or whether there were similar laments over fallen cities in their literary tradition. It is the case that they share the characteristic of the personification of a destroyed and catastrophe-stricken city, described from the point of view of the conquered — but such an event was an all too frequent occurrence in the world, ancient or modern. Both genres express similar emotions. In Mesopotamia the collapse of the city is attributed to the wrath of the god or to a capricious decision of the divine assembly. Often a deity is depicted as leaving his or her temple because the situation facing the city was so overwhelming that no assistance could be offered. In Lamentations the LORD has given over his city to punishment, but no mention is made of a divine return to a rebuilt sanctuary, which differs essentially from Mesopotamian examples.<sup>16</sup> Further, in Lamentations there is acceptance of human sin as precipitating the crisis. So, beyond a broad cultural similarity, the literary relationship of Lamentations to other ancient writings is not self-evident, and this line of analysis adds little to our understanding of Scripture.

#### D. Message of the Book

Why was Lamentations written? Discovering the message of the book depends on identifying the target audience for whom it was originally composed and on assessing their circumstances as they first heard the work. It was not written as a eulogy with which to pay tribute to the past, nor was it initially designed to be a liturgical resource for present and future generations to ponder the experiences of the past; rather it addressed the needs of those who survived the collapse of Jerusalem as they struggled to cope with their interminable suffering and their intense grief. Each chapter of the book is set against this sombre background of catastrophe and agony.

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15. For arguments in favour of the existence of an ancient city-lament tradition within Israel, see Hillers, *Lamentations*, 32–39.

16. For a useful discussion of Mesopotamian parallels, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Interpretation. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2002), 6–12.

Consequently, it has to be admitted that there is a general sameness of outlook pervading the poems of the book, but that is not to imply that the five poems portray what is essentially the same scene from different viewpoints. Even though the physical situation of Jerusalem is the same at the beginning and at the end of the book, it was the poet's intention that his hearers' perspective on their predicament should have changed.

Chapter 1 describes the destruction and misery of Jerusalem, particularly in contrast to her former glory. Chapter 2 emphasises that the catastrophe had occurred because of the LORD's wrath, and so the only hope of relief for the city must originate with him. Chapter 3 has a more personal formulation, arguing the relevance of the poet's own experience. Though repeating many of the themes found elsewhere in the book, it especially centres on the existence of divine 'steadfast love', which gives a genuine basis of hope for the future (cf. 3:22). The chapter draws on the experience of the psalms of individual lament in which, despite suffering from harrowing circumstances, an individual attains a new sense of orientation towards God. Chapter 4 seems to descend from the pinnacle of faith achieved in the previous chapter by plunging back into the harrowing details of the catastrophe. It does end, however, with an anticipation of future reversal of the circumstances of oppressed and oppressor (4:21-22). Chapter 5 is prayer throughout, ending with an affirmation of the LORD's eternal rule and his righteousness, and with the plea that he intervene effectively. The external circumstances of Zion remain unchanged, and cannot provide a basis for hope. But they are now approached in a spirit of prayer, with a renewed affirmation of the character of the LORD and with an acceptance that he alone can provide the way forward. Even so, it has to be recognised that the resolution of Zion's quandary presented in Lamentations does not rise as high as that found in the lament psalms which usually end by anticipating a future time of praise (e.g. 'I shall sing to the LORD, for he shall have dealt bountifully with me,' Ps. 13:6). The uncertainty which obscured Zion's view of the LORD's purposes has not been totally dispelled.

*(1) The Need for Sympathy*

The repeated elaboration in Lamentations of the many aspects of Zion's suffering incorporates an explicit recognition of the magnitude and severity of the situation. The poet does not attempt to provide a superficial remedy by downplaying the calamity the city was enduring, but places himself sympathetically alongside the community he is addressing. He is not speaking at them; instead he speaks as one who shares their experience and comes at it from the inside (3:1-18). In doing so, the poet is aware of the extent to which hearing about their trauma may play a part in a process which will enable the city's inhabitants to grapple with the disaster. A coherent, powerful verbalisation of their grief may indeed fall short of effecting healing for the broken, dysfunctional community, but it moves them on from the distraught, disjointed utterances of personal heartache. Setting out the shattered fragments of their lives was a necessary preliminary to the process of recovery because it forced each individual to recognise the many pieces which constituted the jigsaw of their experience. So too facing up to the fact that others around them had endured the same harrowing disintegration of their lives would induce them to abandon the inward self-absorption which can be characteristic of those overwhelmed by tragedy. In this way they could come together once more as a community in the face of their shared grief.

It is significant to note what the poet does not invite us to do, and that is to sit in judgement on Jerusalem. He makes no attempt to condone her past rebellion and sin. The justice of what the LORD has imposed on her by acting against her is accepted (though not it would seem its severity and prolongation). What the poet does do — and invites us to participate in — is to feel along with her, and in an attitude of sympathy and love to see if anything can be done to relieve her distress by pointing out a way back to the enjoyment of a harmonious relationship with God. It was a time of uncertainty, and the poet does not allow that uncertainty to be resolved by easy words. The future would be determined by the character and purposes of God.

(2) *The Justice and Wrath of God*

The poet is not taken wholly up with the intense anguish which has plunged the people into despair. With keen theological insight he does not let go of the fact that in the situation before him there is another constant factor besides the grief of the people. There is the abiding reality of the wrath of God. The misery of the people is the consequence of the outworking of the wrath of God against their sin. Analysing the present and understanding what possibilities the future may hold depends how these two factors interact.

The wrath of God is the inherent divine reaction to the presence of sin. Zion has experienced the day of the LORD in which he has intervened in the flow of world history and imposed on the people the penalty which sovereign justice requires. However, the collective offence of the city is not spelled out in Lamentations. The allegation that 'she gave no thought to her end' (1:8) does indeed show that there was a reckless unwillingness to recognise the gravity of her situation. The existence of her 'lovers' and 'friends' points to entanglement in foreign alliances and possible involvement in pagan cults (1:2). Mention is made too of the failure of influential figures in the community to promote loyalty to the LORD (2:14; 4:13). Though various factors are indicated as contributing to the LORD's displeasure with Zion, they do not become a major focus in the book. What is emphasised is the severity of the LORD's judgement.

Zion's agony raises the question of human suffering in general. It is part of the fallenness of the world since Genesis 3. When responsible creatures rebel and turn away from God, they plunge themselves into an existence which is inevitably one of suffering caused by God-abandonment. Only by reason of the moderating influence of divine grace acting generally towards our fallen world is there any limit to the extent of its misery. To eliminate God is to eliminate blessing; to rebel is to embrace a state of unmitigated woe. And divine punishment judicially assigns to intransigent rebels the woe which they have in fact selected for themselves.

But God does not use suffering only to inflict punishment on the fallen world. It is also part of his disciplining of his people. Along with other aspects of God's providential governance of his fallen

world, there is much here that is unfathomable to human minds (cf. Job 9:10; Isa. 55:8-11). However, the LORD's action with respect to his covenant people is in terms of his stated commitment. The execution of divine judgement on them is the fulfilment of the warnings given centuries before by Moses. After a delay in gracious forbearance, destruction and exile have been imposed as the curse of the broken covenant (Deut. 4:26-27; 28:32-37; 29:23-27; 30:17-18). No longer could the people enjoy security in the inheritance which they have rendered unclean by their misbehaviour, and so they were 'vomited out' of the land of promise (Lev. 18:24-30).

Lamentations, however, does not concern itself with the fate of the exiles, nor does it question the appropriateness of the LORD's action in overthrowing the city. Both the poet and his audience accepted that the people had not conducted themselves correctly before God and that his verdict against them was just (1:18). What perplexes them is not that God has judged, but the interminable duration of the judgement and the severity of the blows which have come upon the community. They do not assert their innocence; rather they are overwhelmed by their continuing misery and frustrated that there does not seem to be any way to shorten it. Why had they been left to suffer in this way? Would there ever come an end to their agony? Would they not have been better off dead (4:9)? The protracted nature of their suffering left them in a situation worse than that which Sodom had undergone (4:6). In their distress the people are clamouring for their pain to stop, but there is no reply to their entreaties. The God who has spoken in judgement is silent when they cry out to him. Would there ever be a termination to this disaster?

### *(3) Zion Theology*

It is inevitable that acute suffering raises questions as to why such things occur. This is especially the case when it is the believing community which is undergoing such trauma. Why has God allowed this to happen to his people? Will he at some point relent and bring comfort? Lamentations was written for the theologically confused, and is concerned with exploring how the people should now view their standing before God.

This involved the community abandoning their false expectations and regaining a true theological understanding of what was entailed by their relationship with the LORD. For centuries they had been warned that their misconduct meant that divine judgement was impending (2 Kgs. 24:3; 21:12). The southern kingdom of Judah had been given the vivid lesson entailed in Samaria's overthrow. But delayed judgement led to indifference. They saw no need for repentance, and the measure of national restoration of religion under Josiah had left them quite satisfied with their conduct. Certainly, the religious state of the land was not as bad as it had been in Manasseh's reign. The Temple and its worship had been purged of idolatrous abominations. The people therefore expected to enjoy the blessings of the covenant, but that had not happened. However, the reform movement had been superficial, and the community had focused on outward features, not heart reorientation. Consequently their sense of security was not based on the actual facts of the situation (Jer. 6:13-14; 7:1-4). So when catastrophe struck, the people were stunned. The popular religion prevalent in Jerusalem so lacked in depth and insight that it could not provide any interpretative framework for comprehending the disaster which the LORD had imposed.

Their lack of spiritual perception had also been reinforced by an associated phenomenon, which has been termed 'Zion theology'. At one level this was an expression of biblical truth: that God had promised to bless the city. But this promise had seemingly been absolutised in the wake of the deliverance of the city from Sennacherib in 701 B.C., and there had arisen a blind optimism that, no matter how the people conducted themselves, the LORD was irrevocably and unconditionally committed to bless the city. Psalms such as 46, 48 and 76 could be cited to reinforce this point of view. That this forms an element in the religious underpinnings of Jerusalem is evident from the references/allusions to be found in 2:15; 4:12, 20; 5:19. Their thought world came crashing down when reality clashed with this theory. In absolutising the promise of the covenant, they had forgotten the two-sided nature of the covenant relationship and so had neglected the need for loyal commitment and obedience as their response to the blessings conferred on them. Repeated breaches of their covenant obligations had led inexorably to the withdrawal of God's protection from them.



(4) *Personal and Communal Suffering.*

Lamentations records the experience of a community undergoing protracted anguish, and this raises questions as to how the approach and teaching of the book may be applied at the level of personal affliction and trouble. It is often recognised that there are two extended Old Testament treatments of human suffering, in the book of Job and in Lamentations, but it is argued that the situations being examined are significantly different. In Job the focus is on the individual whose suffering is *personal* and *undeserved*. As in many of the psalms, Job's affliction does not derive from any directly attributable fault of his own. Also, as in the psalms of suffering, there is a timeless quality about the presentation of Job's circumstances with no clear specification of time or place. This is not to say that his problems are dealt with in some abstract, generalised fashion but, while the Scriptural record recognises the intensity of the personal experience involved, it presents the matter in a way which is open to application in other situations.

Lamentations too in its presentation is lacking specification of time and place. Undoubtedly we are intended to hear it against the background of 586 B.C. but, since this is never really spelled out (cf. Edom in 4:21-22), the poet in effect invites us to ponder if these events and the reaction to them have a wider significance. But Lamentations differs from Job in that it focuses on the impact of suffering which is both *national* and *deserved*. The people as a whole are experiencing the divine imposition of penalty upon them as an errant community.

However, while it has to be recognised that the experience which underlies Lamentations is 'irreducibly collective',<sup>17</sup> it is nonetheless the case that the suffering of the community is the aggregate of the suffering of the individuals who comprise that community. While the corporate aspect of the experience heightens its intensity and magnitude, there is nothing in Lamentations to suggest that the experience of the community is qualitatively different from that of an individual sufferer. Indeed, the poet presents his material in ways that indicate essential continuity between the individual and the community in this regard.

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17. Mintz, 'Rhetoric,' 2.

This essential continuity may be seen in the figure of ‘daughter Zion’ in chapters 1 and 2. This personification involves attributing to the non-human entity — the city — the qualities of a human personality, a widow, once beautiful and prosperous, but now ravaged by the enemy, abandoned by her former friends, and sitting alone and forlorn at the road side. The figure of a ravaged widow, subject to continuing victimisation, evokes sympathy, and allows us to grasp the overwhelming nature of the catastrophe which has occurred. A general presentation emphasising the great numbers involved would have been more impersonal and less poignant. But at the same time the personalised approach assumes the legitimacy of correlating national tragedy and individual suffering.

The same logic is also evident in chapter 3 where the ‘man’ speaks of his personal experience of affliction (3:1-18) and generalises from it as regards other individuals in similar circumstances (3:28-39) and also as regards what is now an appropriate reaction on the part of the community acting together (3:40-42). Their collective response to the tragedy should not be disjoined from the response of the individuals who comprise the community.

However, it has to be recognised that in Lamentations we are dealing with deserved suffering, imposed as divine judgement on the nation. Even so, it is not appropriate to view Judah as just one among many nations, any more than it is appropriate to think of Job as any sufferer. Here it is the covenant nation which is undergoing God’s chastisement. What is in view is the fate of the nation with privileged knowledge of, and access to, God. Since it has undervalued its special access to God and has thought little of its heritage, he has in retribution withdrawn those blessings from them. Many of the inhabitants of the land had been led off into exile, and from them and also from those who survived in the land the LORD had withdrawn his presence and they were having to endure the silence of divine unresponsiveness to their entreaties. It is this spiritual dimension which sharpened the cutting edge of their sufferings. As a nation they had forsaken God, and he has now left them to experience the consequences of their desertion by abandoning them to their enemies.

*(5) The Future Prospect*

It is not to downplay the pain of Zion to assert that the poet is concerned with more than giving audible expression to the city's agony. He wishes to enable the community to move on. He points out that there is already a measure of hope present in the fact that 'we have not been brought to an end' (3:22). It was not through oversight, but with a purpose, that the LORD had preserved them as survivors in the ruins of Zion. Nevertheless, more than mere survival is needed to heal fragmented and shattered lives. Lasting recovery requires recognition of the character and purpose of God, and also the response of repentance from a community which had so drastically failed to maintain its covenant allegiance.

Particularly in chapter 3 the poet applies the Pauline therapy of extending comfort to any in affliction because of his prior personal experience of the comfort extended to him by the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-5). He presents his own history as a paradigm which shows that even guilty sufferers may approach the LORD. It had been renewed recollection of the character of the LORD which triggered his release from the depths of despair (3:18). So throughout the book the poet insistently points to God. It is not a major element in terms of a word count, but it is strategic in terms of stimulating a renewal of faith and of giving cohesion to the thinking of the disoriented community. This forms the theological backbone to the poet's presentation.

1:18 The LORD is indeed righteous.

2:17 The LORD has done what he planned; he has fulfilled his word which he commanded long ago.

3:22 The LORD's acts of steadfast love

3:25 The LORD is good to those waiting for him.

5:19 But you, O LORD, sit enthroned for ever; your throne endures to generation after generation.

The nation's destiny was not in the hands of blind fate. Rather the people were experiencing the reality of the personal reaction of God in wrath against their sin. It was the LORD's response to their persistent defiance of his requirements which had led to the present crisis, and he alone was able to intervene to alleviate their misery. But that would not occur unless they recognised how wrong their

previous lifestyle had been and turned with confession of their sin to him (3:39-42).

The covenant bond between God and his people is also presented as a ground for hope (3:24), but this again points to the ambiguity of the situation for the survivors in Zion. The extent of the devastation imposed on their land forced them to recognise how heinous their sin had been in God's sight. Had their misconduct then effectively annulled the covenant? Faith struggled to find a chink of light in the face of outward desolation. The ongoing silence of God to their prayers gave no warrant for supposing that there would be a future positive relationship. Their circumstances all militated against optimism.

So the poet does not present a confident picture of what will happen next. The community which had been overcertain of its standing in the courts of heaven is not encouraged to engage in further reckless presumption. Indeed, the poet does not claim to know the path by which the LORD will lead his people back into his favour. He does not even assert that there is a path. What he sees, and sees clearly, is that if there is a path to recovery it must be divinely provided (5:21-22).

The poet does not point forwards to a period of restoration. This is often regarded as a divergence from the message of Jeremiah. It must be noted, however, that Jeremiah's message of restoration was principally focused on a return to the land. The Book of Consolation (Jer. 30-33) is structured round the theme of reversal of exile. 'For, behold days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I shall restore the fortunes of my people Israel and Judah,' says the LORD, 'and I will bring them back to the land which I gave to their fathers and they shall possess it' (Jer. 30:3; cf. Jer. 50:4-5). In Lamentations, however, the focus is not on the exiled community in Babylon, but on the survivors left in Jerusalem. There is no awareness of the timescale on which they may expect relief but, because they are in the hands of the LORD who is essentially benevolent and merciful, the poet's outlook is tentatively positive. There will be an end to the agony of their punishment.