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Lamentations

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Mark J. Boda, *Lamentations*

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Introduction

The book of Lamentations offers a window into the experience of the people of God in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem and demise of the kingdom of Judah. The book presents a series of poems that express the grief of the community using language, imagery, forms, structures, and theology in line with Hebrew traditions of mourning and suffering. This is a disturbing book to say the least, forcing its readers to encounter the honest pain of a community and to struggle with the various strategies employed for processing this pain. It does not provide any simple or final answers to the community's present situation. The book grapples with past biblical traditions related to the intersection of sin and suffering and in turn prompts further responses in the canon and beyond. Its very presence in the scriptural canon of all streams of Judaism and Christianity is testimony to its lasting value, even as these various communities handle it in different ways. This introduction provides the reader of this commentary with an orientation to this challenging book, considering key historical, literary, and theological issues that will lay a foundation for what is presented in the detailed commentary to follow.¹

Historical Issues

Textual Witnesses

Our modern access to the text of the book of Lamentations is possible only because of a faithful scribal tradition preserving the text over millennia. The book was written in Hebrew and later translated into various languages for the use of both Jewish and Christian communities. Hebrew manuscripts

1. With thanks for earlier opportunities to introduce Lamentations in Boda, "Lamentations 1"; and Boda, "Lamentations, Book of." Common material used by permission from InterVarsity Press, PO Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL, 60515, USA, www.ivpress.com.

produced within the Jewish medieval Masoretic tradition include the Leningrad Codex (1009 CE) and other later codices, which largely replicate this textual tradition.² Four partial Hebrew manuscripts with text from Lamentations were uncovered in the caves at Qumran and date to the first century BCE.³ Particularly noteworthy among the Dead Sea Scrolls of Lamentations is 4QLam because of its variance at times from the Masoretic Text (MT).⁴

In antiquity, the book of Lamentations was translated from its original Hebrew into several different languages. The most well-known and significant primary version of Lamentations belongs to the corpus of ancient Greek translations commonly referred to as “the Septuagint” (LXX).⁵ The Old Greek (OG) version of Lamentations was most likely created around the turn of the eras (50 BCE–50 CE), using a formal equivalence translation technique. It is preserved today fully in the great uncial codices of the fourth to sixth centuries and partially throughout the patristic commentaries, with Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century CE) regarded as the best witnesses to the original translation.⁶ Lamentations was also translated into Aramaic (including the Syriac dialect), Latin, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Slavonic, and Arabic.⁷ In addition to the Greek version, the most important of these textual traditions as witnesses to the Hebrew text are the Aramaic (Targum), Syriac (Peshitta), and Latin (Vulgate). This textual history demonstrates the impact and enduring value of the book of Lamentations within both Jewish and Christian communities in antiquity.

The translation throughout this commentary is based on the most important manuscripts and textual witnesses noted above, especially those within the Hebrew and Greek traditions, with a focus on providing a fresh translation of an early form of Lamentations in Hebrew.

2. For an overview of the proto-Masoretic and medieval Masoretic texts of Lamentations, see respectively: Schäfer, *THB* 1C:362–67 (§16.2.2); Martín-Contreras, *THB* 1C:512–13 (§13–17.3).

3. 3QLam (3Q3): 1.10–12; 3.53–62 (partial); 4QLam (4Q111): 1.1–18; 2.5 (partial); 5QLam^a (5Q6): 4.5–8, 11–16, 19–22; 5.1–13, 16–17 (partial); 5QLam^b (5Q7): 4.17–20 (partial). For discussion, see Lange, *THB* 1C:361–62 (§16.2.1). For the texts themselves, see Ulrich, *Biblical Qumran Scrolls*, 749–54.

4. See esp. Schäfer, *THB* 1C:367–73 (§16.2.3); Kotzé, *Qumran Manuscripts*.

5. For superb introductions, see Dogniez, *THB* 1C:394–96 (§13–17.1.1.4); Gentry, “Lamentations”; Hiebert, “Megillot”; Ueberschaer, “Threnoi/Lamentationes/Lamentations”; Youngblood, “Lamentations”; Youngblood, “Character and Significance.” Also note the later Greek recensions (Aq, Sym, Theod), which basically sought to bring the existing OG translation(s) closer to the (proto-)Masoretic tradition. For details, see Gentry, *THB* 1A:211–35 (§1.3.1.2); Meade, *THB* 1C:424–25 (§13–17.1.5.1); M. Dickie, *THB* 1C:439–41 (§13–17.1.6).

6. For a translation and commentary on Lamentations according to LXX^b, see Labahn, *Lamentations*.

7. Excellent overviews can be found for Tg-Lam: Brady, *THB* 1C:402–9 (§13–17.1.3); for Syr-Lam: Balzaretta, *THB* 1C:418–19 (§13–17.1.4.4); for Vg-Lam: Skemp, *THB* 1C:441–46 (§13–17.1.7). For details of the other (secondary) translations of Lamentations, see the various articles in *THB* 1C:452–511 (§13–17.2).

Title and Canonical Placement

The preservation of the text of Lamentations in its original Hebrew and in multiple translations is inextricably linked with its status as an authoritative book within the various canons of Judaism and Christianity.⁸ The book is called *qînôt* in the Babylonian Talmud (B. Bat. 14b; Hag. 5b; y. Shabb. 16.1); *thrēnoi* in Greek; and *threni*, *lamentationes*, or *cinoth* in Latin (see Jerome, *Prologus Galeatus*)—all words referring to a mournful expression.⁹ In later Hebrew codices (e.g., Leningradensis) it is called *’êkâ* (how?), based on the first word of the book, a tradition similar to the naming of the books of the Pentateuch, Proverbs, and Song of Songs.

The Hebrew Jewish canonical traditions generally placed Lamentations among the Ketuvim (Writings), the third and final division of the canonical books. Within the Ketuvim in the later medieval period, Lamentations is often placed among the five Megilloth or “scrolls” (Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther) to be read at the major festivals, but in the earliest period it is found in other positions.¹⁰ Within the Ketuvim one also finds historical accounts from the Babylonian and Persian periods (Daniel, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah, Esther), as well as liturgical (Psalms) and wisdom materials (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs). Lamentations fits well among these books with its cries to God and use at one key commemoration (Ninth of Av), the date of the destruction of the First and Second Temples.¹¹ In this way, Lamentations was read in terms of the continuing worship rhythms of the Jewish community in the postexilic period.¹² But it is also appropriately placed alongside the historical accounts of those who lived in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the elite, which provide other perspectives on life lived in this challenging period.¹³ Furthermore, the presence of books dominated by wisdom themes, especially debates over suffering and meaning in Job and Ecclesiastes, evokes some of the material in Lamentations (esp. in chap. 3).

Melton has noted two fascinating dynamics within the Megilloth that highlight the social and religious realities of this period. The Megilloth is an “unconventional collection within the Hebrew Bible that distinctly foregrounds

8. See esp. Melton, “Conspicuous Females”; Goswell, “Assigning the Book.”

9. Salters, 2.

10. See Beckwith (*Old Testament Canon*, 449–68), who groups the various orders into the categories literary, chronological, anomalous, and liturgical. His chronological (Jerome, Josephus) and literary (Talmud) are the earliest, while the liturgical (Masoretic) is later. But note more recently T. Stone, *Compilational History*; Steinberg, *Die Ketuvim*; cf. Steinberg and Stone, “Historical Formation.”

11. See Parry, “Wrestling with Lamentations,” 177–79.

12. Further evidence of these worship rhythms include those penitential forms of prayer found within narrative books like Ezra 9; Neh. 1; 9; Dan. 9.

13. See also Warhurst (“Associative Effects,” 203), who notes the way these books in the Writings shape the view of exile as an ongoing reality.

females and backgrounds God.”¹⁴ There is no mention of God in Song of Songs and Esther, while Ruth melds human and divine initiative, and Ecclesiastes portrays God “as transcendent and his ways . . . indiscernible.”¹⁵ Lamentations has much speech directed toward God but only a few direct words from Yahweh, the latter also being true of all the Megilloth. At the same time, there is an increase in the role played by women (esp. in “expressing vulnerability and isolation”) in all these books.¹⁶ Therefore, the placement of Lamentations among the Megilloth and the Ketuvim underscores the liturgical nature of this book, the key role played by the female voice of the City, the challenge of a period in which God felt distant to the people of God, and the themes of suffering and theodicy.¹⁷

In contrast, the Greek Jewish canonical traditions placed Lamentations in proximity to Jeremiah—that is, among the Prophets.¹⁸ As noted below, this connection to Jeremiah is reflected in the preface to the book of Lamentations provided in the Greek tradition, which identifies the lament that follows as arising from Jeremiah in response to the exile of the community and destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁹ There is, however, internal evidence for a close connection between the book of Lamentations and Jeremiah (and the prophets in general), with Lamentations taking its lead from the prophetic tradition, which sets a precedent for uttering protest to God in the midst of judgment²⁰ but also provides the divine confrontation that set in motion the suffering cataloged in the book of Lamentations (see below under “Historical Issues: Traditions”). A setting within the prophetic corpus also brings the book into proximity with those prophetic responses to Lamentations that provide pathways of hope beyond the suffering (esp. Isa. 40–55 and Zech. 1–8; see below under “Theological Issues: Old Testament Theological Responses”).

The unique character of Lamentations, as a book standing between liturgical response and heavenly action, human protest and divine accusation, explains its multiple canonical placements and associations.

14. Melton, “Conspicuous Females,” 203.

15. Melton, “Conspicuous Females,” 200. See further Melton, *Where Is God in the Megilloth?*

16. Melton, “Conspicuous Females,” 203. Note also Eccles. 7:28 and the link to wisdom personified (see Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 267–68).

17. For further reflections, see T. Stone, “Canonical Shape and Function”; T. Stone, “Macro-Structure.”

18. The order in LXX^{A, B} is Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations, Epistle of Jeremiah (Goswell, “Assigning the Book,” 11n41). Daniel also shares a double identity within the Prophets (Greek) and the Writings (Hebrew) because of its shared features with the prophetic corpus (visionary experiences) and the postexilic corpus (royal court histories from the Babylonian/Persian periods).

19. Similar is the opening verse of Tg, as well as the various titles assigned in the OG, Vg, and Syr traditions.

20. See Boda, “Uttering Precious”; Boda, “From Complaint.”

Authorship

One of the oldest interpretations of the book of Lamentations is represented by the ancient Jewish Greek translation, which identifies Jeremiah as the composer of at least the first if not all the laments in the book with the addition of the preface: “And it happened, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem was laid waste, Jeremiah sat weeping and gave this lament over Jerusalem and said: . . .” (NETS modified).²¹ Although this preface is missing in the Hebrew tradition, the rabbinic tradition held to Jeremiah’s involvement in its composition (see b. B. Bat. 15a).²² Likewise, the view that Jeremiah authored Lamentations was widespread in early Christian sources.²³ This connection to Jeremiah may have been suggested by the note in 2 Chron. 35:25 that Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, even though the text in Chronicles says nothing about laments related to the fall of Jerusalem.²⁴ The connection between the prophet and the book of Lamentations is usually based on the number of literary connections that have been identified between the books of Lamentations and Jeremiah. However, many have questioned this conclusion, noting that the perspective and ideology of some of the sections of Lamentations stand in tension with the message of a prophet who consistently predicted and justified God’s punishment of Judah (cf. Lam. 4:17–20 with Jer. 2:18; 37:5–10; Lam. 1:10 with Jer. 26:4–6).

Greater sensitivity to the dynamics of voicing within biblical literature and openness to diversity of expression within a given tradition have led scholars back to the importance of Jeremiah, whether as a prophet or a book, to the development of the book of Lamentations.²⁵ The book of Jeremiah contains significant evidence that the Prophet could shift from one perspective to another, and the book of Jeremiah also contains at times other voices, including the voice of the Community and the voice of the City, sometimes in the mode of lament (see below under “Literary Issues: Structure”).²⁶ This does not necessarily mean that Jeremiah was the author of Lamentations, since Jeremiah

21. For the impact of this addition on OG-Lam, see Labahn, “From Anonymity.” See further the textual note on 1:1, as well as Kotzé, “Short Notes,” 79–80. Also, see the textual note on 5:1 for similar connections to Jeremiah in some mss of OG, Vg, and Syr of the book’s final chapter.

22. See Kalman, “If Jeremiah Wrote It”; Kalman, “Authorship.” Note also the ascription to Jeremiah at the start of Tg-Lam: “Jeremiah the prophet and high priest said. . . .”

23. E.g., note the paratextual material attributing the book to Jeremiah in most mss of OG, Vg, and Syr (see the textual notes on 1:1 and 5:1). This view is also attested by many church fathers, including Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Jerome.

24. However, the Apocryphon of Jeremiah (4QapocrJer C^a 18 ii.1–5) does refer to Jeremiah lamenting over Jerusalem. See Davis, “Re-Presentation,” 191–92 (with thanks to Kalman, “Authorship,” 36).

25. Note the early modern link to Jeremiah by Löhr, “Threni III.” See also the helpful discussion in Frevel, “Jeremiah, the ‘Paradigmatic’ Author.”

26. Throughout the introduction and commentary, the terms “Prophet,” “City,” and “Community” are consistently capitalized in reference to the various voices within the book

is only the prophet depicted in the book of Jeremiah and not explicitly identified as its author. Furthermore, the employment of different orders in the alphabetic acrostics (chap. 1 vs. chaps. 2–4) also points to different hands at work in shaping the poems in this book. That the book of Lamentations has arisen within the same group that is responsible for the book of Jeremiah is the most plausible explanation for the character of these various poems and their consistent connection to the voices found in Jeremiah.²⁷

Despite the assertion of some that the book cannot be set accurately within a particular historical context,²⁸ most scholars agree that the book reflects the conditions of the final years of the kingdom of Judah in the sixth century BCE. Many place Lamentations in the period of 586–515 BCE based on historical and linguistic evidence, as well as responses to Lamentations found in later Babylonian (Isa. 40–55) and early Persian period texts (Zech. 1–2).²⁹ Chapter 4 contains descriptions of the experience of the people that appear to fit the time of a siege against the city (Lam. 4:10; cf. Deut. 28:53–57; Jer. 19:9; Ezek. 5:8–12), but it also testifies to later developments and ends with hope for approaching deliverance. Many have argued that chapter 5 may be the latest of the compositions because of its employment of temporal references such as “forever” and “so long,”³⁰ but such evidence is unhelpful because expressions like these are not only stereotypical in liturgical compositions (see Pss. 9:18 [19]; 10:11; 23:6; 44:23 [24]; 93:5) but also relative to the composer’s perspective. Additionally, the reference to the “sins of the ancestors” in Lam. 5:7, which to some suggests a later generation looking back on the generation at the fall of Jerusalem, is not a secure argument because such appeals are evident in compositions arising in the last decade before the fall of Judah (cf. Jer. 31:29; Ezek. 18:2). The dominant perspective of the poems is that of life in the land after the fall of Jerusalem, with only a few references to life in exile (Lam. 1:3, 5, 18; 2:9; 4:15, 22), suggesting that it arose among those who had remained in the land after the city’s fall. It is true that the poems reflect urbanites in contrast to the rural population, but whether this perspective is “elite” is another issue.³¹ The voices showcased are those in extreme vulnerability and suffering, among whom were the elite (e.g., 4:5).

of Lamentations. See further the discussion below under “Historical Issues: Traditions,” “Literary Issues: Genre,” and “Literary Issues: Structure: Voicing.”

27. Lee (29) speaks of an “oral poetic” rather than “authorial” claim for the connection between the Prophet’s voice and Jeremiah. Cf. Berman, 15–17.

28. E.g., Provan, 11–12; cf. Provan, “Reading Texts.” It is true that the Babylonians are not mentioned specifically in the book, but this more generic rhetoric is typical of liturgical material as we see in the Psalter; cf. Goswell, “Assigning the Book,” 6.

29. E.g., Dobbs-Allsopp, “Linguistic Evidence”; House, 283–303. For intertextual links, see the discussion below under “Theological Issues: Old Testament Theological Responses” and also the commentary’s appendix 2.

30. See Lee, 29.

31. As argued by Wilkins, *Book of Lamentations*, 222–23.

Historical Context

The conditions for the fall of Jerusalem were created by historical events and political dynamics that predate this event by centuries.³² Assyrian imperial aspirations led not only to the demise of the Northern Kingdom in the late eighth century BCE and its incorporation into the Assyrian imperial structure but also to vassal status for Judah with its capital, Jerusalem. By the end of the seventh century BCE, however, Babylon with the help of Media would replace Assyria as the leading Mesopotamian power. In the transition between Assyria and Babylon, Egypt would intrude into the affairs of Judah, exemplified in the death of Josiah at the hands of Pharaoh Necho (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2 Chron. 35:20–24). Josiah's sons would serve in quick succession, his younger son Jehoahaz removed, exiled, and replaced by Necho with Josiah's eldest son, Jehoiakim (= Eliakim; 2 Kings 23:31–35; 2 Chron. 36:2–4). Jehoiakim would waver in loyalty between Necho and Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:1–7), reflecting the uncertain political dynamics of this period. Babylon and its emperor Nebuchadnezzar, however, would emerge in control of western Asia (2 Kings 24:7). Jehoiakim's vacillation was not looked on favorably by Nebuchadnezzar, who disciplined him using at first auxiliary forces (24:2), and in the end the Judean king died, leaving his son Jehoiachin to bear the brunt of the Babylonian emperor's fury (24:8–17). In 597 BCE, Jerusalem fell as part of a larger campaign that began as early as 599 BCE and in earnest in 598–597 BCE.³³ Nebuchadnezzar deported Jehoiachin to Babylon along with members of his royal court and a large number of skilled personnel from Jerusalem, placing Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah (= Mattaniah) on the throne in his place (2 Kings 24:10–17; 2 Chron. 36:9–10). Later records from Babylon would confirm Jehoiachin's experience at the heart of the empire, where he and his family received support from the imperial court (see 2 Kings 25:27–30 // Jer. 52:31–34).³⁴

Zedekiah would reign for eleven years, but in the end he (2 Kings 24:20b), along with other kings in the region (Jer. 27), rebelled against his Babylonian overlords, most likely emboldened by the rise of a new pharaoh in Egypt, Psammeticus II (595–589 BCE).³⁵ This rebellion prompted Nebuchadnezzar to besiege Jerusalem one final time, bringing an end to Judah's existence as a royal (vassal) state (2 Kings 25 // Jer. 52; 2 Chron. 36:11–20).

This final siege of Jerusalem began on the tenth day of the tenth month in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign (early January 587 BCE) and lasted for eighteen months until the ninth day of the fourth month in his eleventh year

32. See further Boda, *Haggai, Zechariah*, 22–32; Boda, *Book of Zechariah*, 7–15; Carter, *Emergence*; Faust, *Judah*; Lipschits, *Fall and Rise*.

33. See Lipschits, *Fall and Rise*, 52.

34. For the ancient Babylonian evidence, see ANET 308 (Babylon 28186).

35. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise*, 63.

(end of July 586 BCE; 2 Kings 25:1–2).³⁶ The siege involved the Babylonian army surrounding the city to cut off all supplies and build siege works against the city walls (25:1). Throughout the siege, people surrendered to the Babylonians (Jer. 37:11–13), revealing fissures within the community and the desperate conditions of those trapped inside. On the final day of the siege, the city wall was breached (2 Kings 25:4), but it is uncertain whether this breakthrough was from those inside trying to get out or the reverse. The description that follows identifies a location, “the gate between the two walls near the king’s garden” (25:4), which may have been the breach or another location that then was used by the royal party to leave the city. This elite group abandoned the city and headed toward the wilderness region to the east of Jerusalem but was overtaken by the Babylonian army on the plains of Jericho (25:5). Zedekiah was taken to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah (in Syria), the Babylonian headquarters in the Levant, where his sons were killed before him and his eyes put out before he was deported to Babylon in shackles (25:6–7). A month later, the Babylonian commander Nebuzaradan arrived at Jerusalem to begin dismantling its infrastructure, setting fire to its major buildings including the temple, palace, and houses, and demolishing its walls (25:8–10, 13). Valuable materials were plundered (25:13–17). While most of the elite were forced into exile (25:11), some of them, including leading priestly and royal figures, were taken to Riblah before Nebuchadnezzar and executed (25:18–21). The poorer classes were left behind to care for the land (25:12).

The devastation of Jerusalem led to the establishment of a new political capital for this region: Mizpah in the Benjaminite region just north of Jerusalem.³⁷ Second Kings 25:22–26 describes the appointment of Gedaliah (cf. Jer. 40:7–41:18), a member of the Shaphanide scribal family that had served the Judean kings beginning with Josiah (2 Kings 22) and displayed some sympathy for Jeremiah (Jer. 36). Gedaliah would serve as a governor, connecting those within the newly formed province of Judah and the imperial hierarchy. Remnants of the Judean military, the poorer classes, and others who had fled to nearby regions gathered around Gedaliah during his short period of service (Jer. 40:7–12). Unfortunately, within seven weeks from the beginning of Gedaliah’s rule, a member of the royal Davidic line, Ishmael son of Nethaniah, the son of Elishama, assassinated Gedaliah with the help of a small force, killing others in the process (including Babylonian soldiers) while taking captive female members of the royal family (40:13–41:10). Jeremiah 41:16–43:13 recounts how those who survived this attack ultimately fled to Egypt, fearful of Babylonian reprisal.

Evidence for economic activity related to Jerusalem can be culled from the discovery of some storage jars, suggesting that some people remained in

36. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise*, 73–74.

37. See Lipschits, *Fall and Rise*, 92–97.

Jerusalem, whether political or priestly, “who guarded the ruins of the temple and preserved its memory and the rites that used to be conducted there.”³⁸ Textual descriptions from the Babylonian period immediately after the fall of Jerusalem (Jer. 41:5) and from the early Persian period (Zech. 7–8) suggest that there were those who were drawn to the temple ruins to commemorate the fall of the city (see below under “Historical Issues: Setting in Life”). But the temple in Jerusalem was not reconstructed until the reign of the Persian emperor Darius (515 BCE), with preliminary initiatives beginning under the figure of Sheshbazzar during the reign of Cyrus (ca. 538 BCE; Ezra 1; 5) and a more successful project occurring under the royal and priestly figures Zerubbabel and Joshua during the reign of Darius (ca. 520–515 BCE; see Ezra 3–6; Hag. 1–2; Zech. 1–6).³⁹ Apart from the temple precincts, the city would largely remain in ruins until late in the fifth century (see Nehemiah), long after the reconstruction of the temple. There is evidence for the names of governors administering the province of Judah (Yehud) from the very beginning of the Persian period, suggesting a continuation of the Babylonian political structure established under Gedaliah.⁴⁰

This historical overview provides a general backdrop for reading the book of Lamentations. It provides evidence for the Babylonian attack on the Levant and its devastating effect on the nation of Judah and especially its capital city Jerusalem. The final destruction of Jerusalem was not Nebuchadnezzar’s first encounter with this city, and the level of destruction wreaked on the city can be traced to his exasperation over a lack of cooperation with his imperial designs. The fact that the political center was moved to Mizpah suggests an extreme level of devastation in Jerusalem, confirming the picture encountered throughout the book of Lamentations. This substantial devastation and the significant delay in the revival of the city created conditions for the liturgical traditions found in Lamentations.

Setting in Life

The fixation in the book of Lamentations on the events surrounding the fall and destruction of the city and its aftermath suggests that the setting of the poems is most likely the days of fasting that arose immediately after the fall of Jerusalem.⁴¹ Evidence for mourning rites associated with the destroyed sanctuary and possibly also the fallen state is found in Jer. 41:4–9. There,

38. Lipschits, *Age of Empires*, 198.

39. For the timing of these initiatives, see Boda, “Flashforward”; Boda, “Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.”

40. See Lipschits, *Fall and Rise*, 125; Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, xxix–xli; H. Williamson, “Governors of Judah”; Vanderhooft, “New Evidence,” 231–33.

41. For such a setting for the community in the midst of crisis, see Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 82; Ferris, *Genre of Communal Lament*, 103–8. Cf. Judg. 21:1–9; 1 Sam. 7:5–6; 1 Kings 21:8–13; Isa. 58; Joel 1–2.

eighty men from Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria, performing rites associated with mourning (i.e., shaved beards, torn clothes, self-inflicted wounds, weeping), are depicted on their way to “the house of Yahweh” with grain offerings and incense (41:5).⁴² While this evidence comes from the Babylonian period immediately after the fall of Jerusalem, Zech. 7–8 speaks of the practice of four fasts during the following “seventy years,” fasts that took place in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months (Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19). That these fasts were related at least to the temple in Jerusalem (as in Jer. 41) is suggested by the fact that a delegation from Bethel approached the priests and prophets of “the house of Yahweh of Hosts” (Zech. 7:3 AT) to determine whether these fasts should now come to an end with the Second Temple nearing completion. Some have suggested that the four fasts were related to key events associated with the fall of Jerusalem.⁴³

Four Key Events Related to the Fall of Jerusalem

<i>Tenth month,</i> 587 BCE	Siege of Jerusalem began (2 Kings 25:1; Jer. 39:1)
<i>Fourth month,</i> 586 BCE	Jerusalem’s walls breached and leadership fled (2 Kings 25:3–7; Jer. 39:1–10; 52:6–11)
<i>Fifth month,</i> 586 BCE	Jerusalem destroyed (2 Kings 25:8–12; Jer. 52:12–16)
<i>Seventh month,</i> 586 BCE	Gedaliah assassinated (2 Kings 25:25–26; Jer. 41:1–3)

Close associations between Lam. 3 and the prophetic lament liturgies found in Jer. 14:1–15:4 (arising during the reign of Judah’s final king, Zedekiah) also suggest a common liturgical setting for prayers of lament and penitence throughout the sixth century BCE and beyond. Other compositions that may have arisen in this liturgical setting are now found in the Psalter (e.g., Pss. 74; 79; 89; 106; 123; 137; cf. Pss. 44; 60; 83),⁴⁴ as well as in narrative texts describing prayer in the Persian period (Ezra 9; Neh. 1; 9; Dan. 9). That the same context is suggested for all of these prayers is bolstered by close literary and ideological features they all share.⁴⁵ Of particular interest are Pss. 42–44, 74, and 88–89.⁴⁶ Connections to this prayer tradition will be noted throughout

42. Note that in NIV quotations, I have consistently replaced NIV’s “the LORD” with “Yahweh.”

43. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 103–7; Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, 207n122. For the view that links Lamentations more closely to the rebuilding of the Second Temple, see Greenstein, “Book of Lamentations.”

44. For general comparisons and contrasts between psalms of protest (i.e., laments) in the Psalter and Lamentations, see Goldingay, “Models for Prayer.”

45. See Boda, “Priceless Gain”; Boda, “Zechariah and Prayer Traditions.”

46. See House (397; cf. 281, 456), who speaks generally of the poems in Book 3 of the Psalter (Pss. 73–89). Cf. Goldingay, 190.

the commentary, but see appendix 2 under “Lamentations and the Psalms” for lists showing the many connections to this prayer tradition.

Traditions

Lamentations showcases a crossroads in the tradition history of the OT. It stands at a key historical intersection between the monarchial and post-monarchial periods, a transition that necessitated new modes of preserving text and tradition with the loss of the cultural institutions supported by the Judean monarchy. It is not then surprising to find connections between Lamentations and many other theological traditions within the OT—some that predate Lamentations, others that are contemporary, and still others that will emerge later.⁴⁷

Various motifs throughout the book of Lamentations reflect key earlier traditions. The “day of Yahweh” tradition seen especially in chapters 1–2 can be discerned throughout prophetic literature, often linked to an approaching time of salvation and/or judgment.⁴⁸ In Lamentations, the fall of Jerusalem is identified as an expression of this “day” (e.g., 1:12, 21).⁴⁹ Another judgment tradition is related to the covenant curse material in the Torah, which stipulates the reality of divine retribution for violation of the covenant (Lev. 26:14–45; Deut. 28:15–68; 29:19–28 [18–27]; 32).⁵⁰ This explains the presence of admission of the people’s culpability in relation to the suffering throughout Lamentations. However, at certain points in Lamentations there are indications of some concerns that the present experience of covenant discipline exceeded the expectation created by the Torah (cf. Lam. 4:6 with Deut. 29:23 [22]; Lam. 5:22 with Lev. 26:44; Lam. 2:16 with Deut. 32:27). A positive tradition that influences Lamentations (esp. 3:21–33) is that of the character creed of Exod. 34:6–7.⁵¹ Hope for “the man” in Lam. 3 is prompted by a remembrance of this tradition (vv. 21–33), but what follows in vv. 34–39 builds on the theology of divine discipline also found in the character creed, which is allied with the retribution theology found above as well as in wisdom theology.⁵² This theology reminds the people that God does not afflict with delight (v. 33) or

47. Cf. Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use*, 604–12.

48. See further Boda, *Book of Zechariah*, 686–91.

49. See Gottwald, *Studies*, 82–89; Renkema, 102–4; Boase, *Fulfillment of Doom?*, 105–39.

50. On the connection to the more general Deuteronomistic retribution theology, see the foundational works of Gottwald, *Studies*, 66, 70; Albrektson, 230–37. For the covenant curses, Flanders (“Covenant Curses Transposed”) provides a superb overview of key earlier works and presentation of possible connections. In the commentary I have included the most convincing connections, but others noted by Flanders on a thematic level may also contribute to the overall “sustained allusion.” See further Stead, “Sustained Allusion,” esp. 154–56; Boase, “Chaos and Order,” 56; Provan, 40; Berlin, 52; Assis, 65; House, 351.

51. See Boda, *Heartbeat*, 27–51; Boase, “Chaos and Order,” 63.

52. See Gottwald, *Studies*, 71–72.

approve of injustice (vv. 34–36) but rather dispenses discipline because of sin (vv. 37–38).⁵³ A further tradition in the OT is one that depicts the suffering of a “man” (*geber*) figure, as one finds in Lam. 3. Such a figure appears in both Pss. 88 and 89 (see chap. 3 under “Overview: Traditions”), with the former suggesting culpability and the latter innocence. Another suffering “man” (*geber*) figure is found in the book of Job (3:3, 23; 4:17; 10:5; 14:10, 14; 16:21; 22:2; 33:17, 29; 34:7, 9, 34; 38:3; 40:7), a book that also has many other connections to the book of Lamentations (see appendix 2 under “Lamentations and Job”).⁵⁴ However, Lam. 3 evidences clear differences from Job, since the former speaks of culpability and the latter of innocence.⁵⁵

Zion theology plays a significant role in the book of Lamentations.⁵⁶ This theology was foundational to Judah’s kingdom and thus emphasized by royal circles and the priestly groups that the monarchy supported.⁵⁷ As various psalms reveal (Pss. 2; 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 122; 137), the Zion tradition depicted Jerusalem as the place of God’s dwelling and seat of his rule over all the earth, replacing and exceeding the Canaanite seat of divine rule on Mount Zaphon. So exalted was this city that it is seen as invincible, secure from any attack of the enemy—a belief that led to an emphasis on the inviolability of Zion, lulling the people into a false confidence based on God’s past choice of Jerusalem and its sanctuary, especially after the miraculous victory over the Assyrians in Hezekiah’s time (2 Kings 18–19 // Isa. 36–37). Later prophets confront this royal ideology, predicting that Zion will be destroyed (Jer. 26:18–19; cf. 7:1–15; Mic. 3:12) and its sanctuary abandoned by Yahweh (Ezek. 10) because of the rebellious behavior of the people. Thus, after the fall of Jerusalem, Lamentations modifies this tradition so that “Yahweh is a menacing enemy instead of an avenging savior,” and in this way, there is an “overturning or undoing of the Zion tradition and not simply a reinterpretation.”⁵⁸ In the book of Lamentations, the Zion tradition is associated with the most bitter lament and pain because the people struggle with the promises related to the city of Jerusalem and its sanctuary.⁵⁹

53. Lo (“Exodus 32–34,” 28) contrasts Exod. 32–34 with Lamentations, the former focused on the grace tradition of Exod. 34:6–7a, the latter on the discipline tradition of 34:7b. However, both are in view in each context, especially as seen in the punishment meted out in Exod. 32:9–10, 25–35.

54. E.g., Berlin, 85; Dobbs-Allsopp, 110, 120; Berman, 92–93. See also Maier, “Afflicted Man,” 104–6; Kynes, “Debating Suffering”; Aitken, “Inevitability of Reading”; cf. Lévêque, *Job et Son Dieu*, 1:382–86; Mettinger, “Intertextuality,” 269–71. Kynes (“Debating Suffering”) in particular sees Job as a response to Lamentations. See Lam. Rab. 3.1 for the early rabbinic connection between “the man” and Job.

55. See also Maier, “Afflicted Man,” 106.

56. See Albrectson, 219–30; Renkema, 44–45; Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, 46.

57. See J. Roberts, “Davidic Origin”; J. Roberts, “Zion in the Theology”; J. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 4.

58. Dobbs-Allsopp, “R(az/ais)ing Zion,” 39.

59. For the way Lam. 2 depicts Yahweh as turning against Zion, see Dobbs-Allsopp, “R(az/ais)ing Zion,” 21.

Key to Zion theology in Lamentations is the regular employment of a figure called “the Daughter of Zion.”⁶⁰ The use of this female image shifts emphasis from the royal focus on power to that of vulnerability, relationality, and culpability. The image of a daughter brings into view the familial context, within which the daughter was related to her father and mother and was to be carefully protected and treasured (see below under “Literary Issues: Imagery”). That this is often not the case (e.g., Gen. 34; Judg. 11) suggests the ever-present danger to such figures and thus their vulnerability, a contrast to the inviolable image of Zion within royal ideology. This relational and vulnerable image is taken up within the prophetic tradition, evident in the shift in focus in the book of Isaiah from Zion (chaps. 1–35) to the Daughter of Zion (chaps. 40–66), with the key transition coming at Isa. 36–39 (see 37:22) in the midst of Zion’s vulnerability before the Assyrians, which is immediately linked to the coming vulnerability before the Babylonians in chapter 39.⁶¹ In Jeremiah, however, we find the Daughter of Zion and related female traditions (including wife and mother) employed to point not only to relationality and vulnerability (Jer. 4:31; 6:2, 23) but more so to culpability (chaps. 2–4). This is already evident in the earlier prophet Hosea, who uses a similar female image throughout Hosea 1–3 to point to the relational and culpable character of the people.⁶² Ezekiel also picks up this image at times, even though there are few indications of dependence between Lamentations and Ezekiel.⁶³ The Daughter of Zion motif is used also in Mic. 4:10 as the pain associated with childbirth is linked to the exile to Babylon, before it is reversed in 4:13 with the Daughter of Zion becoming a powerful domesticated animal. In texts like Zeph. 3:14 and Zech. 2:10 [14] and 9:9, the Daughter of Zion takes on the role of rejoicing amid redemption, announcing a shift in the experience of the community.⁶⁴ In Lamentations, the Daughter of Zion tradition dominates the depiction of Jerusalem and its community throughout chapters 1–2, especially focusing on vulnerability and culpability and the hopeless condition of the city. In 4:22, however, a positive word is addressed to the Daughter of Zion, signaling hope for the Community as they take up their communal prayers to Yahweh in chapter 5.

60. See Boase, *Fulfillment of Doom?*, 51–104; cf. Kim, “Daughter Zion.” On female Zion more generally, see Maier, *Daughter Zion*.

61. Notice also the vulnerability of Daughter of Zion in the introductory chapter of Isaiah (which is suggestive of the same context as chaps. 36–39). Daughter of Zion is only mentioned elsewhere in Isa. 1–35 in 10:32 and 16:1.

62. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion*, 31–37.

63. See Mandolfo (*Daughter Zion*, 45–54) and Galambush (*Jerusalem*, 58), who link Lam. 1–2 to Ezek. 16. But the lexical connections are weak apart from the reference to “Sodom” in Lam. 2:6 // Ezek. 16:48 and “perfect in beauty” in Lam. 2:15 // Ezek. 16:14, which are probably drawn from the more general Zion tradition. Note the lack of Ezek. 16 coverage in Boase, *Fulfillment of Doom?*, 54n23. Kalmanofsky (“Sound and the Fury”) reads Lamentations alongside Ezekiel without claiming dependence.

64. See Boda, “Daughter’s Joy.”

These general insights into the prophetic feminization of the Zion tradition provide important foundation for more specific connections between Lamentations and the traditions of Jeremiah. This is seen especially in the work of Nancy Lee, who demonstrates parallel voicing dynamics between the two books. Focusing particularly on Jer. 4, 8, and 10, Lee traces a variety of voices including those of Yahweh, the Prophet Jeremiah, the City Jerusalem, and the People.⁶⁵ She meticulously identifies key links between the “use of genres, imagery/themes, terms, rhetorical technique, and content” to show that “these two ‘singers’ in Jeremiah were the same two ‘singers’ in Lamentations, but were, moreover, two different poets. That is, the one who speaks for Jerusalem is more than just a personification of Jeremiah.”⁶⁶

Lee also notes an important theological issue that can be discerned within the book of Jeremiah.⁶⁷ It is encountered in the speech of Jer. 10:23–25, a speech that Lee links to the voice of the City (Jerusalem’s Poet) who cries to Yahweh, “Discipline me, Yahweh, but only in justice, not in your anger, or you will reduce me to nothing” (v. 24 AT), before asking God to direct his anger toward “the nations that do not acknowledge you” (v. 25). Similar language is expressed later in Jeremiah by Yahweh, who promises to do precisely what was asked in 10:23–25, complete destruction of the nations but just discipline of Jacob (see 30:10–11; 46:27–28). There, however, Yahweh says nothing about his anger, thus reserving his prerogative of anger in justice (see further the “Theological Reflection” for Lam. 2). This example highlights the relational dynamic between the human voice(s) and the divine voice within the book of Jeremiah, interacting on the topic of theodicy. The issue raised in Jer. 10:23–25 showcases the way the modulation of voices in chapters 4, 8, and 10 expresses the struggle over Yahweh’s judgment of the nation, fusing divine accusations with responses from both the prophet and the community, which include agreement, lament, and protest.

Similar modulation of voice can be discerned in the next major section of Jeremiah in chapters 11–20.⁶⁸ Here at regular intervals the prophet expresses lament to God related to his painful experience as a prophetic voice among the community (see 11:18–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–14, 15–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13, 14–18). Among these laments, Jeremiah expresses his frustration with the people, requesting judgment to fall upon them for their abuse of the prophet (11:20; 12:3; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21–23; 20:11–12), even while confronting Yahweh over his justice (12:1; 15:18; 17:17; 18:20; 20:7, 14–18). However, at the center of this section in 14:1–15:4, the prophet participates in a prophetic

65. See the chart by Lee, 55. Exemplary is Jer. 8:18–9:2 [1] with the voicing: Jerusalem (8:18), Jeremiah (8:19a), People (8:19b), Yahweh (8:19c), People (8:20), Jeremiah (8:21–9:1 [8:23]), Yahweh (9:2 [1]).

66. Lee, 127.

67. Lee, 70–72.

68. See Boda, “From Complaint”; Boda, “Uttering Precious.” Cf. Lee, 81.

liturgy of lament that brings together the lament of the community, the intercession of the prophet, and the rejection of both by the Deity. The overall flow of this section emphasizes the increasing frustration of Jeremiah with both the community he serves and the divine commission he has received. At the same time, one finds consistent divine rejections of attempts to intercede for the people amid their crisis (7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 15:1). Here one discovers the frustrating situation of a prophet caught between “a rock and a hard place,” mediating between the community and their God, expressed succinctly in Jeremiah’s prayer to Yahweh in 18:20: “Remember that I stood before you to speak good things on behalf of them, to turn your wrath away from them” (AT). What we find in Jer. 11–20 echoes some of the dynamics at play in chapters 4, 8, and 10.

These insights into the voicing dynamics within Jeremiah are useful for reading the book of Lamentations, where one finds similar theological and literary trends. Some general connections between the various voices in Jeremiah and those in Lamentations have been traced by Lee. Among the prophetic books, *’êkâl/’êk* (how terrible that) is used more often in the book of Jeremiah than in any other book (19×, versus 7× in Isaiah; 2× in Ezekiel, Hosea, and Obadiah; and 1× in Micah and Zephaniah).⁶⁹ The declarative sense (how!), as opposed to the interrogative sense (how?), is also used most often in Jeremiah (3:19; 9:19 [18]; 48:17, 39 [2×]; 50:23 [2×]; 51:41 [2×]), usually in lament contexts. This word with the declarative sense introduces three of the five chapters in Lamentations (1:1; 2:1; 4:1), as would be expected in a dirge. In addition, the technique of “double meaning,”⁷⁰ which can be seen in both Jeremiah’s laments (e.g., 11:18; 17:14; 20:7) as well as elsewhere in Jeremiah, can also be identified throughout Lamentations.⁷¹

More specific connections between Lamentations and Jeremiah on the thematic as well as lexical levels are displayed in the lists in appendix 2 (see the section titled “Lamentations and Jeremiah”).⁷² Throughout these lists there are regular appearances of the key Jeremiah passages of chapters 4, 8, and 10, as well as other lament passages within chapters 11–20 (esp. 11, 14–15, 18, and 20),⁷³ all of which contain similar modulation between divine, prophetic, city, and communal voices in the context of judgment, mourning, and protest.

69. See Isa. 1:21; 14:4, 12; 19:11; 20:6; 36:9; 48:11; Jer. 2:21, 23; 3:19; 8:8; 9:7 [6], 19 [18]; 12:5 (2×); 36:17; 47:7; 48:14, 17, 39 (2×); 49:25; 50:23 (2×); 51:41 (2×); Ezek. 26:17; 33:10; Hosea 11:8 (2×); Obad. 5, 6; Mic. 2:4; Zeph. 2:15. Cf. Lee, 81.

70. For Lamentations, see esp. Thomas, “Meaning of *zōlēlā*.” For Jeremiah, see esp. Holaday, “Style, Irony.”

71. For this, see further Lee, 97, 117, 140, 144, 176, 183–84.

72. These connections have largely been drawn from Nancy Lee’s superb work; see Lee, *passim*. See also Morrow, *Protest Against God*, 110–11; Maier, “Afflicted Man”; House, *passim*; Parry, *passim*; Thomas, *passim*.

73. See further Boda, “From Complaint”; Boda, “Uttering Precious.”

In addition to this influence from Jeremiah, echoes that are found between the various poems provide further evidence of these same Jeremianic voices throughout Lamentations. Lee finds no influence from Jeremiah within chapter 5, suggesting that the People's voice now emerges, tutored by the earlier interaction between the voice of both Prophet and City in chapters 1–4 (see below under “Literary Issues: Structure: Voicing”).⁷⁴

This evidence has significant implications for the interpretation of Lamentations. It reveals that the intermixing of judgment, mourning, and protest found in Lamentations reflects what is found in a key prophetic book of the same period—a reminder of the complexity of the experience of divine discipline that prompted not only acceptance due to admission of culpability but also painful mourning and bitter protest from those experiencing judgment. There is need not to juxtapose the prophetic and lament literature but instead to consider the mediatorial dynamics at play within the prophetic stream, especially in the case of Jeremiah.⁷⁵

Literary Issues

Observations on the history and traditions of the individual compositions of Lamentations provide insights into the historical circumstances that gave rise to these compositions. However, such insights must be supplemented by analysis of the final canonical shape of these originally independent prayers. This involves paying attention to key literary features employed throughout the collection.⁷⁶ Lamentations is written in Hebrew poetic form, as distinct from prose forms like the narratives found elsewhere in the OT. Hebrew poetry communicates through the use of imagery, genre, and structure.

Imagery

The language of the book of Lamentations is vividly presented, painting the reader a picture that captures the imagination.⁷⁷ Some of this language is figurative in the technical literary sense, employing similes and metaphors to clarify the presentation. But even the language that refers to the actual experience of those who have endured the fall of Jerusalem shapes the imagination, as the poets usher the reader back to the experience of the community undergoing this pain. These many images will be investigated in the commentary.

74. Lee, 191–94.

75. Similarly Berman, “Drama of Spiritual Rehabilitation,” 564. For a similar view in the rabbinic tradition, see Kalman, “Authorship,” 86.

76. Here treating rhetoric in the way laid out by Muilenburg (“Form Criticism”) in his famous SBL presidential speech.

77. See Thomas, 86–90.

The most important type of imagery in Lamentations is personification, usually related to the city of Jerusalem but also related to its gates, walls, roads, and surrounding kingdom. By personifying these physical structures and regions, the composers were able to vividly describe the pain and express the cry of the people. There is a sense that the poets send out Zion to intercede for them, hoping that she may have greater success at gaining Yahweh's ear.⁷⁸ Key to chapters 1–4 is the personification of Zion as a female figure.⁷⁹ Barbara Kaiser notes, "Distinctively female experience was regarded highly enough to function as the chief metaphor through which the poet expressed his own agony over Jerusalem's fate and encouraged community catharsis."⁸⁰

Such personification is not surprising since women are depicted as figures of great suffering in every poem in the book of Lamentations (1:4, 18; 2:10, 12, 20–21; 3:51; 4:10; 5:3, 11).⁸¹ In general, the use of the female figure, according to Follis, serves as a symbol of "civilization and culture," a key role played by any city in the ancient world.⁸² This female figure of Zion is pictured in various ways: as widow (1:1), princess (1:1), lover (1:2), maiden (2:13), and especially as mother (1:5, 16; 2:19–20, 22; 4:2) and daughter (1:6, 15; 2:1–2, 4–5, 8, 10–11, 13, 15, 18; 3:48; 4:3, 6, 10, 22).⁸³ The combination of these last two images is powerful, such that Zion "shares solidarity with the suffering children of Jerusalem, and as mother of the people, she weeps for her desolate children."⁸⁴ At the same time, it implies another set of relationships with a male figure who would be the husband and father, responsible for this city mother and her children, as well as this city daughter as a child.⁸⁵ Connecting to the familial context makes vivid the deplorable situation and creates the foundation for the divine appeal.

The daughter image dominates the book as a whole, drawing "on the realities of ancient daughters in kinship systems to emphasize Zion's vulnerability and induce empathy for her."⁸⁶ Frymer-Kensky argues that "the image of the

78. See Lanahan, "Speaking Voice," 43–45; Heim, "Personification." For connections between these images and the city lament genre, see Bergant, "Challenge of Hermeneutics," 10; Dobbs-Allsopp, 50–53.

79. See further Dearman, "Daughter Zion"; Floyd, "Welcome Back"; Floyd, "Daughter of Zion."

80. Kaiser, "Poet as 'Female Impersonator,'" 182.

81. Such depictions lead Floyd ("Daughter of Zion") to conclude that the Daughter personifies the women of the city rather than the city itself. Nguyen ("Mission Not Impossible"), however, creates distance between the Daughter figure and the final inhabitants of the city, identifying her with historical Zion (see more fully Nguyen, *Chorus in the Dark*, 64–124).

82. Follis, "Zion, Daughter of," 6:1103.

83. For the daughter vocabulary here, see translation and commentary on these verses.

84. Bosworth, "Daughter of Zion," 218.

85. See Wendland, "How Are the Children?," 77–81.

86. Bosworth, "Daughter of Zion," 218. Cf. Heim, "Personification"; Follis, "Holy City as Daughter"; Maier, *Daughter Zion*, 73–74; Dearman, "Daughter Zion"; Wendland, "How Are the Children?," 79–81.

young woman as victim focuses our attention on the vulnerability and perishability of the nation.”⁸⁷ Similar is Bosworth, who sees the daughter image as conveying “a connotation of ‘desired, vulnerable, endangered femininity.’”⁸⁸ Daughters in ancient Israel were both valued and devalued. On the one side, due to patrilineality there was preference for sons over daughters (1 Sam. 1:11), yet on the other, the daughter was to be cared for tenderly (2 Sam. 12:3).⁸⁹ Wendland speaks of “endearment and dependence”⁹⁰ and “an expectation of economic dependence, obedience, and sexual chastity on the part of the daughter, and physical protection and economic support on the part of the father.”⁹¹ The rhetorical strategy of this personification is powerful. First, the female Zion image expresses the vulnerable desperation of those in suffering while at the same time expressing their expected protection.⁹² Second, this singular female figure focuses the suffering of an entire community, enabling “her to express her pain and respond to the challenges she faces in the aftermath of destruction,” so that “the inexpressible plight of unnumbered people may be grasped through the experience of one corporate individual.”⁹³

Genre

While identification of genre provides direction for discerning the historical context, or at least the generic sociological context, in which these poems functioned (see above under “Historical Issues: Setting in Life”),⁹⁴ it also shapes one’s expectation when reading the text and identifies the literary building blocks for the various passages.⁹⁵

The book of Lamentations showcases a series of expressions reflecting the disorientation of a community and individuals who have experienced significant pain and suffering.⁹⁶ Most scholars have identified these expressions with the prayer traditions of ancient Israel, usually with what are often called laments, both communal and individual, but also with other forms that are closely related to laments, including imprecatory and penitential prayers.

87. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 160; with thanks to Conway, “Daughter Zion,” 109.

88. Bosworth, “Daughter of Zion,” 225, quoting Keel, *Die Geschichte Jerusalems*, 1:632.

89. Bosworth, “Daughter of Zion,” 225.

90. Wendland, “Naming Jerusalem,” 74.

91. Wendland, “Naming Jerusalem,” 70n22.

92. For vulnerability, see Salters (52), who speaks of “vulnerability and concern.” Unfortunately, his choice to translate “Daughter of Zion” with only “Zion” completely loses the nuance.

93. Heim, “Personification,” 130–31. For the key role of women in Lamentations and antiquity for expressing suffering, see Tillema, “Gendered Lament.”

94. On “setting in life” (*Sitz im Leben*), see Tucker, *Form Criticism*, 9, 15.

95. See Longman, *Old Testament as Literature*, 47–60.

96. See Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 3–32. For a fuller treatment of the terminology I use for various types of prayer in the OT, see Boda, “Prayer”; cf. Harrichand, *Compassionate Intercultural Care Practices*.

Throughout this commentary I will use the term “disorientation prayer” to refer to these types of expressions.⁹⁷ Another genre in ancient Israel often associated with Lamentations is that of the funeral dirge, those mournful expressions over the death of a close family member or friend (e.g., 2 Sam. 1:17–27; Jer. 38:22).⁹⁸ One final major genre connection is made to an expression found in the broader ANE context—namely, laments over a destroyed city or sanctuary (referred to as “city laments”).⁹⁹ Other minor genres include forms associated with wisdom and prophecy.

Material in the book of Lamentations is addressed to God (e.g., 1:9c, 10, 11c, 20–22; 2:20–22; 3:17, 19, 42–47, 52–66; 5:1–22), but this is only a small portion of the entire book. Much of the book is addressed to other audiences. This could lead to the conclusion that these texts are not really prayers, since direct speech to God is often presumed to be essential for this genre.¹⁰⁰ But an analysis of the book of Psalms shows that as much speech in the book is directed to nondivine audiences as is to the divine audience.¹⁰¹ This may prompt an abandonment of the common view that the book of Psalms contains mostly prayers or, better, an adjustment of the definition of prayer, suggesting that prayer at times also involves God “overhearing” speech.¹⁰² This plays a role in the discussion of genre in Lamentations because the dirge and ANE city laments do not typically address God directly, leading some to focus more attention on these genres than on the prayer traditions of ancient Israel.

An investigation of the material not addressed to God in the book of Lamentations draws attention to other types of material. In 3:40, the Community is called to examine their ways and return to Yahweh. Such an invitation reads like a liturgical summons at a communal gathering during crisis (e.g., Jer. 14:1–15:4; Joel 1–2). Lamentations 4:21–22 addresses words of salvation to Jerusalem and words of judgment to Edom, using language similar to other prophetic context where God’s people are encouraged and their enemy is judged (e.g., Isa. 23:12; Zeph. 3:14–15). Addresses to other audiences punctuate

97. Westermann, 6–11, 109–220. For the elements of lament, see Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 82, 96, 121; Ferris, *Genre of Communal Lament*, 89–103.

98. See Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 85, 100 (who were influenced by Jahnou, *Das hebräische Leichenleid*); cf. Lee, 13–15; Westermann, 6. On the setting of mourning in the OT and ANE, see esp. Anderson, *Time to Mourn*; Pham, *Mourning*; Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*.

99. For ANE city laments, see Bouzard, *We Have Heard*; Cohen, *Balag-Compositions*; Cohen, *Canonical Lamentations*; Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology*; Delnero, *How to Do Things with Tears*; Dobbs-Allsopp, “Darwinism”; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*; Ferris, *Genre of Communal Lament*; Filarski, “Lamentations”; Gabbay, *Pacifying the Hearts*; Greenstein, “Book of Lamentations”; Gwaltney, “Biblical Book”; Kramer, *Lamentation*; Michalowski, *Lamentation*; Samet, *Lamentation*.

100. See Newman, *Praying by the Book*, 6.

101. Boda, “Varied and Resplendid.”

102. Suderman, *Social Audience of Prayer*; Suderman, “Are Individual Complaint Psalms Really Prayers?”

the text, including those to the “passersby” (Lam. 1:12), Daughter of Zion (2:13–17), and her wall (2:18–19). The vast majority of material, however, is addressed by the Prophet or the City to an implicit audience.¹⁰³

In the context of prayer, such material could be part of the prayer. However, this would be seen more readily in a context using direct speech to God at some point. Thus, the voice of the Prophet in chapters 1–2 and 4 rarely speaks directly to God (only in Lam. 1:10–11b). The voice of the City does so explicitly in 1:9c, 11c, 20–22, and 2:20–22, so possibly the material outside the direct speech could be considered part of her prayer, but this is uncertain. Lamentations 3:1–41 is mostly expressed to an audience that appears to be the Community, which is prompted to pray through vv. 40–41, but there are moments in which prayer breaks into this speech (vv. 17, 19, 23). The Prophet’s speech in vv. 48–51 speaks about Yahweh before the shift into thanksgiving prayer in vv. 52–66.

So, Lamentations is really *sui generis*, uniquely expressing the pain associated with the fall of Jerusalem by drawing on various genres associated with suffering—especially prayer traditions, funeral dirges, city laments, prophetic announcements, and wisdom reflection.¹⁰⁴ Middlemas notes the ways Lamentations mixes various forms, demonstrating how interruptions and interjections in the forms result in “creative expression.”¹⁰⁵ This artistic rhetoric can be seen, for instance, in the way chapter 1 uses the funeral dirge at the outset to “invite the readers to enter into the scene described and to stand aghast as well,” since “the dirge does not invite judgment, only mournful attendance.”¹⁰⁶ The subtle shift into the plaintive prayer as the chapter progresses provides the opportunity for supplication.

Within a context where much life was lost, it is not surprising to see elements from the funeral dirge, and in this way, as these poems were rehearsed in the aftermath, they expressed the sorrow that accompanied the fall of the city. Evidence from the city lament genre highlights Jerusalem as a key city within the ancient world. Its use long before there was any hope for the reconstruction of the city or especially the temple suggests, though in a different setting than that seen in Mesopotamia,¹⁰⁷ some form of hope that one day the

103. As noted above, the terms “Prophet,” “City,” and “Community” are consistently capitalized here in reference to the various voices within the book of Lamentations. See further the discussion above under “Historical Issues: Traditions” and below under “Literary Issues: Structure: Voicing.”

104. See Thomas, 76–80. Cf. Bergant (“Challenge of Hermeneutics,” 9), who uses the phrase “the fundamental genre is exploded” to describe the book’s unique expression.

105. Middlemas, “Speaking of Speaking,” 53.

106. Bergant, “Challenge of Hermeneutics,” 13. See Goldingay (66, quoting Middlemas, “War, Comfort,” 354), who notes that if Lam. 1 begins with a funeral lament of City Jerusalem, then “the report of her death has been greatly exaggerated and she cries out.”

107. See Dobbs-Allsopp, 10; contra Gwaltney, “Biblical Book,” 209–10. On differences between the ANE city lament genre and the book of Lamentations, see Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 30–96; cf. Thomas, 106–8; Berman, 64–66.

reconstruction would indeed take place. However, the clear connections to the Hebrew prayer traditions exemplified in the Psalter firmly root Lamentations within the sacred liturgical rhythms of the Hebrew community, with Yahweh as one of the key audiences of these poems.

Structure

Tradition, imagery, and genre provide the building blocks for the poems in Lamentations.¹⁰⁸ These components have been drawn together in both typical and unique structures that compose the various chapters in Lamentations.¹⁰⁹ Some of these literary structures will be limited to one or more of the poems, such as chiasms (chaps. 1–2; 4:2–10) and anadiplosis (chap. 2), and so will be dealt with in the introduction to those chapters, but two structural features impact all of the poems.

Acrostic. A key rhetorical feature in Lamentations is the alphabetic acrostic that structures four of the five poems (chaps. 1–4).¹¹⁰ This literary device appears at several points in the OT (Pss. 9–10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145; Prov. 31:10–31; Nah. 1:2–8), as well as in other Semitic literature, including Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Paleo-Canaanite.¹¹¹ In this technique, each verse or stanza begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Lamentations employs two different alphabetic systems, with chapter 1 containing an order with the letter *ayin* followed by *pe*, and chapters 2–4 using an order with the letter *pe* followed by *ayin*.¹¹² These two systems are known from antiquity; the *pe–ayin* order is older, with the *ayin–pe* order arising in the Persian period and beyond.¹¹³

The acrostic in chapter 3 is the most intricate, with each of the three lines within each stanza beginning with the same successive letter of the Hebrew

108. See the treatment of these issues above under “Historical Issues: Traditions,” “Literary Issues: Imagery,” and “Literary Issues: Genre,” and below under “Theological Issues: Old Testament Theological Responses.”

109. Meter will not be emphasized in this commentary (contra, e.g., Shea, “The *Qinah* Structure”; House, 308–10), partly because it is not consistent throughout Lamentations but also because there are significant questions over the legitimacy of meter as a category in Hebrew poetry. See, e.g., Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 292–302; Vance, *Question of Meter*; Longman, “Critique of Two Recent”; de Hoop, “Lamentations”; M. Martin, “Does Ancient Hebrew Poetry Have Meter?”; Grosser, *Unparalleled Poetry*, 9–10, 247–57. The tradition of referencing the so-called *qinā* meter seems to be fixed in works on Lamentations, as it continues to be mentioned despite concerns over its validity (e.g., Parry, 9–10; Salters, 16–17; Garr, “Qinah”).

110. Some have treated the acrostic as a later insertion (e.g., Westermann, 99–100) or addition (e.g., Wiesmann, *Die Klagelieder*, 28). On the use of chiasm for structuring Lam. 1–2, see the overviews for each chapter. For further discussion, see Salters, “Acrostics and Lamentations.”

111. See Westermann, 98–100; O’Connor, 12.

112. See the textual note in the commentary on 1:16 for scribal and translation tendencies to align the alphabetic order in Lamentations.

113. See also Berman, 71–72. Cf. First, “Using the *Pe–Ayin* Order”; Demsky, “Researching Literacy.”

alphabet. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 have only the first line in the stanza beginning with the successive letter. Chapter 5 does not employ the alphabetic acrostic form but does have twenty-two lines, the same number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet and thus of the stanzas in each of the other poems of Lamentations.

One may be tempted to treat the acrostic as literary artifice, since the flow of thought often crosses over acrostic verse boundaries. But such crossover creates cohesion between the stanzas, compelling the reader to continue reading through the poem. As Berlin notes concerning chapter 3, “This ‘enjambment’ of ideas and images across the alphabetic boundaries is a counterweight to the formal structuring of the acrostic. It keeps the poem moving forward and prevents the poem from breaking up into three-line sets.”¹¹⁴

Several purposes have been offered to explain the use of acrostics, including fulfilling magical rites, aiding memorization of poems, emphasizing completeness,¹¹⁵ or producing aesthetically pleasing literature.¹¹⁶ Although there may be multiple purposes behind the use of acrostics, according to Owens most likely they are used in the book of Lamentations for “containment and completion”: *containment* because “grief can know no end, yet it must be held within certain bounds for life to continue,” and *completion* because of the need “to convey the feeling of having covered everything.”¹¹⁷ Assis sees the acrostic producing “a measured and deliberate work,” so that the poetry prompts not only emotion but also analysis, and he notes its close association with wisdom in the OT.¹¹⁸ Similar is Allen, who posits a desire to bring control over the inner responses to the difficult moment alongside a desire to express the inner responses that are far from under control.¹¹⁹ The significance of the absence of an acrostic in the final poem is debated (see chapter overview for Lam. 5).

Voicing. Another important rhetorical feature that impacts structure has been highlighted especially in the work of Nancy Lee, who analyzes the

114. Berlin, 85–86. Also see Thomas, 80–83; James, “Aesthetics,” 7.

115. Allen (32) notes the prevalence of “all” in Lam. 1 as an example, and the cry “is there any anguish like my anguish?” Cf. Renkema, 307; House, 337; James, “Aesthetics,” 5–6. See House (341) on “all” in Lam. 1, citing vv. 2 (2×), 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18, 21, 22 (2×), thus double references at the beginning and end. The completeness may reference totality of sin, devastation, and agony. But cf. Berman (150–52), who rejects these in favor of order and process.

116. Westermann, 98–100; O’Connor, 11–13.

117. Owens, “Personification,” 78.

118. Assis, 12–13. James (“Aesthetics,” 6) shows how the acrostic “evokes order, stability, and traditionalism” and is used in the OT usually in more positive contexts (e.g., Pss. 9; 34; 111; 112; 119; 145; Prov. 31:10–31), so that its employment in Lamentations “feels ironic, or strange.”

119. See Allen, 32. For a more negative view of the acrostics, see Yansen (*Daughter Zion’s Trauma*, 177), who argues that they are “simply façades. They cannot control, order, or contain Zion’s trauma.” But for James (“Aesthetics,” 7), they spur “thinking forward, with, through, and beyond the immediacy of trauma.”

modulating voices throughout the book.¹²⁰ She identifies the two dominant voices in Lamentations with two voices that can be discerned in the book of Jeremiah (see above under “Historical Issues: Traditions”): Jeremiah the Prophet and a female poet voicing personified Jerusalem’s pain (called “Jerusalem’s Poet”). This dialogue, which Lee traces back to “different poetic singers who performed their composed songs in response to one another,” is prominent in chapters 1, 2, and 4.¹²¹ The female perspective of chapter 5 (cf. v. 14b with v. 15a) and links to the earlier cries of personified Jerusalem (cf. 5:17 with 1:13, 22; 4:17) suggest that the communal lament of this final chapter has taken over the role of the personified Jerusalem.¹²²

Lee’s study demonstrates the importance of the various voices that appear throughout the book.¹²³ No two poems are alike in their structuring of the voices. One needs to be alert to the impact that employing various voices has on the reading of each poem. Kaiser picks this up in her analysis of chapter 1 when she notes, “It would appear that emotional and psychological progress is realized in this poem as it moves from a more distant, descriptive 3rd-person reporting in verses 1–11 to a more personal, private 1st-person speech in verses 12–22.”¹²⁴ Middlemas notes the voicing dynamics in both chapters 1 and 2, observing how the voice of the City “drowns out that of the narrator” by the conclusion of chapter 1, while this same narrator by the conclusion of chapter 2 “appears to be aware that . . . Daughter Zion was not able or has not been so keen to speak up about her situation” and so “urges her to cry out (vv. 18–19).”¹²⁵ In chapter 3, this inner turmoil is presented from the outset and is expressed not by the City personified as a woman but rather by a suffering man. Further voices can be discerned in this poem, especially that of the Community (which also appears in chap. 5). The interplay of various voices provides more opportunities to express and experience the pain of the crisis.

While recognizing the shift in voicing in chapters 1–2 from the introductory third-person voice to a first-person feminine voice, Kaiser treats this as a shift of a singular voice into that of a “female impersonator” occurring “at the point of greatest tension.”¹²⁶ In contrast, Lee argues that the feminine voice that emerges has its own integrity and independence from Jeremiah’s

120. See Lee, *passim*; also Thomas, 90–93. But cf. Westermann, 65, 139–40; Heim, “Personification,” 144–68; and the critique of Nguyen, *Chorus in the Dark*, 8–14. On voicing more generally in Hebrew poetry, see Boda, “Varied and Resplendent Riches”; Musy, “Hearing Voices.”

121. Lee, 42.

122. Lee, 196.

123. Cf. Lanahan, “Speaking Voice”; Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion*; Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*. See further C. W. Miller, “Reading Voices”; Conway, “Daughter Zion”; Conway, “From Objective Observation to Subjective Participation”; Boda, “Uttering Precious”; Heim, “Personification,” 144–68.

124. Kaiser, “Poet as ‘Female Impersonator,’” 44.

125. Middlemas, “Speaking of Speaking,” 47, 49.

126. Kaiser, “Poet as ‘Female Impersonator,’” 166.

prophetic voice, with roots in oral performances involving two poets, one of whom was a woman.¹²⁷ Some trace this second voice to the female singers who played a role in expressing mourning for the community, as encouraged, for example, in Jer. 9:17–22 [16–21].¹²⁸ Mandolfo also distinguishes between the Didactic voice (Jeremiah’s voice for Lee) and the voice of the Daughter of Zion, with the former sympathetic toward the latter.¹²⁹

The number of voices in Lamentations is controversial. Lanahan identifies five voices, with the objective reporter and the City Jerusalem as the two key voices in chapters 1–2, followed by a defeated veteran soldier in chapter 3 (echoing that of the City), a bourgeois in chapter 4 (echoing that of the reporter), and a choral voice in chapter 5 that fuses the previous voices.¹³⁰ Lee also highlights five voices, with two initial voices (Jeremiah and Jerusalem’s Poet) in chapters 1–2 and 4, but then for chapter 3 distinguishing between “the man” (vv. 1–24, 52–66), a respondent to “the man” (vv. 25–41), as well as the two initial voices: Jerusalem’s Poet (vv. 42–45) and Jeremiah (vv. 46–51).¹³¹ Chapter 5, the final poem, has a fifth voice, that of a woman expressing lament on behalf of the people as a whole.¹³² Conway identifies four voices: the unidentified speaker and Daughter Zion in chapters 1–2, “the man” in chapters 3–4, and the Community in chapters 3 and 5.¹³³ Provan is exemplar of a minimalist approach, with only three voices: the narrator, the sufferer portrayed as personified Zion, and the people of Jerusalem.¹³⁴

Voicing dynamics will play a key role in the present commentary. Many voices are found across the book, often quoted by the dominant voices. But three voices dominate, which will be identified as the male Prophet, the female City, and the Community.¹³⁵ Other voices break in at times, often quoted by the dominant voices: all who pass by on the road (1:12; 2:15), dying children (2:12), enemies (2:16), themselves (3:18, 20, 24, 54, 56), God (3:57), anonymous voices (4:15), and people among the nations (4:15). In a single instance, one of the quoted voices quotes another voice: a psalmist (2:15). One cannot always be certain about differentiating the three dominant voices. Since the poems are now read in succession in the final form of the book, the various

127. Lee, 108–12, 127–29.

128. See Goitein, “Women as Creators,” 23–27; Li, “In a Different Voice.” Hobbins (“Zion’s Plea,” 167–69) argues that most of the voices in Lamentations are female.

129. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion*, 60. See also Conway, “Daughter Zion.”

130. Lanahan, “Speaking Voice.”

131. Lee, 77, 132, 168, 182.

132. Lee, 192, 194.

133. Conway, “Daughter Zion,” 103; similarly, Ellington, “De-Centering Lamentations.”

134. Provan, 7; similarly, Allen, 11–12; Dobbs-Allsopp, 107; Heim, “Personification.”

135. As noted above, in order to emphasize these voicing dynamics, the terms “Prophet,” “City,” and “Community” are consistently capitalized throughout this commentary when referencing the various voices of the book of Lamentations. See further appendix 1, “Lexical Relationships Between the Voices and Poems in Lamentations.”

voices function together to impact the reader progressing through the whole. Furthermore, significant connections in vocabulary and themes between the five poems suggest cohesion among the poems and relationship between voices, whether identifying distinct voices or highlighting the impact of one voice upon another.¹³⁶ This is visible in the list in appendix 1 to this commentary, “Lexical Relationships Between the Voices and Poems in Lamentations.”

The approach taken in this commentary identifies the male Prophet figure observing the plight of Jerusalem in chapters 1 and 2 with “the man” of chapter 3 who speaks throughout the poem with a voice of protest and communal voice included at two points.¹³⁷ This same figure reappears in chapter 4 and ends up merging with the voice of the people before declaring a prophetic hope to the City. In chapter 5, the Community now takes over the voicing, and the Prophet and City are no longer heard.

Some have noted the absence of God’s voice in Lamentations,¹³⁸ often using this as evidence for the insensitivity of a Deity ignoring the cries of the people, much as is noted by “the man” in 3:8 and the Community in 3:44. However, God’s voice can be discerned at two points in the book. First, God’s comforting response “do not fear” is cited in 3:57 as “the man” rehearses his divine rescue for the Community. Second, 4:21–22 employs prophetic speech and draws on prophetic tradition to announce the end of Zion’s discipline and retribution on its enemy Edom. Now, it must be admitted that these responses are neither as direct nor as extensive as one might like in such a crisis, but such an expectation seems misplaced if one looks to the book of Psalms, where God’s voice rarely appears within the prayer tradition. However, if one compares Lamentations to Jeremiah, there would be an expectation for God’s voice to break in, but the voice of God in the latter context is dominantly disciplinary. One might even see in the divine silence here signs of God’s insensitivity in allowing the Community to process their discipline and pain.¹³⁹

The struggle expressed in these poems is communicated through contrasting voices: female and male, individual and corporate, bitter and penitent, suppliant and prophetic. Through the dialogical character of this book, the reader experiences the various perspectives expressed within as part of the struggle of this community after the fall of Jerusalem. This dialogical character is not unique to Lamentations but also seen in the prophetic book of

136. On the role of repetition in Lamentations not only to “bind” it together but also to highlight “variation,” see Thomas, 83–85. On connections and disconnections between the various voices, see Nguyen, *Chorus in the Dark*, 189–224.

137. As also, e.g., Allen; Berman. In this I depart from, e.g., Nguyen (*Chorus in the Dark*), who focuses on the “personae” of the personified Zion and “the man” of Lam. 3 as distinct from the narrator and the Community.

138. E.g., Heffelfinger, “I Am He.”

139. E.g., Dobbs-Allsopp (149–54), who sees silence in both negative and positive ways. Hobbins (“Zion’s Plea,” 162) says that for God to respond as in Isa. 49 at this point would be “a gruesomely insensitive response to the Zion of Lam 1:22.”

Jeremiah, as was reviewed above (see above under “Historical Issues: Traditions”). In Jeremiah, the emphasis is on the word of the Deity rather than the word of the Community, though the latter is present. The word of the Prophet dominantly echoes that of the Deity but at times reflects that of the Community. In Lamentations, the emphasis is nearly entirely on the word of the Community rather than the word of the Deity. The word of the Prophet dominantly echoes that of the Community but at times reflects the word of the Deity.

With these general observations on voicing in the book of Lamentations in mind, each poem will be analyzed for specific voicing dynamics, and this will provide essential orientation for discerning the structure of the individual poems. For each chapter, the poem’s structure will be detailed in the overview section of the commentary.

Overall Flow. The completeness of each poem’s acrostic pattern in chapters 1–4 reveals that every poem in the book has its own integrity. One question, though, is whether the book merely represents an anthology of poems or instead was designed as an integrated collection.¹⁴⁰ Many suggestions have been provided, ranging from Renkema’s intricate poetic links between stanzas across the poems, to Reimer’s use of grief theory (from anger to acceptance), to Assis’s use of intratextual links to create a concentric structure that moves the reader from despair to prayer.¹⁴¹

This commentary will pay attention to developments in voice and genre to discern the overall structure.¹⁴² The Prophet’s voice in chapter 1 begins with a form of speech akin to the dirge form, one that expresses pain over death but falls short of prayer to God at first. The City voice breaks into this dirge at two points near the end, with direct speech to Yahweh calling for his attention. In time, the Prophet’s voice ceases, and the City’s voice takes over. She addresses passersby before the Prophet’s voice breaks in one final time, again noting her lack of comfort, before she completes her speech, ending with direct speech in vv. 20–22, which ultimately calls down vengeance on her enemies.

Chapter 2 begins as the first poem with the Prophet’s voice depicting the painful circumstances of the City, but this time the Prophet is more emotionally engaged and focused on Yahweh’s responsibility for the City’s demise.¹⁴³

140. See the excellent review by Thomas, 25–34.

141. Renkema, 35–52; Renkema, “Literary Structure”; Reimer, “Good Grief?”; Assis.

142. See, e.g., the approach by Boase (“Fragmented Voices”), which draws on trauma theory and highlights a move from fragmented suffering to collective identity in the book as a whole. For trauma approaches to the book of Lamentations, see further Bier, *Perhaps There Is Hope*; Janzen, *Trauma and the Failure of History*, 89–120; Yansen, *Daughter Zion’s Trauma*; Boase, “Traumatized Body”; Holt, “Daughter Zion”; Serfontein, “Introducing a Re-Reading”; R. Williamson, “Taking Root.”

143. On the shift in the Prophet’s voice between chaps. 1 and 2, see Parry, “Ethics of Lament,” 151–52. As Berman (57) notes, “The pastoral mentor gains credit with Bat-Zion by expressing empathy.”

By v. 11 the Prophet depicts his own internal brokenness as he weeps because of the impact on the most vulnerable in the city, reaffirming the condition of the City in the preceding chapter. By v. 13 the Prophet begins to address the City directly, and this leads him to call the City to cry out to Yahweh (vv. 18–19), a shift from how he approached the City in chapter 1. The City takes up this invitation, calling for Yahweh’s attention to the extent of the destruction and death (2:20–22).

The speaker at the outset of chapter 3 identifies himself as “the man” (*geber*). While this voice may be an additional voice, in light of connections between the content of this voice in chapter 3 and that found in the two initial poems of chapters 1–2, it is likely that this is again the Prophet progressing from more distant reporter (chap. 1), to more emotionally engaged reporter (chap. 2), to personally expressive poet (chap. 3). Signs of this could be seen already in 2:11, where the Prophet was overwhelmed with emotion. The voice of the Prophet mostly comprises two personal testimonies that begin and end chapter 3. The first is about resolution to a personal struggle with God’s discipline and leads to a reflection on the dynamics of divine discipline, with one protest voice included in it (vv. 1–39). The second is about a resolution to a personal struggle with enemies in the form of a thanksgiving prayer with enduring request (vv. 52–66). The first testimony leads to an invitation to the Community to repent (vv. 40–41), which prompts a prayer of communal penitential lament (vv. 42–47). This communal prayer in turn prompts a sensitive response of an individual lament by the Prophet (vv. 48–51), which leads to the second testimony designed to provide a way forward in the present predicament where there is no divine response, focusing attention on the unjustified abuse of human enemies (vv. 52–66).

Although continuing the use of the alphabetic acrostic, chapter 4 is shorter than the preceding poems, employing only two lines per stanza, unlike the three lines of each stanza in chapters 1–3. The voice of the City is silent in chapter 4 as the Prophet dominates throughout, again presenting the painful conditions of those who experienced the fall of Jerusalem. The Prophet reports these conditions using first common singular speech at times (my; 4:3, 6, 10), always in reference to the City as “the Daughter of my people.” However, at a certain point the Prophet shifts into first common plural speech (we, us, our; 4:17–20), as seen in chapter 3, prompting the Community to join in and foreshadowing the communal lament that will emerge in chapter 5. The conclusion to chapter 4 addresses the City and her enemy Edom directly, expressing judgment on the “Daughter of Edom” but salvation for the “Daughter of Zion” (4:21–22). These words provide the greatest encouragement in the entire book and the words closest to direct response from Yahweh, in this case through the Prophet. In chapter 4 we see the continuation of the transfer of the City’s voice to the Community via the Prophet, which began with chapter 1 (City), then continued in chapters 2–3 (City to Prophet) and chapter 3 (Prophet to Community).

Chapter 5, although containing twenty-two verse units like the first four poems, abandons the alphabetic acrostic pattern. The voice is consistent throughout the poem, as it is a communal voice spoken in first common plural (we, us, our). It is also clearly a prayer spoken to God with requests. Seeds are planted for this prayer at earlier points in Lamentations: first with the City breaking into the dirge of chapter 1 (vv. 9c, 11c, 20–22); then the depiction of an unknown group in chapter 2 (v. 18aα) crying to the Lord, followed by the encouragement of the Prophet for the wall to cry out to Yahweh (vv. 18–19), followed again by the City addressing Yahweh (vv. 20–22); then the guidance of the Prophet in chapter 3 to pray through first common plural speech; and finally, even in the first common plural speech of chapter 4, with its conclusion in hope (vv. 17–20). In chapter 5, the Community now takes up the example of City and Prophet and responds to the exhortation of the Prophet to speak to God with humility but also honesty.

Theological Issues

The book of Lamentations emerges out of a specific historical context and tradition and is expressed in creative literary ways. Its placement in a canonical context reveals its ongoing role as a normative text intended to shape communities of faith.

Old Testament Theological Responses

Two key prophetic texts represent the first responses to the book of Lamentations. Both texts show internal evidence that they provide prophetic answers to laments arising after the fall of Jerusalem. The first prophetic text is Isa. 40–55, with its introductory lament from Jacob/Israel in 40:27 (“My way is hidden from Yahweh; my cause is disregarded by my God”), and especially the introductory lament from Zion in 49:14 (“Yahweh has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me”).¹⁴⁴ Scholars have noted not only a multitude of lexical connections between the book of Lamentations and Isa. 40–55¹⁴⁵ but also similar use of two key suffering figures: one male (the Servant), the other

144. See Boda, “Uttering Precious,” 4–8; see also Flesher, “Daughter Zion,” 303–11, for the close theological connections and yet developments between Lamentations (esp. chap. 5) and Isa. 62–66 (esp. 63:7–64:12 [11]).

145. See Gottwald, “Social Class,” 44–46; Heffelfinger, “I Am He”; Larry, “Lament Beyond Blame,” 93–127; Maier, “Afflicted Man”; Middlemas, “Did Second Isaiah Write Lamentations 3?”; Newsom, “Response,” 75–77; Parry, “Prolegomena,” 400–406; Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use*, 234–35, 238–43; Seitz, “Isaiah and Lamentations”; Sommer, *A Prophet Reads*, 127–30; Tiemeyer, “Lamentations in Isaiah 40–55”; Tiemeyer, *For the Comfort of Zion*, 347–61; Turner, “Daughter Zion,” 5; Tull Willey, *Remember*. Cf. O’Connor, 139–47; Linafelt, 62–79.

female (Zion), whose fates are intertwined¹⁴⁶ and from whom will emerge a community (seed in 53:10; children/servants in 54:13; addressed in chap. 55). There is thus a close association between both the female Zion figures and the male figures (Prophet/“man” and Servant) in Lamentations and Isa. 40–55. And just as there are striking parallels between the Prophet and “the man” in Lam. 3 and the female Zion figure in Lam. 1–2 (see above under “Literary Issues: Structure: Voicing”), so there are connections between the female Zion figure and the Servant in Isa. 40–55.¹⁴⁷ For a fuller list of these connections, see appendix 2 under the section titled “Lamentations and Isaiah 40–55.”

Zechariah 1–8 has also been identified as a response to the book of Lamentations (esp. chap. 2).¹⁴⁸ These connections show the reliance of Zechariah on Lamentations not only as a source for its vocabulary but as a strategy of response and reversal. Zechariah 1–8 contains evidence that it intertwines both protest and penitential prayer traditions that arose in the aftermath of Jerusalem’s fall, showing how these are not necessarily opposing prayer responses, something seen in the way they appear alongside each other in the book of Lamentations.¹⁴⁹ The many connections that emerge between Lam. 2 and Zech. 1–2, 8 confirm that this prophetic material (Zech. 1–8) is designed as a response to the once comfortless community (Lam. 1:2, 9, 16–17, 21), taking up the agenda of the prophetic voice in Lam. 2:13. Zechariah signals Yahweh’s intention to reverse the present circumstances. And that is seen more broadly in the reversals of Lamentations found in Zech. 1–6, including a shift from temple destruction (Lam. 2:6–9) to reconstruction (Zech. 1:16), from spurning king and priest (Lam. 2:6) to restoring them (Zech. 3; 6:9–15), from absent and false visions as well as misleading oracles (Lam. 2:9, 14) to true visions and oracles (Zech. 1–6).¹⁵⁰ For a full list of these connections, see appendix 2 under the section titled “Lamentations and Zechariah 1–8.” Interestingly, there are also connections between Zech. 1–8 and Isa. 40–55, which highlight how Zechariah provides a response to Lamentations in dialogue with the previous response in Isa. 40–55 (esp. chap. 54).¹⁵¹

146. For links between the Servant and Zion figures in Isa. 40–55, see Tull Willey, *Remember*, 221–23.

147. Tull Willey, *Remember*, 265–66. For further probing, see Mandolfo (*Daughter Zion*, 117), who suggests that Isaiah at times distracts attention away from unanswered questions. Cf. Tiemeyer, “Lamentations in Isaiah 40–55.”

148. See Stead, “Sustained Allusion”; Stead, *Intertextuality*, 74–132 (esp. 127–28); Stead, “Zechariah’s Intertextual Reversal.” For a possible connection to the prophet Zechariah “hidden” in an acrostic in Lam. 5:1–3, see Guillaume, “Lamentations 5,” 4–5.

149. See further Boda, “Zechariah”; Boda, “Zechariah and Prayer Traditions.”

150. Stead, “Zechariah’s Intertextual Reversal,” 132, 134.

151. See Stead, “Sustained Allusion,” 157; Stead, *Intertextuality*, 130–31. Cf. Delkurt, *Sacharjas Nachtgesichte*, esp. 77. Also note the connection between Zech. 1:11; 2:11–12 [15–16] and Isa. 12–14; Isa. 12–14 is a passage closely related to Isa. 40–55; see Boda, “Hoy, Hoy,” 177–79, 187–89; Wolters, “Whole Earth.” On chap. 54 within Isa. 40–55, see Boda, “Uttering Precious,” 4–8; Boda, “Familial Identity,” 82–88.

The book of Lamentations interacts with a significant number of key theological traditions within the OT, showcasing the variety of theological strategies that shaped those who lived in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem (see above under “Historical Issues: Traditions”). In many ways, Lamentations could be treated as a busy “roundabout” (traffic circle) where various theological roads converge, running the risk of collision. Various roads emerge from this roundabout, as we find responses from the prophetic tradition in Isaiah and Zechariah especially, and possibly also in Job. Ezra-Nehemiah, along with Haggai–Malachi, depicts the reconstruction of the temple and city, as well as restoration of its worship and populace. But these books also express concerns over ongoing issues as the community continues to live under imperial control and to display sinful patterns. The book of Daniel expresses concern for the reconstruction of the city and temple (see Dan. 9), but this prompts the revelation that enduring sin among the remnant will mean an enduring period of struggle for the city and its populace.¹⁵²

New Testament Theological Responses

Lamentations and Jesus Christ. Zion would struggle to regain the glory of the preexilic era, and the dominance of the penitential prayer tradition after the exile (Ezra 9; Neh. 1; 9; Dan. 9) testifies to the fact that the people longed for more. This longing can be discerned among that cast of faithful characters who appear in the temple courts early in the Gospel of Luke (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary) as they await the messiah and identify him in Jesus. Interestingly, the NT contains connections with Lamentations that suggest a close link between Jesus and the temple-city.¹⁵³

Matthew 27:39–40 depicts the actions of the people hurling abuse and wagging their heads at Jesus as they pass by in a way strikingly similar to Lam. 2:15.¹⁵⁴ In both cases the verbal abuse of those who pass by is quoted. The quote in Matt. 27:39–40 is particularly poignant because of its reference to destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days:

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”

152. See Boda, *Severe Mercy*, 460–70.

153. I am deeply indebted to Robin Parry for these many connections: see Parry, *passim*; Parry, “Prolegomena”; Parry, “Wrestling with Lamentations”; Parry, “Jesus and Jerusalem.” See also Berman, 143–46; Bailey, “Fall of Jerusalem”; Moffitt, “Righteous Bloodshed”; Kang and Venter, “Canonical-Literary Reading,” 6–7. The material here is also developed in Boda, “Continuity and Discontinuity.”

154. The underlined portions of the quotations below use the same lexical stock in the Greek of Matt. 27:39 and the OG translation of Lam. 2:15.

Compare this to Lam. 2:15:

They have clapped palms against you—
all those passing on the road.
They hiss and shake their head
against the Daughter of Jerusalem.
“Is this the city of which they said: ‘Perfect in beauty,
the joy of the whole earth?’”

Preceding this connection between Jesus’s death and the destruction of the temple are several references in Matt. 27 to righteous and innocent blood being shed, at first on the lips of Judas in v. 4 as he seeks to pass the guilt of betraying innocent blood to the chief priests and elders:

“I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.”
“What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.”

Similarly, we find these words and theme on the lips of Pilate in v. 24:

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!”

But Pilate’s wife makes an important distinction, identifying this innocent man as “a righteous man” in the warning to her husband in v. 19:

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man, for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.” (NASB)

At the end of the scene, the people take the guilt of the innocent blood of this righteous man upon them and their children in v. 25:

All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

This theme of the innocent blood of the righteous in Matthew hearkens back to chapters 23–24, where the term “righteous blood” (23:35) occurs in connection with Christ’s elongated woes against the Pharisees, which climax with a reference to the killing and crucifying of contemporary prophets, sages, and scribes, and the cumulative guilt of the spilling of righteous blood falling upon this generation.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, “If we

had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation. (23:29–36)

The phrase “righteous blood” (*haima dikaion*) in 23:35 is found only in the Greek translation of the OT in Joel 3:19 [4:19], Jon. 1:14, and Lam. 4:13. However, only in Lam. 4:13 is it used in connection with the destruction of the temple, as in Matt. 23, where Jesus concludes these woes with his lament over Jerusalem, which clearly ties the final woe of the shedding of the prophets’ blood to the desolation of the temple:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” (23:37–39)

And as Matthew continues in chapter 24, the focus remains on the destruction of the temple:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” (24:1–2)

The redemptive-historical connections are varied:

1. *The death of the righteous, innocent Jesus as the cause of the destruction of the temple.* The death of Jesus as a “righteous one” is clearly connected with the destruction of the Second Temple and with the death of righteous innocent ones underlying the destruction of the First Temple.
2. *The death of Jesus as the destruction of the temple.* Since Jesus is understood in the NT as the one in whom Yahweh dwelled (John 1:14; 2:19–22), the people’s citation of his words concerning his death and resurrection ironically identify him with the destruction and rebuilding

of the temple, with the former (destruction) his death on the cross and the latter (rebuilding) his resurrection to life.¹⁵⁵

3. *Jesus weeping over the city and temple.* Jesus weeps and addresses Jerusalem and notes the failure of Jerusalem to recognize God's coming in and through him (seen in both Matt. 23:37–39 and Luke 19:41–44). He weeps, then, as a proleptic comforter in line with the voice of the Prophet in Lam. 1–2.
4. *Jesus drinking the cup of wrath.* Amid the passion account in Mark 14:36 appears language aligned with Lam. 4:21 in reference to drinking a cup, reflecting the larger OT theme of “the cup of wrath.”¹⁵⁶ In Lamentations, this is preceded immediately by 4:20 with its reference to the hope of the nation to live under the royal messianic figure among the nations. The failure of the royal house, which led to the nation receiving the cup of wrath, is now taken over by Jesus who receives this wrath of judgment.

These connections reveal that the redemptive-historical moments of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection are far more connected to the book of Lamentations than may at first be noticed. Jesus's death foreshadows the destruction of the Second Temple, not only because his death is the climactic example of the community's rejection of God's “visits” to them, but also because he had taken on the role of the temple in his incarnational form. The irony, though, is that there would be an immediate reconstruction of the temple (in three days) through his resurrection from the dead, opening the way for the people to access God's presence despite the loss of the physical temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the failure of the Davidic line is now redeemed through Jesus, who experiences abuse at the hands of “the nations” and drinks fully the cup of wrath on behalf of the guilty line and nation.

In addition, however, we see in Jesus's tender weeping and lament over the city the sensitive heart of comfort that is expressed regularly throughout the book of Lamentations. And when we hear Jesus's cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46 // Mark 15:34; cf. Ps. 22:1 [2]), we see the reason for his tenderness to all those who suffer, whether legitimately or illegitimately in this world.

Lamentations and the Community of Christ. On one level, this message of Lamentations fundamentally points to redemptive history, to something that was unique for that ancient community in their particular moment. But we have seen how this message sets up a pattern that is reflected in the work of Christ, reminding us of the painful experience of both Christ's death

155. For further development of this theme in the Gospel of John see Kerr, *Temple of Jesus' Body*.

156. See Job 21:20; Pss. 11:6; 75:8 [9]; Isa. 51:17, 22; 63:6; Jer. 25:15, 17, 28; 49:12; Ezek. 23:31–33; Hab. 2:16; cf. Rev. 14:8, 10; 16:19; 18:3.

and the destruction of the temple, yet also the hope of what Christ came to do: grant access to God through his resurrection. What was experienced by Judah in Lamentations related to the first and second destructions of Jerusalem and the temple, and what was experienced and accomplished by Christ through his own destruction/death and reconstruction/resurrection is something unique that we look back on and place our faith in God's work.

On another level, however, the message of Lamentations provides a pattern for the Christian journey in the pathways of Christ. It is important to remember that the message of the death of innocent, righteous blood in relation to the destruction and reconstruction of the temple that Jesus declared in Matt. 23:34 was pointing to more than himself, since he speaks of sending prophets, sages, and teachers who will be killed and crucified. Thus, what he speaks of in relation to his own crucifixion is related to a pattern that will be repeated in those he sends:

Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. (23:34)

This helps make sense of Matt. 16:24 and the call to take up one's cross and follow Christ. The fact that Christ's unique redemptive-historical act provides a lasting pattern for us as his followers is also made clear in 1 Pet. 2:20b–24:

But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

It is not then surprising that although the NT clearly creates a strong link between Jesus and the temple, it also extends this connection to Jesus's followers as those who function as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the place where God's presence dwells when they gather (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21–22; 1 Pet. 2:5).¹⁵⁷ This capitalizes on the resurrection dimension of the theology considered above—that is, Christ's resurrection in three days signaled

157. Parry, “Jesus and Jerusalem,” 265n29.

the immediate rebuilding of the temple, which provides access to God through his role as mediator but also through the church as his representatives on earth in whom now dwells the Spirit, as signaled by Acts 2.

But there is more. The lament of Jesus over Jerusalem reveals the heart of God broken over the disciplined state of the community, and it reminds us of the revelation of Hebrews concerning Jesus's own lament amid his suffering:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (5:7–10)

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (4:14–16)

The one who wept over Jerusalem and its coming destruction is the one who also wept over his own approaching destruction, seen in the close identification in Matthew's Gospel between these two demises. And the writer of Hebrews makes clear that there was nothing inappropriate in such weeping, which is aligned with "reverent submission" (5:7), and that Jesus even "learned obedience from what he suffered" (5:8). But the writer of Hebrews argues that such lament qualifies Jesus to be the sensitive high priest and encourages his followers to approach God's throne of grace with confidence and there "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (4:16). Lamentations showcases the cry in the midst of the discipline of God and the destruction by the nations. That cry is heard in Christ's own weeping over the city, as the one who bore the guilt of that city and so was in a real way culpable, but in Lamentations we also hear voices that invite us to cry out to God and look for comfort.

No wonder the church adopted readings from the book of Lamentations in their Holy Week *Tenebrae* service tradition.¹⁵⁸ This was a perpetual reminder within the church calendar of the relevance of Lamentations to redemptive, revelatory, and relational history, providing an example of expressing to God pain that is appropriate for those who follow in the steps of the Suffering One.

158. Parry, 160; cf. Parry, "Wrestling with Lamentations," 180–84.

Contemporary Theological Responses

In light of these redemptive-historical connections showing the relevance of the book of Lamentations for Christian theology, various theological themes will be explored in the “Theological Reflection” section at the end of the commentary on each chapter. It is important to understand the way Lamentations functions as an “open” text and thus provides not one but many trajectories for the life of faith.¹⁵⁹ This is evidenced so clearly in the developments traced in the figure of the Prophet, in the increasing involvement of the Community as a whole, in the variety of pathways of expression provided in chapter 3, in the honest articulation of concern over the involvement of the three subjects of lament (God, enemy, suppliant), and in the modulating expressions that conclude the book in chapter 5. The “Theological Reflection” sections will provide more specific biblical-theological reflection to extend the foundation developed above and lead to nascent practical-theological implications for Christians today.

Conventions of the Commentary

This commentary follows a format similar to other volumes in the BCOT series but differs in a few areas as a result of the unique form of Lamentations. The commentary on each poem in the book (which corresponds to the chapter divisions known to English readers) consists of three parts: (1) *Overview*: an orientation to the poem with sections on its historical context, genre, tradition, language and imagery, structure, and role within Lamentations; (2) *Translation and Interpretation*: a fresh translation of the Hebrew text with notes explaining select translational and textual issues, followed by the commentary proper, which proceeds with a verse-by-verse analysis in keeping with the acrostic structure of each poem, a verse for each of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet (with exceptions for chaps. 3 and 5);¹⁶⁰ and (3) *Theological Reflection*: a concluding discussion of theological themes and biblical-theological reflection arising from the text to pave the way for practical-theological responses for Christians today (as explained above under “Theological Issues: Contemporary Theological Responses”).

159. See esp. Thomas, 50–70, 244; cf. Heim, “Personification,” 169, noting the earlier work of Eco, *Semiotics*.

160. In chap. 3, a stanza features three verses for each letter, totaling sixty-six verses overall. There, the translation and commentary proceed stanza by stanza, treating each triad of verses together. While chap. 5 breaks from the acrostic pattern of chaps. 1–4, it nevertheless divides neatly into twenty-two verses, so the format of verse-by-verse analysis is maintained. On the structure of each poem and these two exceptions, see the discussions in the overview for each chapter, as well as in the introduction above under “Literary Issues: Structure: Acrostic” and “Literary Issues: Structure: Overall Flow.”

All translations of Lamentations throughout the commentary are my own. The translation approach taken here is one of formal equivalence (creating at times “Heblish”), to help readers see the Hebrew poetic form more clearly and understand the commentary on the original language.¹⁶¹ The text of *BHQ*, which reproduces the MT according to Codex Leningradensis (MT^L), is used here as a starting point. Textual issues are addressed on a case-by-case basis, and key text-critical decisions or variants are always explained in the notes on the translation. The ancient manuscripts (i.e., DSS) and versions of Lamentations (i.e., OG, Syr, Tg, Vg) are all cited according to the standard critical editions (found in the list of abbreviations above), while English translations of these texts are my own (except for OG, which is typically drawn from NETS). Note that the name “Yahweh” is used throughout as the name of the God of Israel, rather than “the LORD,” as in many English versions. Translations from other biblical texts follow the NIV, unless otherwise indicated (but note that I have consistently replaced NIV’s “the LORD” with “Yahweh”). The abbreviation AT (author’s translation) denotes my own rendering. Where versification of the Hebrew text (per *BHS* or *BHQ*) differs from modern English translations, the Hebrew chapter or verse number is put in square brackets after the English reference (e.g., Jer. 9:1 [8:23]).

As noted previously in the introduction, the terms “Prophet,” “City,” and “Community” are capitalized when referring to the three primary voices within the poems of Lamentations (see above under “Literary Issues: Structure”). This is in keeping with the tradition of scholarship on Lamentations and will also emphasize the key role of voicing dynamics in this commentary.

The Hebrew verbal system is described with the labels *prefix conjugation* (the imperfect or *yiqṭōl*), *suffix conjugation* (the perfect or *qātal*), and *preterite* (the *waw*-relative, *waw*-consecutive, or *wayyiqṭōl*).

The principal commentaries and monographs on the book of Lamentations are cited by the author’s last name and page number only; these works are recorded along with complete citation information in the list of abbreviations above, as well as in the bibliography (marked with an asterisk).

161. I have arranged the poetic lines according to the traditional system of parallel lineation, notwithstanding the fascinating critical proposals of Grosser, *Unparalleled Poetry*. In this I follow in the main lineation structures arising from the Hebrew Masoretic accentuation tradition (though see Grosser, *Unparalleled Poetry*, 251n47).

1

Longing for Comfort

(1:1–22)



Overview

Historical Context

The first poem of Lamentations reflects on the aftermath of the fall of a city, pointing to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE (see introduction under “Historical Issues: Historical Context”). Since there is no resolution to the predicament described, the poem was most likely composed sometime before the completion of the Second Temple under Darius in 515 BCE. Although a good poet would be able to recreate an experience in rhetorically powerful ways, there is no reason to disconnect this chapter from the experience of the community after the city’s fall. As noted in the introduction, the original setting for this and other chapters in Lamentations was most likely a day of fasting observed regularly between the fall of Jerusalem and the reconstruction of the temple (cf. Zech. 7–8; see introduction under “Historical Issues: Setting in Life”).

Genre

Lamentations 1 is dominated by the disorientation prayer form but shows signs of influence from two other related forms, the funeral dirge and the city lament,¹ especially in the sections voiced by the Prophet (see introduction under “Literary Issues: Genre”). The opening cry of “how terrible that” (*’êkâ*) in v. 1 and the summons to mourn in vv. 12 and 18 are drawn from the funeral dirge, as are the contrast motif in vv. 1 and 6 and the description of misery in

1. On the combination and interaction between these forms in chap. 1, see Parry, 42–43; Allen, 44; Lee, 127–29; Thomas, 137.

vv. 2 and 4.² At the same time, many features are similar to the Mesopotamian city lament, especially the interchange of speakers between the poet narrator and the weeping personified city. However, it is the disorientation prayer form found in the Psalter that comes to dominate the poem.³ This chapter does not end with the kind of hope often expressed in the disorientation prayers of the Psalter,⁴ but Pss. 74, 88, and 89, which betray numerous connections to the book of Lamentations (see appendix 2 under “Lamentations and the Psalms”), conclude in similar fashion.

The Prophet here begins in the genre of the funeral dirge (vv. 1–9b) but shifts into disorientation prayer (vv. 10–11b) after the first interjection by the City (v. 9c; see below under “Structure”). As Middlemas notes, “A not quite dead Zion interrupts the narrator’s untimely report of her demise to add a personal note to an otherwise rote report of the downfall of the city.”⁵ The poem’s use of the personified City Jerusalem gives it the tone of the individual disorientation prayer, even though the circumstances in view are clearly war, which affects a community. The individual tone of the prayer increases the emotional connection of the reader to this text, making it useful for all readers and communities who may not be experiencing the specific historical realities of the fall of Jerusalem.

This poem is dominated by the magnitude of the present distressful situation. The dominant entity representing the community is the City (v. 1), identified as Zion (vv. 4, 17), Daughter of Zion (v. 6), Jerusalem (vv. 7–8, 17), and Maiden Daughter of Judah (v. 15).⁶ However, Judah is also mentioned in v. 3 and Jacob in v. 17. The poem depicts a situation of a city that has experienced destruction (e.g., v. 13), depopulation (e.g., v. 1), and control (e.g., v. 5) at the hands of a conquering force. This has impacted all levels of society, ranging from the elite, including elders (*zāqēn*, v. 19), priests (*kōhēn*, vv. 4, 19), and military officials (*šar*, v. 6), to the younger population, including young women (*bātūlā*, vv. 4, 18), children (*‘ōlāl*, v. 5; *bēn*, v. 16), and young men (*bāhūr*, vv. 15, 18). Some of these have been forced into exile (vv. 3, 5, 18), others have died violently (v. 20), and still others suffer with the resulting shortage of food (vv. 11, 19). Festal activity has come to a halt (v. 4), and sacred places have been defiled (v. 10).

While the initial section of the poem is a funeral dirge focused on the predicament of the City and its people by the Prophet to a general audience (vv. 1–9b, 15c, 17) and at times God (vv. 10–11b), the later section is a first-person

2. Bergant, “Challenge of Hermeneutics,” 7. See also House (338–39) for more detailed connections, esp. on the “dramatic statements of reversal.”

3. Following Westermann, 118–19; House, 339–40; Salters, “Structure and Implication in Lamentations 1?” 300–301.

4. Provan, 33, noting Pss. 3; 7; 13; 25; 44; 51; 79; 80.

5. Middlemas, “Speaking of Speaking,” 46.

6. On the rhetorical strategy of introducing the City anonymously at the outset (vv. 1–2) then progressively introducing identities of Judah (v. 3), Zion (vv. 4–6), and finally Jerusalem (v. 7), see Wendland, “Naming Jerusalem.”

disorientation prayer by the City spoken about Yahweh (vv. 12–15b, 16, 18–19) and at times directly to him (vv. 9c, 11c, 20–22). The poem grapples with the causes that underlie this distress, looking to the culpability of the City (vv. 8–9, 14, 18, 20, 22)⁷ but also to the betrayal and abuse of the enemy (vv. 2–3, 5–10, 14, 16–17, 19, 21–22) and the Deity (vv. 5, 12–15, 17–18, 21–22). Questions are asked, but not the classic “why?” or “how long?” nor ones asked directly to the Deity but rather questions about Yahweh’s treatment of Zion directed by the City toward those passing by (v. 12).

Direct pleas for help from the Deity occur at various points as the voice of the City emerges with her prayer, initially with appeals in vv. 9, 11, and 20 using the imperatives “see” (*r’h*) and “look” (*nbṭ*, hiphil) to implore Yahweh to pay attention to the City’s “misery” (*ny*), “worthlessness” (*zll*), and “distress” (*šrr*). There is then a shift to requests for God’s vengeance against the enemy using the jussive (“may all their evil come before you”) and imperative (“deal violently with them”) in the closing lines of v. 22.⁸ There are also appeals to entities other than the Deity in a strategy by which God “overhears” such petitions.⁹ In v. 12 the City addresses “all who pass by on the road” using the imperatives “look” (*nbṭ*, hiphil) and “see” (*r’h*), and in v. 18 to “all nations” using the imperatives “listen” (*šm’*) and “see” (*r’h*).

There are many motivations for God to act in chapter 1, focused entirely on the magnitude of the distress and the evil of the enemy. God’s character is referenced in v. 18 (“righteous is Yahweh”), but this is designed to justify the discipline rather than provide motivation for God to intervene. Instead of focusing on the righteousness of the supplicant, there are regular admissions of culpability: in the Prophet’s dirge in vv. 5 and 8 and in Zion’s prayer in vv. 14, 18, 20, and 22. We thus find in chapter 1 the three classic “subjects of lament”: God, enemy, and self. All three are identified as causes for the suffering, whether the sin of the City and people, the brutality of the enemy, or the discipline of the Deity. There is little evidence of confidence in this prayer, although the cries to God show that the only source of hope lies with Yahweh.

Traditions

The book’s opening poem interacts with earlier traditions found in the OT (see introduction under “Historical Issues: Traditions”). The “day of Yahweh” motif is introduced though not emphasized in chapter 1 (v. 12, possibly v. 21), drawing on the earlier prophetic tradition concerning an approaching day of salvation or judgment involving significant divine intervention and destruction. It is closely linked with the anger of Yahweh, which is directed against Jerusalem rather than the nations as may have been expected. Retribution

7. See elsewhere in Lamentations: 2:14; 3:39, 42; 4:6, 13, 22; 5:7, 16.

8. Contra Assis (73–74), who downplays this evidence of address to God.

9. See Suderman, *Social Audience of Prayer*; Boda, “Varied and Resplendid.”

theology from the Deuteronomistic and prophetic traditions, which traces discipline to sinful behavior, is evident in the admissions of culpability in this chapter (vv. 5, 8–9, 14, 18, 20, 22). Related to this are the covenant curse materials in the Torah (Lev. 26; Deut. 28–29; 32), the influence of which can be discerned regularly throughout the poem (vv. 3–5, 13–14, 18, 20). Zion theology provides the backdrop for the shock and pain over the destruction, and from this tradition comes the figure of the City, who is central to the chapter. The modulation of voices and the language in the first poem have considerable resonances with the materials found in Jeremiah, especially in the dialogue between Deity, prophet, city, and people in Jer. 4, 8, 10, and 11–20. This poem assumes these traditions but also interacts with them, at times raising questions about their validity and significance for the present moment.

Language and Imagery

While the building blocks of this poem are drawn from both genre and tradition sources, sensitivity to rhetoric underscores the unique way those responsible for this poem have used these basic elements.¹⁰

First of all, a key feature of the poem is the personification of Jerusalem as a female figure called the “Daughter of Zion,” which, through a single representative figure, prompts the community to consider their response to Yahweh and at the same time stirs empathy and moral evaluation within readers (see introduction under “Historical Issues: Traditions”).¹¹ Mary Conway notes the “two contrasting ways” this female figure is depicted in chapter 1: “positively and sympathetically as a mother, a grieving woman, and an isolated widow who is a victim of rape and suffering; but also negatively and judgmentally as a promiscuous woman, an impure woman, and a rebellious sinner who is a deserving recipient of suffering.”¹² This approach thus evokes “judgment but also compassion”—that is, “censure and sympathy.”¹³

The personification of the City as a woman pictures her as an isolated figure (v. 1), a wife who is widowed (v. 1), a mother who has lost her children (vv. 5, 16), a princess who has been reduced to slavery (v. 1), a maiden daughter who has been raped (vv. 6, 8, 15; cf. v. 10), and a woman in a state of uncleanness and impurity (vv. 8–9, 17). She is emotionally devastated: bitter (v. 4), miserable (v. 9), anguished (v. 20), weak (vv. 13–14, 22), weeping (v. 16), groaning (vv. 8, 21–22), and experiencing feelings of worthlessness (v. 11). Her physical posture suggests her devastation as she turns backwards (v. 8), falls (v. 9), and stretches out her hands (v. 17). She has lovers and friends who have become

10. See Muilenburg, “Form Criticism.”

11. Conway (“Daughter Zion,” 104) notes that personifying the city “imbues it with the capacity to feel and suffer.” Cf. Tillema, “Gendered Lament.”

12. Conway, “Daughter Zion,” 105.

13. Conway, “Daughter Zion,” 105, 126.

enemies, betraying and deceiving her (vv. 1, 19). The City can think, recalling painful memories of misery and homelessness, the loss of so many precious things from times past (v. 7), and the failure to consider the consequences of her actions (v. 9). The City is on the run, living as a paranoid drifter “among the nations” (v. 3). She is likened to an ox burdened by a sinful yoke on its neck that saps its strength (v. 14). Her bones suggest the core of her being, which has experienced the fiery attack of Yahweh’s anger (v. 13). The characteristics of the City carry over to her constituent parts. The City’s emotional devastation is reflected in how the roads to Zion mourn (v. 4), as do its priests sigh (v. 4), maidens grieve (v. 4), and people groan (v. 11). As the City is exiled among the nations, so also are her maidens and young men (v. 18).

Other language and imagery within the poem provide insights into some of its key themes. Yahweh is depicted in various negative ways: as an ambushing party lying in wait (v. 17), a hunter stretching out a net to capture his prey (v. 13), and a vintner treading the wine symbolizing the city and possibly the bloodshed it experienced (v. 15). Fire is used to describe Yahweh’s attack on the City, most likely connected with his anger (vv. 12–13). Bread and food are images of the essentials to keep the community alive (vv. 11, 19), for which once valuable things now must be expended to obtain (v. 11). The sword represents the violent death of the City’s people (v. 20) related to the military operation.

Sociological designations reflect the life of the city: priests (vv. 4, 19), maidens (vv. 4, 18), children (vv. 5, 16, 20), officials (v. 6), people (vv. 7, 11), soldiers (v. 15), young men (vv. 15, 18), and elders (v. 19). Military officials are depicted as deer not finding pasture, on the run to the point of exhaustion (v. 6). The house is the central place of family life, a place usually of safety that is now vulnerable to death (v. 20). At times the nations are in view (vv. 1, 3, 10, 18); they are addressed by the City (v. 18) and probably identified with those who pass by (v. 12). Among these nations are the City’s enemies and adversaries (vv. 2, 5, 7, 9–10, 16–17, 21). They are depicted as the City’s former lovers and friends who have betrayed and deceived her (vv. 2, 19). They take control and prosper (vv. 5, 7, 14, 16), joyously mocking her demise (vv. 7, 21), looking upon her devastation as nakedness (vv. 7–8), and acting arrogantly (v. 9). They enter restricted areas like the sanctuary and stretch out their hands to plunder the City’s valuables (v. 10). The adversaries surround Jacob (v. 17).

The language of sin is ubiquitous; the poem uses ethical terms like sin (*ḥēṭ*’, v. 8), rebellion (*peša’*, vv. 5, 14, 22), and revolt (*mrh*, vv. 18, 20) but also priestly vocabulary like impurity (*niddā*, vv. 8, 17) and uncleanness (*tūm’ā*, v. 9), most likely related to female menstruation. Once the enemies’ actions are identified by the City as evil (*rā’ā*, v. 22).

Time functions as a key motif. Ancient days are connected to the glory of the City with its precious things, while more recent past days have been filled with misery (v. 7). The singular word “day,” though, is associated with the devastating time of Yahweh’s judgment (“day of his fierce anger,” v. 12; “a

day you proclaimed,” v. 21) and with its lasting impact (“all day long,” v. 13). The sacred designation “appointed time,” while usually associated with sacred days, also designates the day of judgment (v. 15).

Structure

Various literary strategies can be discerned that contribute to the structuring of this poem. First, it employs an alphabetic acrostic, with each stanza or verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The purpose behind this rhetorical technique in this instance is the dual strategy of “containment and completion” due to the depth of pain and suffering experienced.¹⁴ In addition, it provides an opportunity to express emotion and undertake analysis of the present situation.¹⁵

Second, as with all Hebrew poetry, repetition plays a significant role in the poem of chapter 1. Motifs, vocabulary, and images are repeated in the speeches of both Prophet and City, as well as within their respective speeches. One key repetition is the refrain that appears at several points throughout the poem:

1:2	<i>’ên-lāh mānaḥēm</i>	there is for her no comforting
1:7	<i>’ên ‘ôzēr lāh</i>	there was no help for her
1:9	<i>’ên mānaḥēm lāh</i>	there is no comforting for her
1:16	<i>kî-rāḥaq mimmennî mānaḥēm</i>	because distant from me is comforting
1:17	<i>’ên mānaḥēm lāh</i>	there is no comforting for her
1:21	<i>’ên mānaḥēm lî</i>	there is no comforting for me

Note: Gray here and on following tables indicates variations from the main wording of the refrain.

The basic refrain is found in vv. 2, 9, 17, and 21, with the first three employed by the Prophet about the City (her) and the final refrain employed by the City herself (me). Verse 16 includes a reference to “comforting” within the City’s speech, although without the refrain form. The statement by the Prophet in v. 7 (“there was no help for her”) employs the same elements while replacing “comforting” with “help.” These repetitions draw attention to the greatest concern of the City: its utter sense of abandonment, which is linked at various points in the poem to the loss of inhabitants and festal visitors, as well as betrayal by former supporters and the absence of Yahweh. In the words of Berlin, “This chapter is a plea for comfort in the face of the absence of a comforter. . . . We can say that Lam 1, and perhaps the entire book, is a call to God to be Zion’s comforter.”¹⁶

14. Owens, “Personification.”

15. Assis, 12–13.

16. Berlin, 48. Such comfort will be forthcoming in the response found in Isa. 40–55 (see, e.g., 40:1). See further the discussion in the introduction under “Theological Issues: Old Testament Theological Responses.”

Another strategy for repetition can be seen in the use of a chiasmic structure, a technique used in both chapters 1 and 2.¹⁷ While this type of structure aligns verses in the first half with those in the second half, the impact on meaning is in its creation of balance and closure to the chapter.¹⁸ The technique also divides chapter 1 into two equal parts, with the first half (vv. 1–11) dominated by the Prophet, with two interjections from the City in vv. 9 and 11, and the second half (vv. 12–22) dominated by the City, with two interjections from the Prophet in vv. 15 and 17.

- A v. 1: full/great (*rabbātī*)
- B v. 2: “there is for her no comforting” (*’ên-lāh mənahēm*)
- C v. 3: distress (*mēšar*)
- D v. 4: her priests (*kōhānēhā*)
- E v. 5: “Yahweh . . . they have journeyed into captivity” (*yhw h . . . hālākū šəbî*)
- F v. 6: Zion (*šiyyon*)
- G v. 7: “her misery and her homelessness” (*’onyāh ūmārūdēhā*)
- H v. 8: all (*kōl*)
- I v. 9: Yahweh (*yhw h*)
- J v. 10: stretched out (*pāraś*)
- K v. 11: “see . . . and look” (*rə’ēh . . . wəhabbîṭā*)
- K’ v. 12: “look and see” (*habbîṭū ūrə’ū*)
- J’ v. 13: stretched out (*pāraś*)
- I’ v. 14: Lord (*’ādōnāy*)
- H’ v. 15: all (*kōl*)
- G’ v. 16: “my eye is flowing down” (*’ēnī yōrədā*)
- F’ v. 17: Zion (*šiyyon*)
- E’ v. 18: “Yahweh . . . they have journeyed into captivity” (*yhw h . . . hālākū baššebî*)
- D’ v. 19: my priests (*kōhānay*)
- C’ v. 20: distress (*šar*)
- B’ v. 21: “there is no comforting for me” (*’ên mənahēm lî*)
- A’ v. 22: great (*rabbôt*)

17. Following Renkema, “Literary Structure,” 295–97. For another approach, which requires switching MT’s order of vv. 16 and 17, see Berman, “Criteria for Establishing Chiasmic Structure”; Schäfer, “Der ursprüngliche Text.” However, see the textual note on 1:16 below. On chiasm as a phenomenon, see Boda, “Chiasmus in Ubiquity”; Teeter, “Biblical Symmetry.” With thanks to A. St. Pierre.

18. See Berman, “Criteria for Establishing Chiasmic Structure,” 63.

Finally, attention to voicing dynamics in this poem provides insight into the overall flow of the passage (see introduction under “Literary Issues: Structure: Voicing”). Two dominant voices emerge within the book’s first chapter: a speaker (Prophet) depicting the situation with a focus on the City as a female character (she, her), who introduces the female City speaking in the first person (I, my, me).¹⁹ There is an initially detached yet sympathetic posture taken by the Prophet who is addressed by the City and prompted to engage more deeply in her sorrow, a process that continues into chapters 2 and 3.²⁰

Passage	Speaker	Audience	Speaker Voice
1:1–9b	Prophet	general	
1:9c	City	Yahweh	1st-pers. com. sg.
1:10–11b	Prophet	Yahweh	
1:11c	City	Yahweh	1st-pers. com. sg.
1:12–15b	City	all who pass by	1st-pers. com. sg.
1:15c	Prophet	general	
1:16	City	general	1st-pers. com. sg.
1:17	Prophet	general	
1:18–19	City	all nations	1st-pers. com. sg.
1:20–22	City	Yahweh	1st-pers. com. sg.

The first half of the poem is dominated by the voice of the Prophet, the second half by the voice of the City. Motifs, vocabulary, and images in the Prophet’s speech appear later in the poem in the City’s speech, showing a connection between the Prophet and the City.²¹ Some see in these connections evidence of tension between the two voices, with the Prophet more distant and judgmental and the City voicing a passionate reaction.²² Others see instead a more sympathetic Prophet, suggested by the opening word *’êkâ* (how terrible that), which signals that this Prophet is “a member of the mourning community and immersed in the story he tells.”²³ The truth lies somewhere between these two approaches, with the City employing language from the Prophet at first

19. See Conway, “Daughter Zion,” 103–4, 110.

20. Lee, 129; Conway, “Daughter Zion,” 111, 113; Ellington, “De-Centering Lamentations,” 502. Middlemas (“Speaking of Speaking,” 47) describes the shift from the initial speaker (her narrator) to Lady Jerusalem in a more negative way: “The voice of Lady Jerusalem drowns out that of the narrator.”

21. Conway, “Daughter Zion,” 110–11. See Assis (75) for a list of connections between the two halves of the chapter.

22. E.g., C. W. Miller, “Reading Voices”; O’Connor, 17; Provan, 33. O’Connor (17) states that the Poet’s “distance and lack of passion contribute to her abandonment.”

23. Allen, 35. See also Dobbs-Allsopp, 50, 65; Berman, “Criteria for Establishing Chiastic Structure,” 61; Parry, “Ethics of Lament,” 149–51.

“to polemicize against him” but later “to mirror his semantic intentions,” and this leads in the end to even reusing her own “polemical discourse” to affirm the Prophet’s theology.²⁴ What we find, then, is an interplay between the two main voices in which the Prophet prompts and shapes a response from the City, even as he is prompted and shaped by the City.

Analysis of voicing also makes clear the audiences that are addressed by these two speakers. Yahweh is addressed by the City in vv. 9c, 11c, and 20–22 and by the Prophet in vv. 10–11b. This latter evidence reveals that the Prophet is not merely presenting the City, who then prays, but rather is an active participant in the prayer expression. This means that the Prophet is addressing a general audience that may be both human and divine.²⁵ The City explicitly addresses other audiences in her speeches, including “all who pass by the road” (vv. 12–15b) and “all nations” (vv. 18–19). Neither the voice of Yahweh nor that of the enemy or others is cited in this poem, although the oral expression of the enemy (“laughing”) is described by the Prophet in v. 7. The subtle shifts from addressing a general audience to addressing Yahweh directly to addressing others like passersby or the nations suggests a rhetorical strategy key to this poem. Yahweh is told to pay attention (vv. 9, 11, 20) and to bring vengeance upon the enemies (vv. 21–22). Much more space is given to an address to “all who pass by on the road” in vv. 12–15, which suggests the incomparable level of divine judgment that has befallen the City, focusing especially on the activity of Yahweh, who is the dominant subject of the verbs. This address follows closely after an address to Yahweh to pay attention and so is a case of the City wanting the Deity to overhear her speech to “all who pass by on the road,” thus functioning as a borderline complaint. Culpability is attached to the City throughout the poem, but there is the suggestion here that the suffering surpasses expectations. This strategy of addressing others in the midst of speeches addressing the Deity is also probably in play in vv. 18–19, which is preceded by the declaration of God’s justice and Zion’s culpability but followed by the final call for Yahweh to pay attention in v. 20.

The poem thus divides into two parts (vv. 1–11 and 12–22).²⁶ The first half of the poem represents the expression of the Prophet concerning the circumstances of the City. Near the end of this depiction, the City interjects (v. 9c), and after this point the Prophet’s voice shifts to address Yahweh directly (vv. 10–11b), with the City’s voice interjecting once more, asking for God’s attention (v. 11c). At this point, the City takes over the speaking role in an initial speech to those passing by (vv. 12–15b). Then the voicing modulates between

24. Berman, “Criteria for Establishing Chiastic Structure,” 56.

25. Prayer has both a spiritual and a social dimension; see esp. Suderman, *Social Audience of Prayer*; Suderman, “Are Individual Complaint Psalms Really Prayers?”

26. Similarly, Parry, 40–41. O’Connor (18) includes the second interjection of the City in 1:11 in the second half. Salters (“Structure and Implication in Lamentations 1?”) also notes the significance of these interjections.

Prophet (v. 15c), City (v. 16), and Prophet (v. 17), all speaking to a general audience, before the poem concludes with the City speaking to a general audience (v. 16), then to all the nations (vv. 18–19), and finally to Yahweh (vv. 20–22).

Outline of Lamentations 1

1. Prophet's description of suffering of City and People (1:1–11; * = City's voice breaks in)
 - a. Prophet speaks to general audience (vv. 1–9b)
 - b. City speaks to Yahweh (v. 9c)*
 - c. Prophet speaks to Yahweh (vv. 10–11b)
 - d. City speaks to Yahweh (v. 11c)*
2. City's depiction of suffering and pain (1:12–22; * = Prophet's voice breaks in)
 - a. City speaks to all who pass by about Yahweh (vv. 12–15b)
 - b. Prophet speaks about Yahweh and City (v. 15c)*
 - c. City speaks to general audience (v. 16)
 - d. Prophet speaks about Yahweh and City (v. 17)*
 - e. City speaks to all nations about Yahweh (vv. 18–19)
 - f. City speaks to Yahweh (vv. 20–22)

Role Within Lamentations

The initial poem in the book of Lamentations orients the reader to the crisis that will be the book's focus. The reader first encounters the Prophet, who will in turn introduce the reader to the figure of the City, creating space for her to speak.²⁷ The Prophet is sympathetic from the outset, with the opening cry "how terrible that" (*'êkâ*) drawn from the funeral lament genre. After the City's cry breaks into his description in v. 9, the Prophet shifts from objective description to the audience to address to Yahweh in vv. 10–11b. In this we see the beginning of a development in the Prophet that will continue into chapter 2, one that increasingly voices concern on behalf of the City and expresses personal turmoil over her predicament. There is also development in the presentation of the City, who repeats vocabulary from the Prophet's initial speech—at first protesting but then accepting and even revising her initial statements.²⁸ This initial poem, however, is not merely a depiction of distress, although that is dominant. The poem contains addresses to Yahweh, with the Prophet addressing Yahweh directly (vv. 10–11b) and the City calling the Deity to take notice (vv. 9c, 11c, 20) and also to avenge the abuse of the City (vv. 21–22). There is no resolution in this initial poem, but it plays

27. For the approach taken here, see, e.g., Allen, 22–23; Berman, "Criteria for Establishing Chiastic Structure"; Parry, "Ethics of Lament," 151–52.

28. See Berman, "Criteria for Establishing Chiastic Structure."

a key role in the book to orient the reader to the situation and to prompt prayer through the exemplar figure of the City, who speaks on behalf of the Community.²⁹

Translation and Interpretation

Aleph (א)

¹How terrible that³⁰ she sits in solitude,
the City which had been full of people.
She has become indeed a widow,³¹
the great one³² among the nations.
A princess among the provinces,
she has become a forced laborer.³³

1:1.³⁴ Verse 1 begins as does the opening of chapters 2 and 4: with the exclamatory word “how terrible that” (*’ēkā*), perfectly suited for a painful funeral dirge but also an acrostic since it begins with the letter *aleph*. Its employment in passages like Isa. 1:21, Jer. 48:17, and Ezek. 26:17 shows how it expresses

29. See the introduction under “Literary Issues: Structure” for connections between chap. 1 and the other poems of Lamentations (esp. chaps. 2 and 5).

30. See Allen, 33, 35. It is difficult to capture the emotional and exclamatory quality of this opening word (*’ēkā*) and its role in contrasting the painful shift in circumstances. Salters (35) notes, “While the word can have an interrogative force (Deut 12.30; Jer 8.8), it probably has more of an exclamatory function here—Alas!”

31. See the discussion on *kā’almānôt* (like widows) in the commentary on 5:3.

32. Possibly “lady/mistress over the nations,” in line with ANE evidence (see Dobbs-Allsopp, 51, 55). Cf. Vg *domina gentium* (mistress of the nations). See also Kotzé (“Short Notes,” 83–87) on the different understanding in OG with *peplēthymmenē en ethnesin* (multiplied among the nations).

33. Rejecting OG *phoron* and Vg *tributo*, both meaning “tribute” and reflecting later Hebrew (so Goldingay, 49nf).

34. OG has considerable material prior to the start of v. 1: “And it happened, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem was laid waste, Jeremiah sat weeping and gave this lament over Jerusalem and said . . .” (NETS modified). A Latin form of the superscription is present in some Vg mss but is lacking in most of the oldest and best ones. The textual evidence thus suggests that it was not original in Vg but was composed and added later in the version’s transmission based on the Greek (contra Salters, 5, 21; Hillers, 11, 64). While this extra material is most likely a later addition to the Greek (and Latin) textual traditions of the book, it reflects a legitimate connection between Lamentations and Jeremiah that has been affirmed in recent scholarship and in this commentary (see introduction under “Historical Issues: Authorship” and “Historical Issues: Traditions”). On the Greek and Latin superscriptions, see further Kotzé, “Short Notes,” 79–80. Note also that most Syr mss bear the heading “The Lamentations of Jeremiah” at the start of the book (see Albrectson, 36–38), and Tg begins 1:1 with: “Jeremiah the prophet and high priest said . . .” While the longer prologue is not original, the majority of Vg mss do have paratextual material at the beginning with some form or another of “The Lamentations of [the prophet] Jeremiah,” which is also true of most OG mss (for the Greek evidence, see Ziegler, *Jeremias*, 467^{app}).

“the incredulity and grief of the poet at the disaster”³⁵ and “marks a sudden change from a glorious past to the degraded present.”³⁶ This initial word leads immediately to attention on the figure that dominates the book as a whole: the City of Jerusalem. Verses 1–11 comprise the Prophet’s description of the suffering of the City and its people, with the voice of the City breaking in at two points (vv. 9c, 11c).

The opening depiction of a figure sitting (*yšb*) resonates with the posture of others in the OT who are expressing grief (e.g., Ezra 9:3–4; Neh. 1:4; Ps. 137:1; Jer. 48:18; Ezek. 26:16; Jon. 3:6; cf. Lam. 2:10), applied at times to personified cities (e.g., Isa. 3:26; 47:1). Typically, when the verb *yšb* (sit, dwell, remain) appears with the noun *‘ir* (city), it designates people who dwell within a city. Here, however, it is the City itself that is personified, since the people have been removed from the scene. At the outset, then, the focus is on the emptiness of the City—that is, the lack of dwellers—a condition that is traced at first to the forced migration of its population (vv. 3, 5; cf. v. 18) and then later to the death of those defending it and left vulnerable in it (vv. 15–16, 19–20). The City has been left in “solitude” (*bādād*), a term associated with a fortified city left vulnerable by isolating it from a network of defenses (cf. Isa. 27:10; Jer. 49:31)³⁷ and also with individuals who are isolated from society (cf. Lev. 13:46; Jer. 15:17; Lam. 3:28) or nations isolated from other nations (Num. 23:9). Sitting alone recalls the experience of Jeremiah (Jer. 15:17) and the encouragement of the Prophetic voice in Lam. 3:28. This condition of solitude stands in stark contrast to the City’s former condition of being “full of people.”

The state of aloneness is then identified as that of a “widow” (*’almānā*), a status consistently linked to vulnerability throughout the OT.³⁸ Widows are included in lists of those to be protected within Israelite society, both in the law (e.g., Exod. 22:22 [21]) and in the prophets (e.g., Isa. 1:17, 23; cf. Job 22:9; Ps. 68:5 [6]). The loss of male figures within the family leads to this condition, a loss with economic and physical ramifications within a patriarchal society where males protected those under their care and authority (Exod. 22:24 [23]).³⁹ In this context, widowhood could refer to the loss of the divine male figure of Yahweh but more likely refers to the general loss of male figures who would have protected the City from invaders. Widowhood here does not merely point to an economic or physical decline but more importantly to a decline in status within the social

35. House, 344.

36. Berlin, 49.

37. Although see its potential for security in Deut. 33:28 and Mic. 7:14, which may bear an ironic nuance here. See Berlin, 50; Dobbs-Allsopp, 54.

38. See Goldingay, 52.

39. For the use of the “widow” image to refer to plundered lands, see Berlin, 49 (citing the Merneptah Stele, line 27).

context.⁴⁰ The use of the identical phrase (*kə'almānôt*) later in 5:2 suggests that the painful experience of the female population in Jerusalem has shaped the description of the City. In the line that follows, the shameful status of widowhood is contrasted with the former status of greatness (*rabbāṭī*) “among the nations.” Notice the identical language to the earlier contrast: “the City which had been *full of* (*rabbāṭī*) people.”⁴¹ Thus, the negative state of solitude contrasts with the former state of fullness of people, and the negative state of widowhood contrasts with the former state of greatness among the nations.⁴²

The final contrast has the former princess reduced to the level of forced laborer.⁴³ The phrase “among the provinces” links this contrast to the former line (“among the nations”) grammatically, even while reminding the audience of the significant shift in social status: Jerusalem was previously known among the nations but now is reduced to lower status within a province.⁴⁴ The life of the princess is connected with the leisure of the elite, whether that is the women within the immediate family of the reigning monarch (1 Kings 11:3; Isa. 49:23) or women within elite families of a nation (Esther 1:18; cf. Judg. 5:29–30). The image of the princess is contrasted with that of the laborer, those forced into servitude by the royal elite (e.g., Exod. 1:11; 1 Kings 4:6) or dominant people group (e.g., Deut. 20:11; Josh. 16:10).⁴⁵ This opening verse then focuses the attention of the audience on the contrast between the former ideal condition and status of Jerusalem and its present deplorable situation.

Bet (ב)

²Surely⁴⁶ she weeps at night,
her tears on her cheek.
There is for her no comforting
from any of her lovers.
All her friends have betrayed her;
they have become for her enemies.

40. This begins a depiction in which shifts from honor to shame are clear throughout. See Savarikannu, “Expressions of Honor.”

41. See Thomas (“Meaning of *zōlēlā*”) on the Hebrew stylistic device antanaclosis or rootplay and its use in chap. 1, esp. here in this example. Cf. Lee, 97–98.

42. Some (e.g., Assis, 58) treat *rab* (translated above as “great one”) here as quantitative, referring to the large population of the City as a contrast to aloneness.

43. See historical references to the vulnerability of the “daughters of the king” in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem in Jer. 41:10; 43:6.

44. Note how the term *mādinā* (province) refers to the subnational level, whether within Israel (1 Kings 20:14–15, 17, 19), Babylon (Ezek. 19:8; Dan. 8:2), or Persia (Ezra 2:1 // Neh. 7:6; Esther 1:1).

45. On the international level, this status is known as vassal. See Assis, 50, 58.

46. Treating the cognate infinitive absolute here in line with *IBHS* §35.3.1.

1:2. Having presented the shift in Jerusalem’s condition and status in the opening verse, the Prophet now draws attention to the internal response and relational disparity experienced by personified Jerusalem. The initial lines of v. 2 emphasize the emotional turmoil experienced by the personified City, with reference to weeping as well as tears on her cheek. Now we are forced to look upon this female figure in her painful state, which is not surprising for a “widow.” In the Psalter, “night” is associated with praise (Ps. 134:1), revelation from God (16:7), and meditation on God (63:6 [7]), but particularly with prayer (42:8–9 [9–10]) and weeping (e.g., 6:6 [7]). The night may suggest that period when human activity ceases and this lone female figure is left with her painful memories of what has been lost.⁴⁷

This depiction of weeping begins the process of empathizing with the figure of the City, who as female is both daughter (connecting with the starving children of the City) and mother (connecting with bereaved mothers of the City).⁴⁸ The City herself will personalize this in 1:16; the Prophet in turn will be affected, as we see in 2:11–12.

The initial image of the weeping female figure of Jerusalem is accentuated by the relational abandonment that now follows in 1:2. In her pain, Jerusalem has no one to comfort her. Worse than merely abandoning her, those whom one would expect to comfort have now turned against her in betrayal. Twice the term “all” (*kōl*) is used to emphasize the totality of this relational isolation. As noted above in the chapter overview, comfort—or rather the lack of it—is a key motif throughout the first chapter, showcased in refrains at various points in the poem (vv. 2, 9, 16–17, 21). It is also key to the prophetic response throughout Isa. 40–55 (e.g., 40:2; 49:13) to the disorientation cries of the servant Jacob/Israel (40:27) and Zion (49:14), and thus was clearly a need of the community that experienced the destruction of the City and its aftermath.⁴⁹

The word *rēaʿ* refers to a friend or neighbor, a term used to typify those colleagues of Job who came with the intention of comforting him (Job 2:11). It can be used for colleagues in vocational tasks, such as fellow priests (e.g., Zech. 3:8), or a close friend, described in Deut. 13:6 [7] as “one who is as/like your soul” (AT). Such an individual expresses love (Prov. 17:17), as well as pity (Job 19:21) and comfort (2:11), rather than condemnation (16:20; 32:3). A friend can even gain a status greater than a sibling (Prov. 17:17; 18:24). Betrayal by such a person would be devastating and aligns the City again with the experience of Jeremiah (Jer. 12:1, 6).

The term “friend” appears alongside “loved ones” (ptc. of *ʾhb*) in Pss. 38:11 [12] and 88:18 [19], other prayers that express the pain of abandonment.

47. Assis, 60.

48. See Bosworth, “Daughter of Zion,” 230–32. Cf. the call for the walls of the City to weep in 2:18.

49. See, e.g., Assis, 60–61; Goldingay, 53.

This latter word is used for the expression of love between the opposite sexes (e.g., Gen. 24:67; Song 1:3), but it is also used for the love expressed between God and humans (e.g., Deut. 4:37), family members (e.g., Ruth 4:15), friends (e.g., Lev. 19:18; 1 Sam. 18:1), foreigners (e.g., Lev. 19:34), and leaders (e.g., 1 Sam. 18:16). It can even be used for impersonal entities like food (Gen. 27:4) or activities like bribing (e.g., Isa. 1:23). Therefore, the employment of this term here may just be a synonym for “friend.” However, the depiction of Jerusalem as a female figure may bring to mind the prophetic “metaphor of God’s broken family,”⁵⁰ which depicts the people of God in an illicit sexual relationship with other gods and their nations, as we see in texts like Jer. 22:20–22, Ezek. 16, and Hosea 2.⁵¹ Furthermore, the word *’hb* is used in the OT in a political sense, a use also evident in the broader ANE, where it can refer to “allies” (see 1 Kings 5:1 [15]).⁵² The leaders of Jerusalem and Judah had sought to negotiate the unsettled diplomatic realities of the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE, which after the demise of the Assyrian Empire witnessed Egypt, Babylon, and Media vying for control of the Levant (see introduction under “Historical Issues: Historical Context”). The emphasis on betrayal alongside the depiction of tearful weeping highlights the emotional pain of the City as the result of its destruction at the hands of her former friends and lovers who have now become “enemies.”⁵³

Gimel (ג)

³Judah has gone into exile from⁵⁴ the experience of misery,
and from⁵⁵ the experience of great servitude.⁵⁶

50. O’Connor, 20.

51. See Berlin, 59; Goldingay, 54.

52. Dobbs-Allsopp, 56; Berlin, 51 (noting Moran, “Ancient Near Eastern”).

53. See Provan (36) for how “enemies” (*’ōyēb*, also *šar*) in Lamentations refers to foreign nations (1:5, 9, 16, 21; 2:3, 7, 16–17), noting that these are “undifferentiated terms for the foreign enemies” (41).

54. There are a few options for the use of the preposition *min* here: temporal use, “after” (IBHS §11.2.11.c); causal, “the cause or means of a situation” (IBHS §11.2.11.d, ex. 10–12); agency, “by” or, as rendered here, “from” (IBHS §11.2.11.d, ex. 13). Salters (42) covers this in detail, noting that this collocation (*glb* followed by *min*) appears elsewhere 11× in the OT and nearly all are locative (“from”), except for Isa. 5:13, which is causal. He notes that causal does not work for Babylonian captivity, unless you see people fleeing the land into exile to escape the affliction and harsh service. The temporal “after” is possible though (see Berlin, 41). Salters adopts the locative and sees *glb* not as “go into exile” but rather as “depart” (cf. Linafelt, 159n13). Provan (38) uses “after having endured” (which appears to be temporal) but bases this on the locative sense (see esp. Ezek. 12:3; Mic. 1:16).

55. See the previous note.

56. With Salters (41) here ignoring the double use of *autēs* in OG, while treating its lack of equivalent of the pronoun *hi?* as unnecessary for Greek understanding.