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THEOLOGIES OF THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

by Helen Titche Cohn

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

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Referee: Professor Alan Cooper

Dedicated to

Laura, Paul, Nelson and Momio

whose support made it all possible

Theologies of the Book of Lamentations

by Helen Titche Cohn

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 BCE was an unprecedented crisis for the Jewish people. Then, as now, this event evoked difficult theological questions about God's justice and mercy, His relationship with the Israelite prople, and the possibility of ever appeasing His anger. The Book of Lamentations is a powerful description of and response to this crisis. Readers through the ages have attempted to find in it answers to these and other theological questions.

However, the Book of Lamentations admits to a variety of interpretations, as this paper demonstrates. In spite of scholarship's goal of objectivity, personal theories and biases cannot help but affect a writer's analysis. The first part of this paper reviews four scholarly discussions of Lamentations, showing how each writer's interpretation is influenced by his approach or preexisting bias. In each case, the writer supports his conclusions by reading verses out of context. The same verses, when read within a larger context, often reveal different meanings, which are also presented in this paper.

The second part of the paper examines two specific issues: the nature of the people's sins, and the significance of the final four verses of the book. Most analyses of the Book of Lamentations assume that the catastrophe is the result of grievous sin by the people, based on the terms of the covenant between God and Israel. However, a close reading of the text fails to discover any sins that were equivalent to the severity of the resulting "punishment." Moreover, the hopeful message of sin, repentance and restoration of God's favor, often found in selective readings of the text, is challenged by the stark final lines of the book.

The goal of this paper is to analyze different theological views of the Book of Lamentations and to challenge the reader to balance preconceived ideas with a clear-sighted view of what the text itself is saying.

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The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 BCE was an unprecedented crisis for the Jewish people. This was more than a military defeat, more than the loss of life, property and freedom. The defeat raised theological questions of great urgency. Was God Himself defeated by the Babylonians? How could this be, if the Israelite God were the Lord of all creation? Instead, He must have permitted, perhaps even caused, the destruction. But if this were the case, what was the reason? What had aroused His anger to this degree, what could appease Him, and what hope might be found for the future?

The Book of Lamentations is a powerful, poetic response to the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Using a variety of voices, the poems portray pain and despair at a number of levels, including the personal, communal and religious.

The poems' original intentions and uses are not known. However, the poems achieved a prominent, even mythic, status within Jewish theology that has endured until our own time. For example, the rabbinic tradition, using midrash and liturgy, associated Lamentations with a series of subsequent major catastrophes occurring to the Jewish people. Even now, these poems are used as a prototype for the Jewish understanding of and response to catastrophe.

Modern scholars often include a theological analysis of the Book of Lamentations along with their discussions of topics such as historicity and form criticism. While objectivity is the goal of scholarship, personal theories and biases cannot help but affect the writer's analysis. If this is true regarding "factual" aspects of the text such as style and circumstances of composition, how much more will it be true regarding the subjective area of theology,

whether the scholar is explicitly aware of it or not.

The first part of this paper will consider four scholarly interpretations of the Book of Lamentations. Although these interpretations differ in many ways, certain major issues recur: Was the punishment appropriate to the people's sin? Did the poet reflect the Hebrew prophetic tradition, or did he adhere to the mainstream popular religion? Did the catastrophe that befell Israel reflect the terms of the Deuteronomy covenant? Should Lamentations be read within the context of the entire canon, or as an independent work?

Although the major issues are often the same, the responses differ widely. For example, Gottwald sees Lamentations as squarely within the prophetic tradition, defining a theology of purposeful suffering and acceptance of God's mysterious ways that became the backbone of both Jewish and Christian thought. On the other hand, Kaufmann sees no trace of this prophetic tradition, but instead sees a deep belief in a popular religion that was in opposition to the "outsider" prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

As another example, Albrektson sees a paradigm shift in Lamentations from an ancient Zion-centered tradition to a trust in the more recent and universal covenant of Deuteronomy. In contrast, Mintz sees no hope or consolation in Lamentations by itself. Only when it is read within the context of the Hebrew canon does Lamentations become part of a larger picture of the human struggle for consolation and reconnection with God after devastation and despair.

The contrasts between these writers will show the extent to which preexisting biases can influence the reading of a text, especially a text which admits of so many differing interpretations. This paper points out logical weaknesses or inconsistencies in the arguments, but no interpretation is rejected, since each has its own insights to contribute to an understanding of

the Book of Lamentations.

The second part of this paper focuses on the text of Lamentations itself. Two issues are highlighted: the nature of the people's sins, and the significance of the final four verses of the book. Again we will see that different writers attach widely varying interpretations to the same verses.

Although their interpretations differ, each of these writers employ a similar technique to support their specific theological understanding of the poems: they take individual verses out of context, in a manner reminiscent of the rabbinic method of "proof texts." The technique of proof texts worked for the rabbis who considered Scripture as coming from a single source Who intended that humans find its hidden meaning through this type of close analysis of each word.

The technique is more subject to question when it is used by scholars who view the text as the product of human inspiration and creativity. Thus Part II of this paper presents alternative interpretations of key verses, interpretations which view the verses *within* their specific context in the poems. There is no single "right" interpretation. The goal of this paper is to uncover the multiple meanings and various theologies that can be found in the Book of Lamentations.

Norman Gottwald -- In the Prophetic Mainstream[1]

For centuries the Hebrew prophets had warned the people of the punishment coming to them from God if they did not turn from their evil ways and worship the one true God with acts of ritual and ethical purity. Gottwald's thesis in *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* is that the Book of Lamentations was written as part of that prophetic tradition. The book viewed the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in the beginning of the sixth century as the fulfillment of the prophets' warnings. These events were, in fact, the terrible "Day of the Lord" of which they had spoken. The Book of Lamentations was a response to this tragedy within the prophetic tradition, a response that had a major influence on the future course of Judaism.

Gottwald's analysis of Lamentations yields two significant theological messages. First, through this book the Hebrew faith finds a way to survive the worst type of catastrophe and doubt. Second, the theology of Lamentations provides a foundation for aspects of Christian theology that are pertinent both in the days of Jesus and in our current time.

An analysis of Lamentations must begin with its historical context, according to Gottwald. The fundamental problem that faced the Israelites was not the fact that their seemingly invulnerable city had been conquered. The problem, rather, was the apparent destruction of the Israelite relationship with God.

A document, which critical scholars identify with the heart of the book of Deuteronomy, had been discovered with much fanfare a mere two decades previously, in 621 BCE. This document promised that loyalty to God would

[1]Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*. Great Britain: Robert Cunningham and Sons Ltd, 1954.

be richly rewarded. In the spirit of this document, Josiah began the so-called "Deuteronomic reforms." However, history seemed to contradict this promise: Josiah met an untimely death in 609, and Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians a decade later. Had God broken His covenant? Had He abandoned His people? Or was there some other explanation or understanding of God's actions which would account for this incomparable tragedy?

Gottwald asserts that the Book of Lamentations addresses and answers these urgent questions. Through Lamentations a theology evolved which incorporated the notions of suffering, faith, and acceptance of the mysterious workings of God. These notions had their roots in the prophetic tradition, and led ultimately to a Christian understanding of Jesus' suffering. Thus Lamentations is part of the mainstream message of the Hebrew Bible and is in the center of a religious continuum which stretches from the earliest prophets to the Christian present.

Even a casual reading of the Book of Lamentations reveals a thoughtfully crafted literary work. Gottwald's analysis of Lamentations begins with a discussion of its major literary techniques. Two of these techniques, the acrostic and the lament form, are explicitly identified in the opening two chapters of his book. The third literary technique, which he calls "tragic reversal," is more integral to Gottwald's understanding of the theology of Lamentations. Therefore, this third technique is discussed later in this section, within the larger context of Lamentations' theology.

Each of the five chapters, or poems, in Lamentations is constructed around the Hebrew alphabet. The first four poems are acrostics, where each verse or set of verses begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the final poem, although not an acrostic, contains 22 verses corresponding to the number of

letters in the alphabet. In the first chapter of his book, Gottwald presents and then discards several theories about the use of the acrostic form: the magical powers inherent in letters, the instructional use of Lamentations in the classroom, the use of acrostics as an aid in memorization. He then elaborates a theory which he says has been suggested in the past, but not fully developed: when an idea is expressed through the entire alphabet, it is expressed completely. "If the subject is to be exhausted, the alphabet alone can suffice to suggest and symbolize the totality striven after."[2] He suggests that the same intent can be seen in the *viddui* or list of sins used in the Jewish liturgy. This is an apt analogy, since he maintains that the acrostic form was deliberately used by the author of Lamentations "to bring about a complete cleansing of the conscience through a total confession of sin."[3]

In his second chapter, Gottwald explores various forms of the lament, which is a literary type found in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, particularly Psalms and certain prophets. Laments can be categorized according to different types: national lament, funeral song, individual lament. Gottwald summarizes several prominent scholarly theories, concluding that Lamentations is a communal lament of mixed types from the sixth century BCE.[4]

The rigorously form-critical discussion of lament types supports Gottwald's theory that Lamentations has a pivotal position in its literary form as well as its theology: "We may, therefore, frame the tentative theory that the catastrophic events of the fall of Judah led to a deliberate fusion of hitherto comparatively separate types [of laments]."[5] However, even taking

[2]Ibid., 29.
[3]Ibid., 30.
[4]Ibid., 42.
[5]Ibid., 46.

this theory into account, the discussion of lament types seems tangential to Gottwald's main concern with Lamentations as a critical theological statement.

This theological statement, according to Gottwald, parallels the message which underlay prophetic preaching. The prophets did not just preach about disaster resulting from the people's sins; the prophets also offered hope. The path from sin to restoration in God's favor has four stages: chastisement, repentance, conversion and hope.[6] These stages are the framework for Gottwald's analysis of Lamentations, and each will be viewed in turn. However, before searching the path to restoration, we must look at the nature of suffering in the Book of Lamentations.

Although some have called the grief of Lamentations an "exaggeration,"[7] Gottwald says that this extravagance of emotion serves to show how unparalleled the catastrophe was. He calls verses 2.18a and 19a,e the "nadir of Jerusalem's despair," after which the "sun of faith begins its circle toward the zenith."[8] However, he also lists a series of verses in chapter 3 (3.17, 18, 31, 33, 49, 50) as illustrating the worst aspect of the catastrophe: Israel's apparent alienation from God. These two statements are contradictory: if the worst aspect of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple is the people's alienation from God as expressed most often in chapter 3, then earlier statements cannot be the nadir of grief in the book. Moreover, Gottwald later uses two of the verses cited here, 3.31 and 33, to support his theory of ultimate hope in God's righteousness. Thus he weakens his argument by using the same verses to illustrate contradictory sentiments.

The theme of suffering is so prominent in Lamentations that one could

[6]Ibid., 91.
[7]Ibid., 63.
[8]Ibid., 65.

argue that the book's main preoccupation is with various types of unremitting suffering, such as loss, physical pain, humiliation, and lack of connection with God. For Gottwald, the suffering is not an end point, but an introduction. The suffering is a necessary prerequisite to the prophetic dynamic mentioned earlier, the dynamic which ultimately leads from despair to hope and restored faith.

For example, in the previously mentioned discussion about the nadir of despair, he cites verse 2.13 as "one of the most moving expressions of grief and ruin in all literature":

> How shall I uphold you, with what shall I compare you,
> O daughter of Jerusalem?
> To what shall I liken you, and how comfort you, virgin daughter of Zion?
> For great as the sea is your ruin; who can heal you?[9]

Such an evaluation is subjective at best and other verses would surely qualify for this dubious distinction. This particular verse is significant for Gottwald because, in his eyes, "it only serves to intensify the need for turning to the Lord," since comfort cannot come from any human source.[10]

Likewise, the following verse also has an underlying significance:

> The iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the sin of Sodom;
> She was overthrown in a moment and no hands were laid upon her. (4.6)

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was used in biblical writing as a proverbial image for sudden, violent and final divine punishment of sin. The significance of the reference to Sodom, according to Gottwald, is that Lamentations "reasons from the punishment to the sin."[11] Since the destruction of Jerusalem is unparalleled, bringing greater suffering than

[9]Ibid., 64. English translations are by the author under discussion, unless otherwise indicated.
[10]Ibid., 65.
[11]Ibid., 66.

Sodom, it must have been caused by a sin much greater than the sin of Sodom. However, other interpretations of this verse, which do not assume that the comparison between the two cities concerns the magnitude of their sins, are offered in Part II of this paper.

As mentioned earlier, Gottwald identifies three specific literary techniques in Lamentations. Two (the acrostic form and the lament genre) were discussed earlier. The third, the schema of tragic reversal, is used to highlight the degree of suffering by contrasting a former good time with the current tragic time. Laments and funeral songs often use this technique (for example, David's lament over Saul and Jonathan in II Sam 1.17-27). This motif takes a number of forms in Lamentations: Jerusalem's past glory versus her present humiliation, the people's past wealth versus their current starvation, etc.[12] The interesting twist that Lamentations adds to this motif is the possibility of a future reversal, when God will again look favorably on Israel, and will cause the Israelite enemies to suffer a similar tragic turn in fortune (3.64-66). This reversal becomes one of the causes for hope, according to Gottwald.[13]

Having discussed literary techniques and suffering, Gottwald begins his analysis in earnest. The suffering has a purpose: "An intimation of suffering that is purposeful is the central teaching of Lamentations, the axis around which all the confessing and lamenting revolves."[14] The suffering is both purposeful and temporary; through it, the people will embark on the path that eventually leads to restored harmony with God.

This path, as mentioned earlier, has four stages: chastisement, repentance, conversion and hope. The stages according to his analysis are aspects of the Israelite prophetic message. Consistent with this message, the Book of

[12]Ibid., 54 ff.
[13]Ibid., 62.
[14]Ibid., 107.

Lamentations illustrates the passage from extreme suffering and doubt about God to hope and faith in God.

Given the degree of their suffering, the people ask: What has brought this doom upon us? Their answer, according to Gottwald, is found in the frequent references to their sins: "That Yahweh had been perfectly justified in his harsh treatment of Zion is witnessed by the frequent confessions of sin."[15] Gottwald cites the following verses in support of his assertion:

> Jerusalem has greatly sinned, therefore she has become filthy (1.8a)
> My heart is faint within me, for I have been very rebellious (1.20b)
> For Yahweh has afflicted her because of the multitude of her sins (1.5b)
> My sins are bound together as a yoke; in his hands they are entwined (1.14a)
> We have sinned and rebelled; thou hast not forgiven (3.42)
> It was because of the sins of her prophets, the iniquities of her priests,
> Who shed in her midst the blood of the righteous. (4.13)

This list is concluded with the following "sincere summation":

> The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned!
> Because of this our heart is faint,
> because of these our eyes are darkened. (5.16-17)

The verses are reproduced here to emphasize that although they do speak specifically of "sin," they do not give any indication of the *nature* of the sins.[16] Gottwald acknowledges this problem: "As to the specific sins which constitute the great iniquity of Judah, we are surprised that more detail is not given."[17] This is a noteworthy point. The *suffering* is described in agonizing detail. God's wrath is also described in detail. But the nature of the sins is not described at all.

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[15]Ibid., 94. The "frequency" of these references, or lack thereof, is discussed in more detail in Part II of this paper.
[16]The one exception is found in verse 4.13 which speaks of the sins of the prophets and priests. See Part II, "Priests and Prophets: Guilty As Charged?"
[17]Ibid., 68.

Gottwald's theory hinges on the assumption, from Deuteronomy, that God metes out just reward and punishment. Even if we do not always understand God's ways (an essential point for this theology of Lamentations), we trust that they are just. However, other ways of reading of the list of sins would suggest that the people simply do not know what their sins might be, or that their sins do not seem at all commensurate with the perceived punishment. The verses listed above indicate that the people feel they must have done something to deserve such punishment, but they are at a loss to name even the most minor of transgressions. One thinks of an innocent person under torture, willing to "confess" to anything, without knowing the nature of the accusation. Another image is of a communal confession of sin, acknowledging the obvious fact that all humans sin to some extent, but without a clear indication of the precise nature of specific sins.

Gottwald cites the number of different terms for "sin" as an indication of the "scope and seriousness of sin."[18] "It is evident that the several words were used to impress the sin upon the hearer and to enable the Judeans to confess wholeheartedly their iniquity before Yahweh."[19] An alternative way to interpret the various words for sin (he lists five) is that the people have no idea of what they might have done to merit such terrible punishment, so they use a variety of words, each suggesting a different type of sin, in the hope that one might apply in God's eyes, and their "confession" would thus be accepted.

In Gottwald's view, the first stage, chastisement, contains both the recognition of sin and the acceptance of punishment. The fulfillment of this stage is necessary if faith is to progress to the next stage: repentance. "The admission of sin by the offender is an absolute necessity if forgiveness is

[18]Ibid., 69.
[19]Ibid., 69-70.

desired."[20] Following their statements of guilt, the people express their repentance in their pleas for forgiveness.

The very act of pleading for forgiveness is an act of hope. It assumes a righteous God who is in charge of events and to whom one can appeal. Gottwald sees this budding hope in the frequency of prayers in the Book of Lamentations. It is true, he says, that God appeared "utterly intransigent,"[21] but it was not vain to make an appeal: "Perhaps there is hope" (3.29b). Prayer, he claims, is an expression of the people's hope and faith in a God who hears and is affected by prayers. This is essential to participation in the second stage of the prophetic path back to God.

Repentance implies a break with the offending behavior and a return to God's ways. Gottwald sees such a return in the following verses:

> Let us search and examine our ways, and return to Yahweh!
> Let us lift up our hearts not our hands, to God in the heavens!
> We have sinned and rebelled; thou hast not forgiven. (3.40-42)

It is a call to search out one's deeds and return to God with a new heart, as called for by Jeremiah. The proof text which he cites from Jeremiah (Jer 31.31-34) refers to God's forgiveness of the sins of Judah and Israel and His creation of a new covenant with His people.

This leads to the third stage, conversion. This stage is not fully developed in Gottwald's book, but it appears to apply at this point. Repentance is both a human and a divine activity. Try as we might, the gulf between the greatness of God and the weakness of man can only be bridged through God's initiative. This is the meaning of "Turn us, O Yahweh, unto thyself and we shall be turned. Renew our days as of old!" (5.21)

[Israel] has exhausted herself in frenzied prayer and to no effect...if God

[20]Ibid., 67.
[21]Ibid., 91.

were to turn Israel's heart to himself then a true restoration of her fortunes would occur. So there is a definite distinction to be drawn between "turning to Yahweh" and "return of fortune." The one is the precondition of the other, i.e., conversion is required.[22]

With this conversion comes the basis for hope. But "hope" does not take the form of specific speculation on some tangible, future glory. Rather, it focuses on God's nature. The "hope" is an assertion that God is basically righteous. Gottwald sees the following verses as "a magnificent utterance of the Lord's disavowal of all injustice":[23]

To crush under foot all the prisoners of the earth,
To turn aside a man's right in the very presence of the Most High
To mislead a man in his case, the Lord does not approve. (3.34-36)

The sufferer is comforted by thoughts of God's righteousness, as Zephaniah says:

The Lord within her [Jerusalem] is righteous, he does no wrong;
each morning he shows forth his justice,
each dawn he does not fail;
but the unjust knows no shame. (Zeph 3.5)

Because of God's righteousness and disavowal of injustice, His great anger and destruction must have been for a just cause. Here, now, is the source of God's mystery: His purposes are not always apparent, "and therefore must forever elude the definitions of even an elected people."[24]

When we accept the ultimate mystery of God's actions and purposes, we have come to the core of the theological message of Lamentations, according to Gottwald, for "in Lamentations we come upon the most outspoken appeals for submission to be found anywhere in the Old Testament."[25] He then

[22]Ibid., 104.
[23]Ibid., 95.
[24]Ibid., 102.
[25]Ibid., 105.

quotes the following verses:

> Yahweh is good to him who waits for him, to the person who seeks him;
> It is good that one should silently wait for the salvation of Yahweh;
> It is good for a man to bear a yoke in his youth.
> He sits alone and is silent since it has been laid upon him;
> He puts his mouth in the dust, perhaps there is hope;
> He gives his cheek to the smiter, he is sated with contempt. (3.25-30)

Again using these verses as a proof text, Gottwald explains further:

> Why this indifference, this almost Stoic forbearance and self-effacement? Because the suffering originates with the Lord and is ultimately an expression of his goodness, the sufferer must wait upon his action (3.25-27)....The grief that Yahweh has dealt out is not willful nor perpetual but a seasonal chastening and tempering that is bound to give way to his compassion and love (3.31-33).[26]

Thus Gottwald sees the theology of Lamentations as leading through a series of stages to the final consoling realization that God, who controls all of history, may work in mysterious ways, but those ways are always for the good of His creatures.[27]

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, Gottwald finds two significant theological messages in his analysis of Lamentations. The first, which has been examined at length, is how the Israelites found a way to understand the disaster which had overtaken them and find in it renewed faith in God. The second message is related to Christian theology which looks to the Old Testament for the foundations of its faith.

Lamentations reaffirms that God creates and controls human history. Gottwald sees proof of that belief in two "solid facts" of history: "the survival of Judaism in the face of impossible odds and the rise of Christianity through which the boons of Israelite religion have been spread throughout the

[26]Ibid.
[27]Ibid., 71.

world."[28]

Not only does Lamentations' theology "prove" God's guiding hand in the development of Christianity; it also suggests an analogy with Jesus in several ways. First, just as Lamentations was less about physical suffering than it was about a sense of spiritual desolation, so too was Jesus' agony on the cross more spiritual than physical. Thus Lamentations teaches the overcoming of pain and doubt for the sake of faith. It teaches also that suffering serves a purpose. Third, it advocates a submissive spirit:

> To complete our analogy, it is of course impossible to speak of a resurrection, but, like Christ, the nation is able to utter the cry of commitment, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."[29]

The importance of a submissive spirit in Lamentations is that it lays the ground for Second Isaiah, which in turn is a foreshadowing of yet more Good News. "The persistence of the submissive spirit as a motif in Hebrew literature is especially evident in Second Isaiah's characterization of the Servant of Yahweh."[30] Gottwald has already asserted his belief that Second Isaiah drew on Lamentations for elements of his theology:

> ...that the pupil [Second Isaiah] went beyond his mentor [Lamentations] is indisputable....There is an exuberance and abounding hope which would not have been natural for the dark hours in which our poet wrote....It is Lamentations, and not Ezekiel or Deutero-Isaiah, which shows how the Jews bore the first dismal doubts and wild griefs and deep despair of their fate...to preserve their common faith in Yahweh so that at the propitious hour the prophet of a more certain hope might announce the New Creation.[31]

The problem with this connection between Lamentations and later

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[28]Ibid., 110.
[29]Ibid., 52.
[30]Ibid., 106.
[31]Ibid.

Christian thought is that it is based on questionable assumptions about Lamentations' intent and theology.

The first weakness is Gottwald's assumption that Lamentations stands firmly in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. He is correct in stating that their message was not solely bleak, but generally contained words of consolation and hope. He may be less correct in finding those words of consolation and hope in Lamentations.

The four stages from sin to reconnection with God began with a realization and admission of sin. However, Gottwald's presentation of the Israelite admission of sin is not convincing. Nowhere do the speakers seem to understand the nature of their sins. As suggested earlier, they seem more like people who are coerced by suffering to admit to crimes of which they have little or no knowledge.

Similar questions could be raised regarding the role of prayer in Lamentations. When discussing the nation's suffering, Gottwald quotes the following lines from the third poem:

> Thou hast clothed thyself with anger and pursued, thou hast slain and had no mercy;
> Thou hast clothed thyself in a cloud, prayer is unable to pass through;
> Offscouring and refuse thou hast made us in the midst of the peoples. (3.43-45)

He refers to this as a "prayer of protest" within the larger context of chastisement and the possibility of repentance.[32] However, without much difficulty these verses could be seen as a statement of hopelessness: prayers don't matter; prayers don't penetrate; God acts with anger and not mercy.

Gottwald makes an interesting point when he suggests that the acrostic literary technique expresses the totality of grief from "Aleph to Tav." Not

[32]Ibid., 76.

satisfied with that explanation, he elaborates by suggesting a much larger theological purpose: cleansing of conscience through total confession of sin, followed by an attitude of submission which leads to the prospect of hope.

> By intimately binding together the themes of sin, suffering, submission and hope, [the author] intended to implant the conviction of trust and confidence in the goodness and imminent intervention of Yahweh. That this is the case is evident in the third poem where the acrostic form is intensified at precisely the point where hope becomes the strongest. [33]

In a footnote to these lines, he also points out that in the third poem "the central strophes (those most articulate of hope) use the same acrostic word two or three times in each stanza (cf. vv. 3.19-21, 25-39)." Thus according to his theory the literary form reinforces the themes of sin, suffering, submission and particularly of hope. What of the two poems that follow? The prophetic model generally *ends* with consolation and hope, rather than slipping it into the middle of a message of doom. Surely Gottwald is aware of this use of a *nechemta*, or concluding note of hope. How then does he explain the disheartening closing words of Lamentations:

> Why dost thou continually forget us, forsake us unendingly?
> Turn us, O Yahweh, unto thyself and we shall be turned!
> Renew our days as of old!
> Or hast thou utterly rejected us? Art thou exceedingly angry with us?
> (5.20-22)

Earlier we saw that he uses the middle verse (5.21) to support the view that "conversion," the third of the four stages, will happen through God's willingness to bridge the gulf between Himself and humans. Perhaps Gottwald is reading this verse too much out of context, for within the context the line could be seen as a final unpenetrating plea, which is offset by the despair of the final line.

[33]Ibid., 30.

Gottwald does not address the bleak tone of these final lines in their context, except at one point to acknowledge "the uneasy question of the conclusion."[34] It is uneasy indeed, and a strange ending for a work supposedly about the discovery of hope and faith in God in the midst of ultimate despair. These final verses are discussed in more detail in Part II, "The Coda."

Gottwald's analysis of the Book of Lamentations begins by stating the importance of seeing Lamentations within its historical setting. He recognizes the tension in the poems as due to the conflict between Deuteronomic expectations and the actual events of history. The people and their ruler were sincerely trying to live by the laws of Deuteronomy, yet they were struck by a disaster greater than they had ever imagined. If God was indeed the guiding hand behind all human events, how could He have done this? If He was not powerful enough to prevent it, how could He be God?

After correctly posing the problem, Gottwald finds an answer in Lamentations that is not fully supported by his assumptions. He claims that through the poems the Israelites move from sin to repentance to hope in God's righteousness, in accordance with the mainstream Israelite prophetic model. Through their ordeal, the Israelites come to accept a deep sense of sin, a purpose in their suffering, and a need for submission and acceptance of God's mysterious nature.

These claims are not adequately supported by the text itself. His claims are more reminiscent of Christian rather than Jewish theology. In fact, in his concluding comments he speaks of the fact that the Christian Church has appropriated the book with special reference to the sufferings of Jesus

[34]Ibid., 73.

Christ.[35] He ends by saying that Christendom "desperately" needs to hear the message of Lamentations regarding communal suffering, and that "The personalizing of national grief and suffering in Lamentations 3 was one of the definite forerunners of the Suffering Servant conception."[36]

These concluding sentiments leave little doubt that Gottwald had a specific theological message that he wished to develop through a detailed analysis of the Book of Lamentations. Unfortunately, his sentiments affected the persuasiveness of his analysis.

[35]Ibid., 113.
[36]Ibid., 116.

Bertil Albrektson -- A Shift In Religious World View[37]

Albrektson's debt to Gottwald is apparent from the opening words of the essay "The Background and Origin of the Theology of Lamentations." According to Albrektson, earlier discussions of Lamentations focused on the book's authorship and treated its theology in a general way, as part of the speculation about the author's identity as priest, prophet, member of the court or military person. He credits Gottwald with refocusing attention from the authorship of Lamentations to its theological message.[38]

Albrektson shares two central assumptions with Gottwald. First, they both agree that the key to the theology of Lamentations can be found in the tension or conflict between the people's faith and the recent events of history. They also both assume that the theology is based on the fact that the people have sinned and are being punished.

Regarding the first central assumption, the tension between faith and historical reality, the authors differ in their understanding of the faith which has been betrayed. For Gottwald, the betrayed faith is based on the prophetic vision and the Deuteronomic doctrine of reward and punishment. Albrektson claims that the nature of this faith can be seen through the religious world view of the author of Lamentations, a world view which focuses on Zion as God's inviolate dwelling place.

Albrektson's goal is to show that (1) the author of Lamentations lived in Jerusalem and was familiar with the temple traditions, and (2) the author's lament is over the fall of the temple, and the fate of the city is of central

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[37]Bertil Albrektson, *Studies in the Text and Theology of the Book of Lamentations*. Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1963.

[38]Albrektson apparently was not familiar with Yehezkel Kaufmann's discussion of Lamentations in תולדות האמונה הישראלית (*History of the Religion of Israel*). Kaufmann, prior to Gottwald, had addressed the theological message of Lamentations, to the extent of proposing an ancient popular religious tradition that is similar to Albrektson's theory about the Zion traditions. Kaufmann's discussion is analyzed in the following section of Part I.

interest to him.[39] Albrektson begins with three psalms which are in his opinion the purest expression of the category "Psalms of Zion." The three he selects, Psalms 46, 48 and 76, most clearly illustrate what he identifies as the inviolability of Zion. Each of these psalms describes attacks on Jerusalem, attacks which are rebuffed because Zion is God's home and God's presence continually protects it.

> But as the abode of God, Zion is impregnable; the Lord himself repulses the attack and destroys the hostile powers. The city of God cannot be conquered or defeated: 'God is in the midst of her; she shall not be shaken.' (Ps 46.6).[40]

Having demonstrated that this theme of Zion's inviolability is part of the Israelite world view, he next shows through textual analysis how the author of Lamentations was familiar with this view. At this point Albrektson widens the discussion to speak of more general "Zion traditions" which are found both in the psalms and in Lamentations.

Before he gives specific examples, he acknowledges that these themes or allusions are not particularly dominant in Lamentations. However, this should not pose a problem for his theory, he claims, because people often do not refer explicitly to elements of their world view, but rather leave them implicit.

> ...it is enough if we can find certain elements of these groups of ideas in the text. Even those that are referred to more in passing can be of interest in this connection because the author reveals by them what were to him self-evident presuppositions, that he did not need to mention explicitly.[41]

A simple example of an Israelite Zion tradition can be found in a description of Jerusalem. In Lamentations Jerusalem is described thus:

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[39]Albrektson, p 223.
[40]Ibid., 222.
[41]Ibid., 224.

Is this the city that men called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth? (2.15c)

The same Hebrew words for "the joy of the whole earth" is found only in one other place in the Hebrew Bible:

Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. (Ps 48.3)[42]

Other parallel texts show the themes of Jerusalem's invulnerability (Lam 4.12, Ps 48.5-8) and Jerusalem as the city of God or the great King (Lam 5.19, Ps 48.2, 3). Additionally, "Elyon" as a name for God in Psalm 46 is connected with Zion as the abode of God in Ps 48.3. The author shows he is familiar with this tradition by referring to the God of Zion as "Elyon":[43]

...before the face of "Elyon" (3.35)

also:

Is it not from the mouth of "Elyon" that evil and good come? (3.38)

Albrektson concludes this section of the essay with the observation that other related themes in the psalms, such as the election of David and his house and the kingship of Yhwh, form a group which he calls the "Jerusalemite tradition complex." Elements of these themes also occur in the Book of Lamentations and additionally help connect its author with the temple in Jerusalem and its theological milieu. Albrektson mentions these themes to strengthen his argument that the Zion traditions form part of the background of the theology of Lamentations.[44]

Next Albrektson speaks of a different theological tradition which he claims is also part of the author's world view. This tradition is found in the rewards and punishments of Deuteronomy. As Deuteronomy warned, if the

[42]He explains that the expression "in the far north" is a residue from the earlier Canaanite myths on which much of the Zion tradition is built.
[43]Ibid., 228.
[44]Ibid., 229.

people do not obey God's word, they will be punished. The punishments, also referred to as "curses," are vividly described in Deuteronomy, chapter 28. Albrektson is interested in the similarity between these curses and the disasters described in the Book of Lamentations.

For example, referring to the deportations, Lamentations says:

...her children have gone into captivity (1.5)

A similar verse is found later in the same chapter:

...my virgins and my young men have gone into captivity. (1.18)

Albrektson suggests that the author of Lamentations, in this latter verse, is referring to the following curse in Deuteronomy:

> You shall beget sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours; for they shall go into captivity. (Deut 28.41)

Although Lamentations and Deuteronomy do not always share the same wording, the imagery and sentiments are strikingly similar. After several pages of examples, he says:

> The agreements between Deut. 28 and these passages in the Book of Lamentations seem too numerous and detailed to be dismissed as pure coincidences. The problem is then to decide how the connection between the two texts should be understood.[45]

According to Albrektson, the connection between the texts is deliberate: the author of Lamentations is consciously alluding to the curses of Deuteronomy 28. By doing so, he is giving his theological interpretation of the catastrophe: it is God's punishment for the people's sins, just as Deuteronomy predicted.

This reasoning is based on the presumption that Deuteronomy is older than Lamentations. However, some scholars think that large sections of this

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[45]Ibid., 234.

chapter are "secondary expansions," added after 587, thus approximately contemporary with Lamentations and therefore not likely a starting point for an interpretation of the disaster.[46]

Albrektson feels that this view of Deuteronomy's composition should be reconsidered, since the parallels between Lamentations and Deuteronomy are found in parts usually considered original as well as in those regarded as later expansions. He proposes that all of Deuteronomy 28 is prior to the destruction of the temple, since verses from all of it are used to describe that destruction.[47]

Albrektson caps his theory of a connection between the texts with the following verse from Lamentations:

> Yhwh has done what he purposed, he has fulfilled his word; as he ordained long ago, he has demolished without pity. (Lam 2.17)

He intends this verse to "prove" a connection between Lamentations and Deuteronomy. However, this verse is the subject of much scholarly debate. For example, what is the reference to מימי קדם (*mimei qedem*, or "long ago")? The scroll which most scholars believe to be Deuteronomy had been found a mere three decades prior to the events described in Lamentations. Although the scroll may have been viewed as ancient, the people had just begun their attempts of reform under Josiah. Thus one might question whether Albrektson is correct in using "long ago" to establish a connection

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[46]Ibid., 234-5.

[47]See Dennis J. McCarthy, S. J. *Treaty and Covenant*. Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978. In this book, McCarthy argues that treaty texts such as the one found in Deuteronomy are found in all ancient Oriental civilizations, some dating from the third millennium BCE. These treaty texts include vivid curses for transgressors. Regarding the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy, McCarthy says, "These were an indispensable element in the treaties, and the form they take in Deuteronomy surely reflects ancient traditions." (172) Elements of these curses include defeat, spoliation, slavery, exile, ruin of city and cannibalism. (173-4) Thus the curses in both Deuteronomy and Lamentations could be based on a tradition that predates either work, since parallel ideas are expressed in different language.

with the Deuteronomy scroll.

Albrektson says that two separate traditions, or a "double inheritance," influenced the author of Lamentations. One was the cult traditions of Jerusalem, especially the Zion traditions; the other was found in the theology of Deuteronomy. Lamentations was written when these two separate traditions were beginning to merge. They have in common their focus on the temple in Jerusalem. Still, they are not synthesized: the author is affected by each, but they function in different ways in his attempt to interpret history.[48]

The first tradition provides the *problem*: God's temple is destroyed in spite of the belief that Jerusalem and the temple were indestructible. The second tradition provides the *solution*: the catastrophe reflects divine judgment on a sinful people as taught in Deuteronomy.

Albrektson concludes his essay with a sweeping statement:

> In this, the most difficult crisis in the history of Israel, no help or meaning can be glimpsed in conceptions of God as enthroned in his inviolable temple, conceptions which Israel has inherited from and shares with its heathen neighbors, but only in the native faith of Israel in a Lord who, unfettered by the fate of his cult-center, reigns supreme in history.[49]

He is describing a paradigm shift, a theological change of major proportions. Israel moved from a notion of God as king who reigns invincible in his temple/city to a view of God who rules over all the earth, affecting human events according to His judgments. Albrektson bases his assertion on the fact that two different views of God co-exist in the Book of Lamentations, thereby showing that its author was aware of the paradigm shift and was presenting it in the poems.

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[48]Ibid., 238.
[49]Ibid., 239.

Several objections can be raised against his theory. The first concerns the role of the temple and religious cult. Both the Zion and Deuteronomy traditions are focused on a central cultic site. Regarding the temple and Jerusalem in the Zion tradition, for example, Albrektson says:

> It is this theological tradition of the inviolability of Zion which stands in unbearable contrast to the harsh historical reality after the fall of Jerusalem. Here one really can speak of a "tension between history and faith"; between the bitter fact that the temple had been burnt and ravaged and Jerusalem lay in ruins, and the faith in the impregnability of the city of God, of which the cultic traditions of Jerusalem so eloquently bear witness.[50]

Deuteronomy is equivocal about the precise location of the central cult, but speaks frequently of "the place where the Lord your God will chose for His name to dwell." (Deut 12:11) A centralized site is mentioned often in regard to offerings for tithes, vows, first fruits and holidays (for example, Deut 12:18; 15:20; 16:2; 26:2).

If these traditions were indeed central to the author of Lamentations, one would expect the destruction of the temple and city to be at the center of the laments. However, the laments do not focus on the demise of the cult and the destruction of God's dwelling place. The priests, like the elders, die of hunger, but they are mentioned as part of a larger list of agonies (1:18-19). The priests and prophets are slain in the sanctuary (2:20), but this is stated in a larger context of general horrors: women eating the fruit of their womb; the slaughter of young and old; virgins and young men that God killed in the day of His anger (2:20-21). The focus of much of Lamentations is on the personal, communal, physical and psychic suffering which resulted from the catastrophe, not on the religious implications of the priests' death or the

[50]Ibid., 223.

cultic site's destruction.

There is another weakness in Albrektson's attempt to link Lamentations with Deuteronomy. The scroll found in Josiah's time contained more than a list of blessings and curses. It was primarily a code of behavior among humans, and between humans and God. It speaks of clean and unclean foods, treatment of needy people, marriage laws, responsibility toward other people's property, etc. It contained strong injunctions against idolatry. The blessings and curses of chapter 28 are given in the context of following these laws. Albrektson fails to account for the fact that no specific sin, including idolatry, is mentioned in Lamentations as the "cause" of the disaster which has befallen the people (with the possible exception of "shedding the blood of the righteous" 4:13).

The same objection could be raised against Gottwald. He sees Lamentations as being within the prophetic tradition. Within this tradition, the prophets were quite specific in their indictments (for example, Amos 2:6-8, Is 1:21-23, Jer 5:26-31). If Lamentations were part of the evolution of this tradition, one would expect at least some mention of the prophetic warnings. However, Lamentations does not refer to any of the earlier prophetic statements of sin. In fact, the "prophets" spoken of in the laments seem to be associated with the cult, the very ones that the "outsider" Hebrew prophets warned against (Micah 3:11: "[Jerusalem's] rulers judge for gifts, Her priests give rulings for a fee, And her prophets divine for pay, Yet they rely upon the Lord, saying: 'The Lord is in our midst; No calamity shall overtake us.'")

Thus both Gottwald's and Albrektson's arguments are undermined by the lack of *specific* sins in Lamentations which might have caused the devastation, given that each scholar relies on traditions that focus on human activities which can bring about God's blessing, or God's punishment.

A final critique of Albrektson's approach is that it focuses rather narrowly on parallels between Lamentations and other biblical texts. This focus is of course understandable, since the essay appears in a book which is dedicated to an extremely close reading of the text. The Zion traditions may be part of the author's background, but as Albrektson himself stated, they are revealed in passing rather than being central to the work. In addition, links with the Book of Deuteronomy are tenuous at best. Albrektson's approach yields interesting insights, but ultimately does not address issues that are revealed by looking at themes within the context of Lamentations itself.

Yehezkel Kaufmann -- A Religion of the People[51]

Yehezkel Kaufmann's essay on the Book of Lamentations reflects many of the concerns of traditional scholarship: historical setting, authorship, compositional elements, and the identity of the speaker in chapter 3. These are the traditional issues Albrektson had in mind when he praised Gottwald for refocusing attention on Lamentations' theological message. Albrektson was apparently not aware of Kaufmann's essay, which predates Gottwald's book by a decade, for in this essay Kaufmann also goes beyond the traditional concerns, writing explicitly and at some length about the theology of Lamentations.

Kaufmann makes two major points regarding the theology: it is a theology of faith and hope; and the theology reflects the popular religious beliefs of the people, rather than the beliefs of the "prophets of the destruction" (i.e., the "outsider" prophets such as Jeremiah).

His first point about faith and hope is made within the context of Lamentations' composition. He believes that the five poems were written by a single author. He brings several literary arguments to support his claim, followed by a discussion of the poems' "linguistic unity." He claims that a central aspect of this unity is found in the relationship between chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2 is a poem describing God's wrath. There is no doubt that God is the cause of the destruction and suffering:

> What appears here is not just the idea that God has done all this, but that He appears as the God of wrath and destruction: God swallowed up and

[51]Yehezkel Kaufmann, תולדות האמונה הישראלית Volume 3,. Tel Aviv: Bialik Institute, 1966, p 584-599. The translation from Kaufmann's article is my own. Reference was also made to a draft of an unpublished translation by Scott A. Swanson, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, 1988.

did not have pity, he destroyed, he cut down in the heat of his anger... [52]

Chapter 2 ends on this note, which Kaufmann claims is inconsistent with the other chapters, each of which ends with a prayer for recompense and vengeance. Thus, he says chapter 3 completes chapter 2 from an ideological perspective: God punishes in His wrath, as chapter 2 vividly describes, but His lovingkindness and mercy still endure, as seen in chapter 3.

Kaufmann, like Gottwald and Albrektson, does not question that the people have sinned and that their suffering is deserved punishment. He also does not question that Lamentations offers a message of hope:

> God punishes in anger and wrath. But His lovingkindnesses have not come to an end, and his mercies have not stopped. There is hope for man. The punishment is a punishment for sin, and repentance is the entrance to the gate of mercy and forgiveness.[53]

Kaufmann links the poet's own ideology with the explicit message of the poems of Lamentations: the poet believed in the triumph of faith and hope, which is why he placed chapter 3 immediately after the despairing chapter 2:

> There is no doubt that this is the ideology of the poet of these laments. The destruction is in anger and wrath, but it is recompense for sin, and therefore there is hope for return from captivity. This idea is actually the fundamental theme in all of these poems; the hope for God's loving-kindness is the internal reason for their creation....We should see chapter 3 as the conclusion and completion of chapter 2: chapter 2 is the aspect of wrath, chapter 3 connects the aspect of wrath to mercy and hope.[54]

Verses 22-50 in chapter 3, in his view, contain the motifs of grace, mercy and forgiveness. In specific verses in other chapters, such as 1.18 and 4.22, the poet speaks of faith and repentance, "however only in chapter 3 does he fully

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[52]Ibid., 588.
[53]Ibid., 589-90.
[54]Ibid., 590.

express his faith."[55] However, having asserted this, Kaufmann does not demonstrate how verses 3:20-55 convey the message of hope and faith. Although a case can be made for some verses suggesting hope, others can be read as the wishful thinking of a person in the depths of despair (e.g., 3.20-24). Some seem to indicate God's unwillingness to hear prayer (3.44). Moreover, the concluding lines of this block may suggest not hope, but an attempt on the speaker's part to force God's hand:

> "My eyes will stream without stopping, without relief
> Until the Lord looks out from above to see (3.49-50)[56]

Thus, although Kaufmann asserts the message of hope and faith in chapter 3, he fails to illustrate it convincingly through the text itself. In fact, the very text he cites in support of his theory could also be read as a refutation of it.

As part of his theory of faith and hope, Kaufmann calls chapter 3 the "ideological nucleus" of the poems. However, he does not harmonize this claim with his description of the five poems' structure. According to Kaufmann, certain motifs expand and become more intense from one poem to the next. Some motifs deal with various types of suffering: torments of the mothers; fate of the children; description of the famine, etc. Other motifs which follow this pattern are the sin of Jerusalem and the fate of her king.

Thus Kaufmann's analysis contains both a literary and emotional contradiction which he does not address. He states that the pinnacle of faith and hope is found in the middle of the work, yet he also asserts that the experience of suffering continues to build and intensify through the end.

Other commentators have also claimed that chapter 3 is the book's pinnacle of hope. As the discussion of Gottwald's book pointed out, this

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[55]Ibid.
[56]Translation from Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, p 111-12.

claim seems to run counter to Jewish literary tradition, such as found in the prophets and psalms, where words of hope are placed at the end of an otherwise bleak message. When words of consolation are followed by words of despair, the reader/listener is left with a qualified hope, at best. In the case of Lamentations, Kaufmann emphasizes the increase of suffering and misery which builds through the five poems:

> The canvas of the destruction unfolds before us in stages, in a series of descriptions. Poem complements poem, and the complete picture is only given in all of them together.[57]

If this is the case, and his supporting quotes suggest that it is, then the overall tone of the Book of Lamentations is one of increasing devastation, suffering and despair. Words of comfort sounded in the middle, if indeed that is what they are, would be washed away by the book's conclusion. If the five poems are as carefully crafted by a single author as Kaufmann maintains, one would suspect that this author's intention was not a message of faith and hope.

Kaufmann's second theory about the theology of Lamentations begins with a strong assertion that Jeremiah was not the author of the poems. Through his support of that assertion, he discusses other issues of the poems' theology.

Kaufmann begins with some basic assumptions shared by Albrektson two decades later. Both speak of the poet's world view as a way to understand the theology of Lamentations. Both find references in Lamentations to an ancient religious tradition that speaks of the centrality of Zion and of God dwelling in the sanctuary. And both find parallels between the theology of Lamentations and that of Deuteronomy.

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[57]Kaufmann, 586-7.

Similarities must not be drawn too finely, however, because the two scholars are making different points. Albrektson is arguing for a paradigm shift in Israel's religion during the time of the fall of Jerusalem. Kaufmann, on the other hand, claims that Lamentations reflects ancient beliefs that were still held by the religious and political leaders of the author's day. These beliefs were in contrast to those of the "prophets of the destruction," that is, prophets such as Jeremiah who were outside the power structure.

Kaufmann offers several illustrations for this theory. First, the poet does not refer at all to the prophets of the destruction or their chastisements. Rather, in spite of specific complaints (2.14, 4.13) "he still feels respect for the priesthood and prophecy [i.e., the court prophets]"[58]

The poet is a religious man and he believes that God's wrath is just. But neither he nor the people know the nature of their sin. This is in contrast to Jeremiah and Ezekiel who were articulate in describing the people's sins, especially social-moral transgressions and idolatry. None of these is mentioned in Lamentations. "[the poet] is the farthest possible from Jeremiah and Ezekiel's evaluation, that the destruction was easily understood."[59]

In searching for a reason for God's wrath, the poet speaks of the shedding of the blood of the righteous (4.13). Kaufmann interprets this as a reference to a sin of the ancient religion in which "blood defiles the earth and brings tribulation upon society."[60] According to Kaufmann, the sin of the fathers mentioned in 5.7 refers to idolatry practiced during the reign of Manasseh, and was the ultimate reason for the punishment.[61]

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[58]Ibid., 595.
[59]Ibid., 596.
[60]Ibid.
[61]Ibid.

Kaufmann is accurate in observing that the people's sin is not connected with known prophetic rebukes. Since he believes that the devastation was truly done in retribution, he feels it is necessary to search out and discover the sins. But the two verses he uses to do this (4.13 and 5.7) seem frail reeds on which to hang such weighty suppositions. Unfortunately for his theory, the poems offer no other clues.

Like Albrektson, Kaufmann connects the theology of Deuteronomy with the Book of Lamentations. "The allusion to the prophecy of the destruction as 'from days of old' (2.17) is no doubt an allusion to the warning in Deuteronomy 28." (597) The poet is "one of the faithful of the reform of Josiah,"[62] which explains the connection between Deuteronomy and Lamentations as shown by the similarities of the curses and a few cultic references. However, as discussed in the preceding section, this does not necessarily imply a direct connection.

The fact that the poet had the same political beliefs as those fighting in Jerusalem is a further indication that the poet represents the popular religion and not that of the "outsider" prophets. "This is Jerusalem of Zedekiah and his officials and the citizens' army, which were sullied by Jeremiah and Ezekiel as rebels against God."[63]

Jeremiah had railed against an allegiance with Egypt against Babylonia. However, in Lamentations the poet does not ultimately find fault in trusting in allies, even though Jerusalem has been greatly disappointed by them. "The allies are the ones who sinned in their betrayal and their deception, and about that Jerusalem complains, but Jerusalem did not sin in her trusting."[64]

The prophets of the destruction also scorned Israel's reliance on military

[62]Ibid., 597.
[63]Ibid.
[64]Ibid., 597-8.

strength. The poet of Lamentations, on the other hand, and the people of Jerusalem trusted in military might, as stated in verse 4.12:

> The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or adversary could enter the gates of Jerusalem.

Unlike Albrektson, who sees the poet's world view based on a total trust in the God's protection of His city, Kaufmann thinks the poet and the people have a more practical world view: "[the poet's] trust is that of the people: trusting completely in God, and also in fortresses and heroes."[65]

Kaufmann's final argument in support of his depiction of the poet's world view concerns the poet's deep sadness over the fate of the nobles and the government officials. He laments their fall from high estate and, unlike the "outsider" prophets, he does not bring reproof against the king or the officials.

Kaufmann's theory about the theology of Lamentations has persuasive elements. The "outsider" prophets' message is conspicuously absent. The poet does seem to speak for the people in the midst of their suffering, and searches for a cause which they do not fully understand.

Kaufmann was writing during a time when scholars wanted to make specific identification of people and events in biblical texts, often based on "history" presented in other biblical texts. His essay suffers from such a perspective. In spite of remarks about allegorical meanings in the first two chapters, Kaufmann's discussion stays rooted in his notion of the historic events. He assigns a specific identity to the poet: he is "among the supporters of Zedekiah." Kaufmann bases his assumption on the verse "The one of whom we said, 'In his shadow we will live among the nations.'" (4.20)[66]

Other parts of Kaufmann's theory evolve from this assumption. For

[65]Ibid., 598.
[66]Ibid., 586.

example, as a supporter of Zedekiah the poet must find no sin in trusting allies. He must also believe in the efficacy of military might and be devastated when it fails. The poet must have a positive attitude toward king, priests and prophets and sympathize with their suffering. In contrast, Gottwald was not as tied to a historical perspective and could see the descriptions of suffering by the privileged classes as being just another example of ironic reversal, rather than special sympathy on the part of the poet.

These caveats are minor, however. The weakness in Kaufmann's argument, as in most treatments of Lamentations, is in assuming that the poet considers the people to have sinned in a way that is commensurate with their punishment. This assumption is tied to another that is also questionable: that ultimately the poems present a hopeful view of God's mercy.

Alan Mintz – The View From the Canon[67]

Mintz's approach to the Book of Lamentations differs from the previous scholars' in several significant ways. First, his primary interest is not in Lamentations per se, but in the general category of responses to catastrophe in Hebrew literature. Lamentations, being the first instance of such a response, demands consideration as part of this larger continuum. Second, his orientation is toward the literary aspects of the work. Other scholars discuss this aspect, of course, but Mintz places his entire understanding of the work within a literary framework. For him, the theology itself is expressed through the rhetorical development of the poems.

Mintz draws a distinction between lamentation and consolation. A text is a lamentation when it concerns the human struggle to speak of suffering in the face of God's silence. Whatever relief may emerge from such a struggle comes from the human being and the activity itself, but not from an external source. Consolation, on the other hand, comes from without: "God's word breaks through to man, ending the silence and confirming the persistence of the divine commitment."[68]

An event is a catastrophe not because of its physical severity, but because of its shattering effect on the assumed worldview or paradigm. Mintz is in accord with the previous scholars in seeing the destruction of the old paradigm as the true devastation described in Lamentations.

However, Mintz differs in that he chooses to analyze Lamentations' message within a larger perspective. Israel's religious survival depended on a belief in the covenantal relationship between Israel and God. If a catastrophe seemed to destroy or invalidate that relationship, a new paradigm needed to

[67]Alan Mintz, *Hurban*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
[68]Ibid., 41.

be developed to reestablish the relationship. This new paradigm of meaning was found in God's words as revealed in the various books of the Bible. The books were not to be viewed in isolation but in conjunction with one another. When viewed in this context, Lamentations represents only the first stage of rebuilding the relationship between Israel and God. The next stage, consolation or reconciliation with God, is seen in Second Isaiah (redemption within history) and Daniel (redemption at the end of time).

Mintz acknowledges that any hopeful message found in Lamentations must be found within this larger context, since taken by itself the book is rather bleak:

> Although as an isolated text Lamentations is problematic, its belonging to a larger canonical system of texts--the Hebrew Bible--provides a firm ground for resistance to despair. The unrelieved severity of Lamentations' outlook can be balanced and counteracted by the Rabbis through mobilizing other verses of Scripture--of equally revealed authority--which assure Israel that destruction will ineluctably lead to redemption.[69]

However, redemption is at the end of a long process. First comes the painful attempts to describe and understand the catastrophe, and the equally difficult journey toward reconciliation with God. Only later, in other books when God's voice is again heard, will consolation enter with visions of future redemption. The Book of Lamentations is concerned only with the first step.

Although Mintz does not often speak about the theology of Lamentations, the role played by the poets is clearly a theological one.[70] The poets have three tasks: to find adequate language for the horror; to recover God as an "addressable other"; and to shift the perception of the enemy from God

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[69]Ibid., 5.
[70]Ibid., 271, note 2. Mintz believes that the chapters of Lamentations were written by different authors, with the overall design of the book "the result of an informed redactional intention."

Himself to other humans. These tasks are all fulfilled through rhetorical devices:

> Who speaks to whom about whom as seen from whose point of view? It is in the play of these questions, which defines the rhetorical situation of the text, that the deepest theological business of Lamentations gets transacted.[71]

The first task, finding adequate language for the horror, is accomplished through the use of personification. The first personification is the female figure Zion for the nation as a whole, who speaks in highly metaphorically language to convey the pain and horror of the event.

The next personification is the male speaker of chapter 3, "whose preference for theologizing rather than weeping is demonstrated throughout."[72] The question addressed to Zion, "Who can heal you?" (2:13) is not a rhetorical one but one which the poet of chapter 3 takes as his challenge. Mintz maintains that this chapter is the "theological nub" of Lamentations where questions of meaning and relationship are addressed that elsewhere are avoided.[73]

In chapter 3, the poet attempts to understand what has happened and begin the process of healing. The chapter is divided into three sections, "panels of a great triptych."[74] The first section describes the speaker's unbearable torture by an unnamed enemy, who eventually is identified as God. In this section, the speaker despairs of being able to address God or to be heard by Him. It is a section expressing deep aloneness.:

I thought my strength and my hope / Had perished before the Lord (3:18)

In the second section, the speaker makes a dramatic turnabout,

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[71]Ibid., 26.
[72]Ibid., 32.
[73]Ibid., 33.
[74]Ibid.

recognizing the possibility of hope and the justice of God's actions:

> The preceding lines describe a man for whom neither the past nor the future can be made to divulge the least sign of hope. Yet against the background of this degree-zero of despair, the sufferer recovers himself suddenly. "But this do I call to mind, / Therefore I hope," (3:21) he begins and proceeds with a series of exploratory meditations that end in justifying God's ways.[75]

This dramatic shift is apparently unmotivated and is accomplished purely through an effort of will:

> The suddenness of this move reveals it to be an act of will that is indeed unprepared for, in the sense that it is nourished by nothing but its own desire....The propositions he adduces about God's nature unfold a process that is cognitive in essence; it is based not on what is experienced to be true...but on what is known to be true and can be reasoned to be true.[76]

Mintz explains that the speaker's shift of perspective comes about through his new awareness of and conviction of sin. Mintz doesn't address the question of whether indeed there *was* prior sin which led to the current destruction. He speaks only of the poet's attempt, at last, to see some reason for the disaster. However, Mintz acknowledges that it has taken the speaker a surprisingly long time to come to this point. One would expect someone living within the paradigm of the covenant to consider from the beginning a link between sin and punishment. The fact that this link was made only now after considerable time and with difficulty "is one of the great problems of Lamentations."[77]

For a moment it would seem that Mintz recognizes a problem in the conventional understandings of Lamentations' theology, especially regarding the connection of sin and punishment. However, rather than pursuing this

[75]Ibid., 35.
[76]Ibid.
[77]Ibid., 36.

thought, he explains it away. The speaker *must* see a connection, or the theological assumptions crumble:

> The motives for making the connection are clear enough. Without sin the event has no meaning. God remains gladiator and beast, His persecution an eternal rejection.[78]

In order to avoid the devastating alternative, a meaning must be found; Lamentations must be read within the larger scriptural dynamic of sin, punishment and redemption. The remainder of chapter 3 shows Israel's passage back from this brink of theological nihilism:

Let us search and examine our ways / And return to the Lord (3:40)

According to Mintz, this introduction to the third section shows a turning back to God as well as a significant shift from a solitary individual to the communal "we." Mintz asserts that the awareness of sin and the commitment to turn to God leads to a sense of community, apparently a significant breakthrough.[79] He feels that the true drama in chapter 3 is not the "rather conventional" theology, but the shift from alienation in the first section to the recovery of faith and the reconnection with community in the third.[80]

The most important reconnection, however, is between the community and God. Although the speaker of chapter 3 continues in his own voice, by passing through stages of awareness, he now speaks for the entire community. Equally significant is the content of his speech. He now sees the possibility of a renewed relationship with God; he recovers God as "an addressable other."[81]

Mintz supports his theory with an interesting example. In the first section

[78]Ibid.
[79]Ibid., 37.
[80]Ibid., 33.
[81]Ibid., 37.

of chapter 3 the poet speaks of God in the third person: "And when I cry and plead, *He* shuts out my prayer." (3:8) In the third section, although the accusation is the same, its direction reflects the speaker's new ability to address God directly: "*You* have screened *Yourself* off with a cloud, that no prayer may pass through." (3:44)

Through this renewal of relationship with God, the speaker also shifts his view of the enemy. Whereas before it seemed to be God Himself, now God is potentially Israel's ally once more against a merely human enemy. Mintz sees support for this theory in the concluding lines of chapter 3, where the speaker asks for vengeance on Israel's enemies.

> God is no longer conceived as Israel's prosecutor but--potentially--as Israel's protector against an outsider to that privileged relationship....The introduction of the enemy means also the introduction of history, and there is relief in the regrounding of the relationship between Israel and God within the terms of history.[82]

Mintz mentions repeatedly that God is silent in the Book of Lamentations. Yet because of the larger context in which he places Lamentations, he proposes a hopeful theology. In the face of total and inexplicable devastation, Israel ultimately turns to God in hope and faith of His eventual restoration of their special relationship. Although He does not yet answer, we can begin once again to address Him. Although we have been vanquished by the enemy, that enemy is human rather than divine.

There is vindication of this hope and faith, Mintz asserts, although we will not find it in the Book of Lamentations, but in Scripture as a whole:

> In the absence of some sign from the Other, silence turns into a deafening conviction of rejection....Prophecy offers consolation not just in the promise of divine deliverance but in the very fact that through the

[82]Ibid., 40.

prophet again God speaks.[83]

This quote reflects the tension that exists throughout Mintz's discussion of Lamentations. He more openly than other scholars acknowledges the bleak aspect of the poems. God is silent: perhaps He is the enemy, perhaps He is withdrawn forever. Whatever sins the people may have committed do not seem commensurate with the disaster. In fact, the people cannot even enumerate the sins. The only basis for hope is in the willed recollection of God's past goodness, but the poems give no indication that there might be goodness in the future.

Although aware of these elements in Lamentations, Mintz chooses to read in it a message of hope that can only be seen within the larger context of later prophetic books. His analysis is insightful and appealing. However, a reading which draws connections among works throughout Israel's history can lead to conclusions quite different from those intended by individual biblical authors.

Mintz and the other authors discussed above have read the text through various lenses, seeing Lamentations as part of a larger canonical whole, and with the hindsight of later historical and theological developments. We now turn directly to the Book of Lamentation, first to view several key themes through these various lenses, then to see how these themes are developed within the text itself.

[83]Ibid., 41.

The Covenantal Context

A lament over the fall of the Sumerian city-state Ur searches for the reason for the disaster. The only explanation it can offer is: the gods have willed it. For a time Ur was favored and powerful; now it is not. This change of fortune was not because of sin or corruption among the people, but simply because of divine desire, inscrutable to human beings.

Mintz introduces his discussion of "The Rhetoric of Lamentations" with a discussion of this poem of lament written fifteen hundred years before the destruction of Jerusalem. Mintz claims that the divine caprice in this poem is contrary to Western sentiment, which is troubled by the notion of unmerited suffering. The covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures has shaped our culture's deepest beliefs about the nature and cause of suffering. Although the covenant has had a powerful influence on Western religious thought, it specifically explains Israelite prosperity and suffering through its relationship with God. The covenant states that if Israel will follow specific moral, ethical and religious laws, it will be God's special people. When the people of Israel are faithful, He will reward them; when they disobey, He will punish them.[1]

Through the centuries the traditional theological task has been to find evidence of the covenant and divine adherence to it. We understand and evaluate our acts by observing God's behavior toward us. The Book of Lamentations is a central part of this theological endeavor to see the covenant reflected in human history.

In Lamentations we observe God's behavior toward Israel: He has brought devastation to His people. Lamentations does not question God's role in these events; all that happens in human history is according to His will. According to the covenant, God's protection comes with Israel's faithfulness,

[1]Mintz, *Hurban*, 17-19.

God's punishment comes with her sin, in proportion to the sin. And now God has brought about physical ruin and unimaginable human suffering. Thus Israel must have sinned grievously to merit the punishment described in Lamentations.

While the relationship between sin and punishment is not questioned in Lamentations, the precise reason for the catastrophe is not clear. The poems are rarely explicit about the catastrophe's cause. Yet it is human nature to assume that there is a cause. We want to find a reason; we want to know that the covenant still holds. This desire leads most readers to assume that the Book of Lamentations, as part of the canon, is indeed an assertion of the covenantal relationship and that the suffering and destruction were a direct retribution for sin.

The assumption that the people's sin merited this degree of devastation has determined Lamentations' interpretation for the past two thousand years. For example, the rabbis in the midrashic exegesis Lamentations Rabbati conclude fourteen of the thirty-six introductory proems with "since they sinned, they were exiled."[2] Because specific sins are not named in Lamentations, the rabbis through midrash filled in this omission with their own list:

> Israel did not go into exile until they had repudiated the divine unity, the decalogue, circumcision...and the Pentateuch. Whence do we derive this? From the letters constituting the word "ekhah."[3]

Other causes are also given, many reflecting behavior such as Torah study and ethical behavior which the rabbis wanted to impress on their own listeners. By their time, of course, a second similar destruction had occurred and contemporary reasons needed to be found for this second catastrophe as

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[2]Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash." *Prooftexts* 2(1982): 26.
[3]Ibid.

well.

The traditional view of Lamentations' authorship, which was generally accepted until the nineteenth century, was that Jeremiah wrote the poems. This view reflected the understanding of Lamentations as part of the covenantal system of reward and punishment. Jeremiah was the spokesman for God during the turbulent years leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah warned the people that their behavior would bring about God's wrath. Was not the Book of Lamentations proof of the accuracy of his prophecy?

Modern scholarship for the most part has challenged this view of Lamentations' authorship. Major themes in Lamentations, such as approval of alliances with other countries, are contradictory to Jeremiah's prophetic message. Yet contemporary scholars who discuss the Book of Lamentations continue to bring to the discussion the prophetic concept that God punishes His people when they transgress His laws. Thus a punishment of the magnitude of Lamentations must have been preceded by sins of equal magnitude.

Cohen, for example, when comparing Lamentations with its rabbinic commentary, brings the same set of assumptions as the rabbis: "Lamentations clearly interprets the catastrophe of 587 B.C.E. as God's punishment of Israel for her sins."[4] In support of this statement, he quotes three verses (1:18, 3:42 and 5:16). These are among the handful of verses throughout the five poems of Lamentations which refer to sin or transgression, which will be examined in detail presently.

Gottwald, who was an early contributor to the contemporary discussion of Lamentations' theology, views Lamentations within the Israelite prophetic

[4]Ibid.

context of chastisement, repentance, conversion and hope, as discussed in Part I of this paper. The first stage, chastisement, is the inexorable consequence of sin. Thus his discussion of Lamentations' theology begins with the unquestioned assumption that Israel's suffering was a direct result of her sins.

> What has brought on the doom? The confession of sin, not once or twice but repeatedly, not perfunctorily or incidentally but earnestly and fundamentally, suggests the reason for the calamity.[5]

Following this assertion, he mentions every reference to sin in the five poems, a total of thirteen verses which he is able to summarize in a single paragraph.

Albrektson, like Gottwald, assumes that the people have sinned. He rejects the idea that the tension in Lamentations is due to undeserved suffering by an innocent people:

> We meet instead time after time the opposite view: because both the people as a whole, and particular groups within it, sinned grievously, they have been struck by God's judgement...[6]

Kaufmann does not agree with Gottwald or Albrektson's view of the religious world view of the poet. Kaufmann believes the poet adheres to the "popular religion" of the people, as opposed to the prophetic or Deuteronomic traditions. Nevertheless, Kaufmann also does not question the reason for the destruction.

> Although he did not believe it before, that God would cast the glory of Israel down from heaven to earth, it is clear to [the poet] now, after the destruction has come, that this is the wrath of the just God upon the sin of the people. These laments are the acknowledgement of justice.[7]

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[5]Gottwald, *Studies*, 67.
[6]Albrektson, *Studies*, 218.
[7]Kaufman, 595.

Although Hillers does not focus on the theology of Lamentations, he too assumes the traditional view that the disaster is a punishment for the people's sins. Commenting on verse 1:18, a verse cited by every scholar named above, Hillers writes:

> In v 17 it is established that [Yahweh] is the author of the calamity, and in v 18 comes a confession that he is justified in what he has done. "The Lord is in the right" is an expression ultimately derived from legal language; it is the formula for pronouncing a verdict. Unexpressed here, but implied, is the other half of the formula, "and I am in the wrong."[8]

Of all the scholars surveyed here, only Mintz questions the underlying assumption which has traditionally been brought to a reading of Lamentations. He does not see Lamentations as a self-contained progression which begins with sin and culminates with renewed hope in God's forgiveness and renewed favor. Rather, taken by itself, Lamentations is a picture of despair with little comfort.

> Nowhere in Lamentations is there the least trace of a divine response....In the absence of some sign from the Other, silence turns into a deafening conviction of rejection.[9]

The consolation comes later, in the words of prophets such as Second Isaiah. Thus for Lamentations to yield its traditional message of ultimate hope, it must be read within the larger context of the canon.

Mintz has a fresh view of Lamentations' message, a view which is also expressed in his discussion of sin in Lamentations. Like other commentators, he believes that awareness of sin plays a central role in Lamentations. However, he questions the fundamental underlying assumption that the sin was equal to the punishment.

Mintz says that a major breakthrough occurs in chapter 3 when the

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[8]Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, 90.
[9]Mintz, *Hurban*, 41.

speaker comes to see that his sin must have been the cause of the disaster. Although acknowledging that sin plays a role, Mintz also recognizes that it has taken the speaker a long time to come to this realization. Mintz accurately points out that this connection should have been immediate and obvious. The fact that the connection is neither immediate nor obvious "reveals the disproportion between the overwhelming experience of the Destruction and the scant possibility of any immediate sense of deservingness."[10]

Although Mintz is committed to an interpretation of Lamentations that fits within established views of the canon and covenant, he comes closest to admitting that it is difficult to find support within the text of Lamentations for the traditional view that the severity of the sin determines the harshness of God's punishment. When other commentators acknowledge the scarcity of references to sin, especially to the nature of the sins, they tend to dismiss the issue much as Gottwald did: "As to the specific sins which constitute the great iniquity of Judah, we are surprised that more detail is not given."[11]

Gottwald is not bothered by the lack of detail because he is convinced of the repeated and earnest confession of sin. The question to which we now turn is: just how repeated are these confessions, and how earnest?

Detailing the Sin

The Book of Lamentations is composed of five chapters for a total of 154 verses. Different speaking voices describe the state of ruin and suffering which Jerusalem and her citizens are experiencing. The identity of the speakers is often debated,[12] but the overall effect is agreed upon: different

[10]Ibid., 36.
[11]Gottwald, *Studies*, 68.
[12]See, for example, William Lanahan, "The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations."

speaking voices personalize the tragedy, giving the listener or reader a more immediate sense of the events. The different speaking voices emphasize different aspects of the situation, but each describes the horrors in detail. Thus any attempt to itemize accounts of destruction or starvation or humiliation, for example, would result in lists encompassing large sections of the poems.

In contrast, an itemized list of references to the people's sin is easily made:[13]

> Her enemies are now the masters, her foes are at ease
> **Because the Lord has afflicted her for her many transgressions;**
> Her infants have gone into captivity before the enemy. (1:5)
>
> **Jerusalem has greatly sinned,** therefore she is become a mockery,
> All who admired her despise her, for they have seen her disgraced;
> And she can only sigh and shrink back. (1:8)
>
> **The yoke of my offenses** is bound fast, lashed tight by His hand;
> Imposed upon my neck, it saps my strength;
> The Lord has delivered me into the hands of those I cannot withstand. (1:14)
>
> **The Lord is in the right, for I have disobeyed Him,**
> Hear, all you peoples, and behold my agony:
> My maidens and my youths have gone into captivity! (1:18)
>
> See, O Lord, the distress I am in! My heart is in anguish,
> I know how wrong I was wrong **to disobey.**
> Outside the sword deals death; indoors, the plague. (1:20)
>
> Let all their wrongdoing come before You, and deal with them

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Journal of Biblical Literature 93(1974): 41-49. Lanahan identifies five voices: the reporter and the personified city of Jerusalem of chapters 1 and 2, a soldier in chapter 3, a bourgeois citizen in chapter 4 and a chorus of the people of Jerusalem in the concluding chapter.

[13]Translations in Part II of this paper are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures.* Philadelphia: JPS, 1988, unless otherwise noted.

As You have dealt with me for all my transgressions.
For my sighs are many, and my heart is sick. (1:22)

Your seers prophesied to you delusion and folly.
They did not expose your iniquity so as to restore your fortunes,
But prophesied to you oracles of delusion and deception. (2:14)

Of what shall a living man complain? Each one of his own sins!
Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord;
Let us lift up our hearts with our hands to God in heaven:
We have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not forgiven (3:39-42)

The guilt of my poor people exceeded the iniquity of Sodom,
Which was overthrown in a moment, without a hand striking it. (4:6)

It was for the sins of her prophets, the iniquities of her priests,
Who had shed in her midst the blood of the just. (4:13)

Your iniquity, Fair Zion, is expiated; He will exile you no longer.
Your iniquity, Fair Edom, He will note; He will uncover your sins. (4:22)

Our fathers sinned and are no more; and we must bear their guilt. (5:7)

The crown has fallen from our head; **Woe to us that we have sinned!** (5:16)[14]

Four terms are used in describing the guilt of the people and the city: transgression, sin, rebellion and iniquity. The JPS translation is not consistent in its English usage; in Hebrew these terms are: פשע in 1:5, 1:14, 1:22 and 3:42; חטא in 1:8, 3:39, 4:6, 4:13, 5:7 and 5:16; מרי in 1:18, 1:20 and 3:42; and עון in 2:14, 4:6, 4:13, and 4:22. The last term, עון, also can mean the *punishment* for iniquity, which is a possible reading for 4:6 and 4:22.

This list of all references to sin in the Book of Lamentations leads to several observations. First, the number of these references is relatively small.

[14]To this list Gottwald adds verses 1:9a and 2:4a,d which he claims are also statements of guilt and responsibility, the first as a description of the city, the second addressed directly to her. However, these verses are descriptive of the current situation more than direct statements of guilt by the city or her citizens.

Although Gottwald characterizes them as "repeated," they do not seem so in relation to the total length of the five poems of Lamentations.

Moreover, pointing out their distribution among the different chapters highlights their infrequency. That is, the references to sin are scant compared to the descriptions of pain, suffering and betrayal which compose the majority of verses in each of the poems. Using Lanahan's description of the five *personae* as an example, we see the following distribution of references to sin: Reporter has three (chapter 1 and 2), Jerusalem has four (chapter 1), the soldier has one or two, (depending on how 3:39-42 is read, chapter 3), the bourgeois has two (chapter 4), and the chorus of people have two (chapter 5).

Not only is the reference to sin small in contrast to the reference to suffering, the type of reference is quite different as well. As the list makes clear, the *nature* of the sin, transgression, rebellion and iniquity is rarely mentioned. The typical pattern is: because of our sin, we have been punished in this way and that (1:5, 1:8, 1:18, 1:20, 1:22, 3:32, 4:13). The "punishment" is described in specific detail, as seen from these examples from the verses with a mention of sin: "her infants have gone into captivity," "she is become a mockery," "outside the sword deals death; indoors, the plague."

These descriptions of suffering are mild compared to others that fill the poems. Albrektson has pointed out the many comparisons with the dreadful list of "curses" found in Deuteronomy 28. This may be a deliberate connection on the part of the author of Lamentations, or it may be that Lamentations and Deuteronomy both draw on an older tradition. In either case, the list of horrors is a detailed catalogue: people of all ages and status starve in the streets; the enemy mocks and humiliates the city; youth have been exiled; the sanctuary has been defiled; jackals prowl Mount Zion.

The absence of specific sins is in stark contrast to these vivid details. This contrast is particularly sharp if Albrektson is correct in drawing a connection between Lamentations and Deuteronomy. If the punishment reflects the curses listed there, one would expect at least a *mention* of the sins that led to this punishment. These sins would be the specific violations of the laws given in Deuteronomy as Israel's obligation within the terms of the covenant. However, no such specific violation is mentioned.

Both Gottwald and Albrektson discuss the possible influence of Deuteronomy on Lamentations, but neither addresses this particular problem directly. Gottwald considers the tension in Lamentations to be based on the contradiction between what Deuteronomy promised and what history delivered. The Israelites had recently received and accepted Deuteronomy. Yet in spite of their earnest attempts at reform and their faith in the terms of the covenant, King Josiah was killed and soon after Jerusalem was destroyed and the people exiled. How is it that the nation suffers worse than ever before, just after it has tried to follow God's ways? It is for this reason, Gottwald says, that the Book of Lamentations "stands at the point in Israel's life where the tension between history and faith is, for the first time, most sharply posed."[15]

However, Gottwald does not question the basic paradigm of the covenant. His reading of the text shows how a traditional theological viewpoint will influence the understanding of a text. Implicit in Gottwald's analysis is the assumption that since the destruction occurred, it must have occurred for a reason; the Book of Lamentations must be a witness to that reason and its consequences:

All five of the poems which comprise the Book of Lamentations witness

[15]Gottwald, *Studies*, 51.

> to the prophetic concept of sin and thus form one link in the long chain of evidence bearing out the importance of Lamentations as a justification and preservation of the teaching of the prophets.[16]

Fundamental to the prophets' message is that sin leads to retributive punishment. It seems clear to Gottwald that the events described by Lamentations are this type of punishment; therefore, the people deserved it on account of their sins. To use his own phrase from a slightly different context, he "reasons from the punishment to the sin."[17]

Gottwald initially describes Lamentations' tension as between the people's apparent adherence to the terms of the covenant and the inexplicable disaster that nevertheless overcame them, but the rest of his analysis does not develop this point. On the contrary, reasoning from the punishment to the sin, he accepts the various statements of sin within the poems as accurate. In fact, like the midrash, he reads more transgression into them than might be warranted, as will be discussed later.

Albrektson chooses to overlook this shift in Gottwald's presentation. Rather, he focuses on Gottwald's opening statements about the people walking in the paths of righteousness. This cannot be the source of the tension, Albrektson says, since Lamentations gives no hint, much less explicit formulation, of righteousness. As quoted above, Albrektson says that Lamentations tells us "time after time" that the people "have sinned grievously."[18] Thus his only challenge to Gottwald is over the *source* of the faith tradition in the tension between faith and history. Albrektson, like Gottwald sees a link with Deuteronomy; and like Gottwald, he is not bothered by the conspicuous absence of reference to specific transgressions of its laws.

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[16]Ibid., 67.
[17]Ibid., 66.
[18]Albrektson, *Studies*, 218.

The general formulation "we have sinned and this has happened" seems to both of them an obvious admission of guilt.

As the preceding discussion of Deuteronomy suggests, this assumption of sin is not necessarily supported by the text of Lamentations itself. However, before exploring alternative interpretations, we will look at the way specific verses are used to support the traditional view of sin and punishment within the covenant paradigm.

Of the thirteen verses which mention sin, only a few convey any additional information (2:14, 4:6, 4:13 and 5:7). Therefore, these carry most of the weight of speculation regarding the precise nature of the people's sin. We will begin with interpretations of these verses, then look at a similar verse at the center of chapter 3 and its alleged theological message, then consider the remaining references to sin in the poems. This chapter will also offer alternatives to the traditional views of these verses.

Crime Or Punishment?

When Gottwald speaks of arguing "from the punishment to the sin," he is referring specifically to the verse:

> The guilt (עון) of my poor people exceeded the iniquity (חטאת) of Sodom,
> Which was overthrown in a moment, without a hand striking it. (4:6)[19]

Sodom and her sister cities were used as "stock terms" for divine judgment on sin.[20] By mentioning Sodom, the poet "boldly links unparalleled suffering with unparalleled sin."[21] Thus Gottwald suggests that by referring to Sodom in this manner, the poet accepts and understands

[19]He translates עון and חטאת slightly differently from the JPS translation quoted above, but with the same import: "The *iniquity* of the daughter of my people is greater than the *sin* of Sodom..." Gottwald, *Studies*, 15.
[20]Ibid., 66.
[21]Ibid., 65.

Israel's sins to be even greater than those of this notoriously wicked city.

Albrektson also takes the reference to Sodom as a literal description of the magnitude of Israel's sins:

> ...for the catastrophe has in fact stricken a people of whom the author of the Book of Lamentations can say: "For the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the sin of Sodom" (4:6)! Defiance and desertion have earned their punishment -- in complete accord with the retribution pattern.[22]

Thus this verse can be read as confirmation within the poems of Israel's understanding and admission of great sin, greater even than the legendary Sodom.[23] However, the verse can also be viewed in several other ways, depending on its translation and on the meaning of the reference to Sodom.

In reviewing Hillers' 1972 Anchor Bible translation and commentary on Lamentations, Tigay observes several inconsistencies in Hillers' translation. While Hillers recognizes in his notes that חטאה in verse 3:39 can mean the *consequences* of sin, his translation does not follow this reading. However, Hillers translates עון in 4:22 as the *punishment* of iniquity, showing he accepts that a word which means "sin" can also mean the resulting punishment for the sin. Tigay's complaint is aimed specifically at Hillers' translation of verse 4:6. Tigay feels that the verse is speaking of the resulting punishment, not the sins themselves, and faults Hillers for not reflecting this: "...in 4:6 עון and חטאה are rendered 'wickedness' and 'sin' despite the context's focus on punishment."[24] Tigay refers the reader to Hillers' note on

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[22]Albrektson, *Studies*, 219.

[23]See David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. Roskies also takes this approach, seeing verse 4:6 as a description of what formerly happened to a city which had broken faith with God. Now, within Jerusalem's sin and consequent destruction are found the seeds of hope that a relationship with God still existed: "In this way the analogy to Sodom both mitigated and intensified the immediate destruction by reaffirming, however obliquely, the ongoing contract." (18)

[24]Jeffrey Tigay, Review of D. R. Hillers, *Lamentations* in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 35(1976): 141.

this verse which shows Hillers was aware of the alternative translation.

In his second, revised edition, Hillers maintains his original translation of 4:6, but discusses the alternative meaning in his notes:

> *wickedness.* Here Heb עָוֹן could also be translated "punishment," a sense well attested elsewhere....In this verse the NRSV gives "chastisement" and "punishment," with "iniquity" and "sin" as footnoted optional translations. The Hebrew terms involved call to mind *both* moral deficiency and its consequences, in this case.[25]

Hillers does not discuss חַטָּאת or Tigay's more general point that the context of the verse would easily support the alternative reading.

Robert Gordis, in his translation and commentary, prefers the approach expressed by Tigay. Gordis accepts that both words can mean punishment as well as sin, and in this case should be understood that way. His translation reads:

> The punishment of my people has been greater than the penalty of Sodom[26]

He explains his reasoning in the notes: "Here it is the calamity and not the offense with which the poet is concerned."[27]

Another way of viewing this verse is to see it as truly a stock phrase, rather than a literal comparison between Jerusalem and Sodom. The Bible, especially among the prophets, has several references similar to the one in Lamentations, using Sodom as a prototype. Note that it is the prototype both for extreme evil and for extreme punishment.

For example, when Isaiah says that Jerusalem and Judah have defied God, he adds:

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[25]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 139.
[26]Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*. New York: Ktav, 1974, 147.
[27]Ibid., 189.

They avow their sins like Sodom, They do not conceal them. (Isa 3:9) Perhaps the author of Lamentations 4:6 had this verse from Isaiah in mind, and intended to imply some relationship between the events of his day and the prophet's vision.

Sodom is found in a variety of other contexts as well. Ezekiel speaks of that city in an extended metaphor describing Israel's unfaithfulness to God. Israel is seen as equal to or worse than "her sisters" Samaria and Sodom (Ez 16:46 ff). Jeremiah compares the evil of the prophets of Jerusalem with those of Sodom and Gomorrah (Jer 23:14). Zephaniah, on the other hand, speaks of Sodom and Gomorrah as examples of the utter destruction that God can cause in His wrath (in this case referring to Israel's enemies) (Zeph 2:9).

These uses of Sodom (and Gomorrah) as prototypes suggest that references to them are metaphorical rather than literal. The references are scattered through the Bible in general statements much like those mentioned above. Abraham's encounter with the evil of Sodom, although a more extended story, takes on a similar cast. The city is so utterly wicked that God totally destroyed it. Not even ten righteous people could be found there (Gen 19). Hillers agrees with this understanding of the mention of Sodom: "Both the sinfulness of Sodom...and its sudden destruction...were proverbial."[28]

When viewed as a proverbial figure for great sin or great destruction, the mention of Sodom in 4:6 seems not like a direct admission of Israel's guilt, but like another of the poet's numerous attempts to find imagery to express the horror that he sees around him. This perspective is in accord with Tigay's observation that chapter 4's context is punishment rather than sin.[29]

More than random descriptions of suffering, the chapter catalogues

[28]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 148.
[29]See also Ibid., 146., where Hillers observes that the main theme of the chapter is "the mistreatment of the people of Jerusalem."

suffering that takes the form of dramatic, even unnatural, reversals. Gold has become dull, precious jewels and fine people have lost all value (v 1-2), jackals suckle their young while the nursing child is parched with thirst (v 3-4), those who ate dainties are starving in the streets (v 5), the elect of Jerusalem who once glowed with health are now shriveled and unrecognizable (v 8), compassionate mothers have cooked their children for food (v 10). The reference to Sodom's sudden overthrow in verse 6 comes in the midst of this agonizing list.

We see that the significance of Sodom is not, as often supposed, in its proverbial sin nor even its punishment, but in the way it illustrates dramatic reversal: the sudden overthrow of a mighty city. The destruction of Sodom is often described by the root הפך, "to overturn," as it is here. This root is used in Is 13:19, Jer 49:18 and 50:40, and Amos 4:11 to describe God's action against Sodom. Thus in Lamentations, the import of the verse is that along with her citizens, Jerusalem as a city has been dramatically overturned, like Sodom. But Sodom was fortunate: she was overturned in an instant, with no human enemy to taunt and humiliate her. Jerusalem was overturned too, but her reversal was even worse, protracted and made more bitter by her human enemies.

Priests and Prophets – Guilty As Charged?

Two verses are frequently cited in attempts to determine specific responsibility for Jerusalem's downfall:

> Your seers ("prophets") prophesied to you delusion and folly.
> They did not expose your iniquity so as to restore your fortunes,
> But prophesied to you oracles of delusion and deception. (2:14)

> It was for the sins of her prophets, the iniquities of her priests,

Who had shed in her midst the blood of the just. (4:13)

The verses are generally linked, since they both speak of the prophets and they both seem to describe particular transgressions. Gottwald, for example, takes this approach. While he asserts in his commentary that the people confessed their guilt repeatedly and earnestly, he also acknowledges that not much detail is given as to the nature of the sins. These verses offer him a clue to a specific sin: the irresponsible leadership of the priests and prophets. The verses reveal two aspects of the sin. First, as 2:14 describes, the prophets neglected their duty to warn Judah of her sin and the upcoming judgment. Rather, "they delighted in frothy visions of peace and prosperity."[30] Second, they actually participated in the oppression of the righteous, "even shedding their blood (4:13)."[31]

Gottwald does not distinguish between the prophets mentioned in the Book of Lamentations and the "literary prophets" of the Hebrew scriptures. As discussed in Part I of this paper, Kaufmann claims that there is a major distinction between them. Kaufmann says that the poet speaks for the popular religion of the people, a religion which includes the prophets and priests mentioned in the poems, but *not* those "outsider" prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, whose messages are missing from the poems' worldview. In fact, the condemnation of the prophets in 2:14 and 4:13 hardly make sense if applied to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the two literary prophets during the time of the destruction of Jerusalem.

However, since Gottwald views Lamentations as central to the prophetic tradition of the literary prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, he sees references to "prophets" in Lamentations as part of that same tradition. Perhaps this

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[30]Gottwald, *Studies*, 69.
[31]Ibid.

explains Gottwald's inclination to diminish the importance of these apparent sins in 2:14 and 4:13. He sees them as merely a detailed feature of the national sin, but not central to it: "But one thing is sure: the sin is not laid solely at the door of the religious leadership, but is shared equally by the populace."[32] He supports this statement by pointing out that there is a distinction in the verse between the prophets and the people; the accusation of sin in the verse is actually toward the people ("They did not expose *your* iniquity..."). Also the national guilt is heavier than the religious leadership's, since the community continues to suffer under "the heavy hand of Yahweh's judgment" even after the priests and prophets have been slain or exiled.[33]

Thus Gottwald uses these verses as a literal description of Israel's sins. But he does not rely heavily on the verses, both because he is convinced of the people's sin based on his reading of the text, and because he sees Lamentations as part of a prophetic tradition to which he assumes these prophets belong and by which in some sense they are protected from guilt.

Hillers does not explicitly distinguish the prophets of 2:14 from the literary prophets of the Bible, but he clearly presents the possibility through word association. The Hebrew terms used in this verse, שוא and תפל, are translated in the JPS Tanakh as "delusion" and "folly." Hillers translates the terms together as "so much whitewash," giving their literal meaning in the notes as "emptiness and whitewash." He comments that these two words are the ones applied to visions of false prophets, citing Ez 13:10-16, 22:28 as examples.[34] He, too, links this verse with 4:13 as evidence of the religious leadership's blame for Jerusalem's fall.

However, he does not expand on the theme of false or cult prophets in his

[32]Ibid.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 100.

commentary. According to Hillers, the main point of chapter 2 is that God Himself is the agent of destruction of the city and its people. In the middle of a description of Jerusalem's current misery, the writer turns for a single verse to a consideration of its cause. The people had indeed sinned, but the prophets who could have helped them by revealing it, instead "whitewashed" the situation.[35]

Hillers' attempt to explain this verse has several weaknesses. First, as he acknowledges, read this way the verse does not fit with the flow of surrounding verses. "After this single backward look the poem returns to the present misery..."[36] Second, he does not see the verse as condemning the prophets, although שׁוא and חפל is strong language. Rather, he merely suggests that the prophets let the people down in a way that the text only implies:

> Had her sin been made open and had she repented (the idea is implicit, not expressed in the terse poetic line), she might have enjoyed good times again.[37]

Hillers is making an assumption here, since nowhere in the Book of Lamentations is there an explicit statement that if only the people had realized their sin prior to the destruction, they would have repented and thus avoided the disaster.

In contrast to Gottwald and Hillers, Kaufmann makes a clear distinction between classical Israelite prophecy and the religious beliefs of the author of the poems. The poet is a deeply religious person, but his religion is what Kaufmann calls the popular, national religion. This religion places its faith in the community's leadership: king, priest and prophet. The poet does not

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[35]Ibid., 107.
[36]Ibid.
[37]Ibid.

question God's judgement. God punishes for a just reason, so the people must have sinned. But the poet does not turn to the "prophets of destruction," the prophets outside the establishment, to understand the nature of the sin. Rather, the poet's religious values come from the ancient religion of the establishment and the people:

> From the words of the poet we see clearly that he himself believed from beginning to end in the words of the national prophets and in everything that the people, the king and his officials believed.[38]

Therefore the verses that seem to blame the prophets and priests are not emphasized in Kaufmann's analysis, since he feels the poet is not inherently critical of the prophets. The poet's attitude is merely "complaint," but not rejection, disillusionment, or blame.

> The poet complains against the prophets, who prophesied "delusion and folly" to the people (2:14), and he thinks the iniquity of the prophets and the priests is one of the causes of the destruction (4:13). Yet for all that, he still feels respect for priesthood and prophecy.[39]

On what basis does Kaufmann make the assertion that the poet still respects the priests and prophets? He claims that the poems show that the prophets were, until this disaster, recipients of true visions from God. Thus their legitimacy is never questioned and they too become victims of the catastrophe, rather than major participants in its cause.

> Thus [the poet] considers the Torah which the priests used to teach to be the sure Torah of God. It is only now, when wrath is running wild, that the prophets "receive no vision from the Lord" [2.9]; previously they were prophets of God in spite of 2.14.[40]

In this reading, 2:14 seems to indicate a lapse in the prophets' effectiveness, but not a condemnation of their deeds.

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[38]Kaufmann, 595.
[39]Ibid.
[40]Ibid.

Kaufmann turns to verse 4:13 as the only mention of an explicit sin, the shedding of innocent blood. He conjectures that the reference is to court cases dealing with violent crime.[41] He uses the verse to support his theory that the poet looks to the ancient religion to understand the people's sin. The "prophets of destruction" speak of social and moral transgressions. In contrast, verse 4:13 points to a sin of the ancient religion: blood defiles the earth and brings retribution upon society.

Tigay, in his article on the Book of Lamentations in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, draws on Kaufmann's interpretation. Lamentations describes the failure of the institutions in which the people placed their trust, including the prophets. The book's ideology reflects that of the popular religion as opposed to that of classical prophecy. Referring specifically to 2:14, perhaps because it is the one verse which out of context might challenge this position, Tigay says in a parenthetical remark that the verse "reflects hindsight rather than the classical prophetic view on the popular prophets."[42] Thus he does not seem to find this verse central to an understanding of the poems' religious views.

Mintz emphasizes a literary approach to the interpretation of Lamentations, finding the book's drama and development in the poetic voice. Verse 2:14 is read within this context of unfolding drama. The poet, in his mounting grief, suffers a breakdown in 2:13 and finally speaks in his own voice (as "I"). He realizes that as a poet he is obliged not only to document and memorialize what has happened, but also to attempt to console and heal.[43] His despair is that he may not be able to console Jerusalem adequately in her boundless misery. Yet he will try. If he can find metaphors

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[41]Ibid., 596.
[42]Jeffrey Tigay, "Lamentations, Book of." in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Volume 10: 1371. Jerusalem: Keter, 1972.
[43]Mintz, *Hurban*, 29.

powerful enough to reflect her pain, perhaps her pain will diminish; she will be given "some anchorage and orientation in the world as a protection against the oceanic swell of suffering."[44]

Having established 2:13 as a climactic moment, Mintz then discusses how the poet recovers from his breakdown and implements his plan, beginning with 2:15. This leaves Mintz with the awkward problem of explaining 2:14 since, as in Hillers' commentary, it interrupts the flow of his argument. Mintz deals with the verse in the following parenthetical remark:

> The privileging of the poet's activity continues in the next verse [14] in the denunciation of the false prophets who failed to warn Zion of her iniquity. Although the reference is not to the classical canonical prophets, who themselves decried such delusion mongers--Ezekiel 13:10-13 is an example--there is a sense here in which the moment of prophecy has passed, its powers rendered useless by the actuality of the Destruction. The kind of discourse that is needed in the aftermath is not prophecy but lamentation.[45]

If the verse had not been in the middle of his poet's dramatic moment, Mintz might not have mentioned it, since at this point he is not looking for sin and guilt, but consolation. His final point in this quote is well made, however. The poems definitely seem more concerned with the current suffering than with its causes.

Mintz's comment opens the opportunity for a different interpretation of 2:14, one that he hints at but now can be made more explicit. Rather than discussing this verse as an isolated statement about the disaster's cause, which all of the commentaries above have done, the verse can be read in its context. Preceding it, as Mintz points out, is the poet's cry of despair:

What can I take as witness or liken to you, O Fair Jerusalem?

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[44]Ibid., 30.
[45]Ibid., 30-31.

What can I match with you to console you, O Fair Maiden Zion?
For your ruin is vast as the sea: who can heal you? (2:13)

As if to answer his own question "Who can heal you," the poet continues: "Your seers prophesied to you delusion and folly..." Which is to say: don't look to *them* to heal you; they have already shown themselves worthless. Moreover, don't look to passersby; they merely mock you (2:15). Certainly don't look to your enemies; they gloat about their victory over you (2:16).

Read in this context, the verses are not about the sin which caused the disaster, but about efforts to cope with its aftermath. The prophets of verse 14 are one of several groups to whom Jerusalem might be tempted to turn, all of whom the poet dismisses as being harmful, not healing.

Verse 4:13 is one of the two verses in chapter 4 which seem to speak of sin. The other verse, regarding Sodom, was discussed above. As was noted there, Sodom is named in the poem not because of her sin, but because of her sudden overthrow. Much of the imagery in chapter 4 describes the unnatural reversals that have occurred to Jerusalem and her people. This includes the fate of the priests and prophets. Verses 13 and 14 must be read together for grammatical reasons, with a comma rather than a period at the end of verse 13.[46] Hillers' translation reads as follows:

On account of the sins of her prophets, the iniquities of her priests,
Who shed within her the blood of the innocent,
They wandered blind in the streets, defiled with blood;
By exertion they are spent and exhausted; their clothing is tattered.
"Get away! Unclean!" they call to them. "Get away! Don't touch"...

The verse's meaning is subtly but significantly changed with this translation. Verse 13 is here considered a prepositional phrase; the subject

[46]Hillers rightly considers verses 4:13-15 among the most difficult in the Book of Lamentations. Hillers, *Lamentations*, 141-2.

"they" is in verse 14. That is, prophets and priests wander in the streets because of their sins. This is not a statement about egregious sin which brings disaster to an entire people. Rather, these verses describe yet another drastic reversal: those who were once ritually the purest of all the people are now unclean, defiled, untouchable. Those who stood for righteousness and justice now commit blood crimes. An even more extreme reading of the reversal might also include the unimaginable image of priest and prophet killing the righteous for food, the blood of their victims visible on them. That they too are starving is clear from 1:19. In any event, 4:13 in its larger context can be seen as a description of the aftermath of the disaster, rather than its cause. The verse describes the effect of the catastrophe on the priests and prophets: a complete reversal from their high and righteous state to its antithesis.

Where to Lay The Blame?

Kaufmann identifies 4:13 as the only mention of a specific sin in Lamentations. He sees in that verse a reference to the ancient religion's belief that blood defiles the earth and brings tribulation upon society. However, he continues this discussion with a reference to 5:7, another verse also related to sin. While the poet acknowledges in 4:13 that his generation participated in bloodshed, he ultimately blames the destruction on the iniquity of his forefathers: "Our fathers sinned and are no more; and we must bear their guilt." (5:7)

Kaufmann sees this as further proof that the poet is not in agreement with the "prophets of destruction." The belief of 5:7 is in accord with the popular saying that the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. Since Jeremiah and Ezekiel repudiate this proverb (Jer 31:28, Ez 18:2), Kaufmann strengthens his argument about the poet's affiliation with

the popular religion of his day.

But Kaufmann goes a step further in his interpretation of the verse. He, along with other scholars searching out the nature of the people's sin, noticed the conspicuous absence of idolatry as a cause for God's punishment. Rather than leave this as an unexplained feature of the poems, Kaufmann turns to 5:7. What was the sin of the fathers to which this verse refers? Idolatry! When did it occur? During the notorious generation of Manasseh![47]

This is a creative suggestion, but one which has no support in the text. In fact, other commentators are more reluctant to see all blame laid on the forefathers. Both Gottwald and Hillers balance the reassignment of guilt in 5:7 with the acceptance of guilt in 5:16: "The crown has fallen from our head; Woe to us that we have sinned!".

Of the two, Hillers offers the more concise interpretation. The poet, by saying "*our* fathers" does not disassociate himself from the ancestors or their sin. Rather, as verse 16 indicates, he understands and acquiesces to the terms of the covenant: the sins of the fathers are now being visited on the children (Ex 20:5). In support of this view, Hillers cites Jeremiah, who expresses in one verse the two views of Lamentations 5:7 and 16: "We have sinned against Yahweh from our youth, we and our fathers" (Jer 3:25).[48]

Gottwald is not sure how to read 5:7. On the one hand, he sees it as the single possible exception to other expressions of sin which are the "manfully shouldered" guilt of the current generation. But the verse may not be about previous generations after all; it might refer to the current generation, with "fathers" a reference to the leaders of the community who are now in captivity ("they are no more"), and thus have ceased to exist for the Jerusalem

[47]Kaufmann, 597.
[48]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 164.

community. In this latter case, the responsibility stays with the current generation. However, even if 5:7 were to refer to the ancestors, verse 5:16 shows that it is not a complete shifting of responsibility.[49]

These explanations of 5:7 and 5:16 assume that the poet is seriously concerned with assigning responsibility for the disaster. The verses are puzzling because if read literally they seem contradictory, which is why Gottwald has trouble explaining them. The difficulty once again arises from lifting the verses out of context. They take on a different cast when read within the overall context of chapter 5, as suggested by Michael Moore's article about human suffering in the Book of Lamentations.[50]

Moore calls attention to the surprisingly large number of descriptive terms for people within the social structure.[51] He views chapter 5 as a strong recapitulation of Lamentations' overall theme of the suffering of these various classes of people. Within this short chapter, eleven different age/sex categories are named (e.g., orphans, mothers, virgins, princes), generally in the context of things these people used to do that they are no longer able to do. The poem is a mournful list of human activities, institutions and freedoms that have all been destroyed.[52]

The speakers seem to accept the idea that sin was involved, but their reference to sin is perfunctory. As we have seen, the two references comes from different sources. The first, 5:7, is from the popular religion, perhaps even a proverb from folk wisdom. The second, 5:16, may reflect the conventional theology of the covenant which links punishment with sin, but here there is no attempt to establish what the sin might have been.

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[49]Gottwald, *Studies*, 67.
[50]Michael E. Moore, "Human Suffering in Lamentations." *Revue biblique* 90(1983): 534-555.
[51]Ibid., 546.
[52]Ibid., 552.

Seen in the context described by Moore, the two verses which mention sin seem like puzzled asides rather than statements of guilt, as if to say: Look at all of these suffering people (could this have happened because of our ancestors?); all of our joy is gone (could this have happened because of *us*?).

Conventional Theology

More than halfway through chapter 3, the male persona exclaims "We have transgressed and rebelled..." (3:42) Unlike other statements about sin in Lamentations which are used in isolation as "proof" that the people acknowledge their sin, this statement is seen as part of a larger theological message that is at the heart of chapter 3 and, for many, the heart of the entire Book of Lamentations.

In some ways chapter 3 dominates the book. It is in the center, it is the longest chapter (with three verses for each letter of the alphabet), and it speaks of the relationship between God and humans in terms not found elsewhere in the poems. It also begins on a dramatic note, with a first-person eyewitness voice: "I am the man who has known affliction under the rod of His wrath." (3:1) The identity of this man has been the subject of much debate, with speculation that he is, for example, Jeremiah, King Jehoiachin, a common soldier, or Everyman. Regardless of his identity, his voice is strong, reflecting a thoughtful turn of mind and commanding our attention.

Most commentators who address the theological or ideological message of Lamentations, with the notable exception of Gottwald, look to chapter 3 to support their views. Mintz refers to chapter 3 as "the theological nub,"[53] Tigay calls it the "ideological core,"[54] Hillers says it is "the high point of the

[53]Mintz, *Hurban*, 33.
[54]Tigay, "Lamentations, Book of," 1370.

book"[55] . Although their emphases vary, as we will see, they share the same orientation: this chapter illustrates a genuine movement from despair to hope and redemption.

Gottwald is the exception because he does not focus on chapter 3 in the same manner. He clearly sees a message of hope and redemption in the Book of Lamentations, but for him the message is found throughout the book. In a style reminiscent of rabbinic exegesis, he uses Lamentations as a collection of proof texts to be cited (out of context, if necessary) to illustrate his points. Because this chapter contains many references to the relationship between humans and God, he quotes from it frequently, but he does not offer a structured analysis nor does he stress the importance of this chapter to his views.

Mintz, on the other hand, carefully distinguishes among the chapters.[56] His analysis focuses on rhetorical elements in Lamentations. In chapter 2 a female speaker gives voice to deep expressions of pain, humiliation and despair. As effective as this voice is, it is not sufficient to undertake the next step, which is to try to make sense of what has happened.

> [A] woman's voice, according to the cultural code of Lamentations, can achieve expressivity but not reflection. And now acts of reasoning and cognition are the necessary equipment for undertaking the desperate project of understanding the meaning of what has happened.[57]

The speaker of chapter 3 solves this problem. He, too, gives a first-person account, but he is inclined to theologize and does so, according to Mintz, in three roughly equal sections, "panels of a great triptych."[58] Mintz's analysis

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[55]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 122.
[56]However, he does not discuss chapters 4 and 5, which he feels "represent a relaxing of the rhetorical tension and complexity of the earlier chapters..." Mintz, *Hurban*, 22.
[57]Ibid., 32.
[58]Ibid., 33.

follows the contours of these three panels. The middle panel, which expresses the theological center, is not the most interesting to Mintz. The real drama is the shift from the speaker's individual suffering to his identification with the community. As for the middle panel's grappling with questions of meaning, the results seem rather conventional.[59]

What Mintz calls "conventional" is in fact the analysis which is most frequently offered for this chapter's (and the book's) theology. Tigay gives a succinct summary. The speaker moves through several stages: after describing his suffering in vivid terms, the poet makes the following syllogism: (1) God is good and although He inflicted the current suffering, He will eventually pardon; (2) God does not inflict suffering arbitrarily; so (3) the people must have deserved the suffering because of their sins.[60]

Although expressed in simple terms, this is representative of the analysis given by most commentators who see a hopeful message in chapter 3. They differ mainly in what they emphasize. For example, Gordis is particularly interested in the issue of good and evil. He is bothered by 3:38, which he calls a "crucially difficult and important verse."[61] Whereas most people translate it in a manner similar to Hillers, "Both bad (or "evil," הרעות) and good take place at the command of the Most High," Gordis objects to the notion of God as the source of evil, so he translates: "Not from the mouth of the Most High is it decreed to do harm to a good man!" Although altering the meaning of this verse, he still comes to the same assertion as stated in points (1) through (3) above:

> V[erse] 38 now expresses the same idea as vv. 35, 36 and 37. In the face of his calamities (vv. 1-20) the poet reminds himself of God's mercy (vv. 21-

[59]Ibid.
[60]Tigay, "Lamentations, Book of," 1370.
[61]Gordis, *Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 182.

> 32), because God does not willingly afflict His children, nor does He oppress men or pervert their judgment with Him. Strong in his faith, the suffering poet declares that man's troubles are to be laid at man's door and are not to be imputed to his Maker.[62]

Gordis takes verse 39 as the beginning of the next section; others see it as the final piece of reasoning that leads the speaker to the major shift in verse 40. Either view leads to the same conclusion about the theology. As fits his logical, cognitive nature,[63] the poet has reflected on God's ways and appropriate human action, and now he "draws the practical inference of his observations":[64] "Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord."

This is a significant moment in the poem, according to the "conventional" reading. The poet now states the only logical response to the three-point syllogism upon which he has expounded: the people must admit their sins, repent, and thus be readmitted into God's good graces. This is accomplished by lifting up hands and heart to God, saying "We have transgressed and rebelled..."

All of the elements are related. If the syllogism is true, then the people *must* have sinned, and they must confess the sin in order to begin the process of redemption. Any other interpretation leads to an unacceptable conclusion, as Tigay and Mintz have both pointed out:

> The belief that the punishment was earned, not arbitrary (3:33-39), became the basis of the hope that the repentance and submission could bring an end to the suffering (3:40-41). Without recognition of sin there could have been no meaningful ground for this hope.[65]

> The motives for making the connection [between the ordeal and the

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[62]Ibid., 183.
[63]Mintz, *Hurban*, 35.
[64]Tigay, "Lamentations, Book of," 1370.
[65]Ibid., 1370-71.

> speaker's sins] are clear enough. Without sin the event has no meaning. God remains gladiator and beast, His persecution an eternal rejection. Chapter 3 demonstrates that precisely because a conviction of sin is at first so unnatural, it must be won.[66]

These interpretations seem to arrive at the same conclusion, but in fact they *begin* with the conclusion, as hinted at by the quotes from Tigay and Mintz. The interpretations begin with the assumption that the Book of Lamentations must, ultimately, contain a hopeful message, because the alternative is inconceivable. The exegetical challenge is to find proof of that hope within the text. Thus most commentators take the poet's words at face value, assuming that the poet speaks from his heart and is experiencing some sort of religious transformation. Viewed in this way, the confession of sin at 3:42 is an authentic admission to a great wrongdoing which has led, because of God's justice, to the disaster.

However, the text permits a multiplicity of meanings. It can also be read without a prior assumption that it contains a message of hope. The speaker himself might be torn between his religious views and what he observes around him. He might be tormented by the disparity between what had happened to the people and what they might have done to "cause" it. He might yearn for a message of hope, yet still be overwhelmed by his feelings of despair. He might yearn for the conventional view of God's justice, yet be well aware of the "inconceivable" alternative. Cohen believes that the poet was well aware of the alternative. In verses 1-18 the poet complains not that God has abandoned him, but that God actively persecutes him. "A malevolent and baneful deity, God inflicts suffering upon the innocent and the helpless--no reference to sin here!"[67]

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[66]Mintz, *Hurban*, 36.
[67]Shaye Cohen, "Destruction," 29.

How does a religious person respond to such a possibility? By rehearsing in his mind all he has been taught about God's nature and trying to apply it to the current situation, in spite of the gap between teaching and current perception. Thus, by an act of will, the poet makes a shift from remembering his afflictions (vv. 19-20) to remembering something that might give him hope (v. 21 and 24).

Most commentators read the verses that follow (25-36) as statements of heart-felt belief. However, they also can be seen in a different light. The poet, in his distress, recalls what he has been taught to believe about God. Perhaps he can find hope for the future in the familiar, conventional beliefs: God is merciful; God is good to those who trust in Him; humans should be patient and not complain; God afflicts those who deserve it, and then He pardons.

These beliefs do not seem heart-felt for several reasons. First, they do not reflect the speaker's actual state of mind. Gottwald, looking at verses 25-30, sees proof that the speaker has moved forward in his relationship with God, that he has learned the great theological lesson of the Suffering Servant which appears next in Second Isaiah and is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.[68]

> The Lord is good to those who trust in Him, to the one who seeks Him.
> It is good to wait patiently till rescue comes from the Lord.
> It is good for a man, when young, to bear a yoke;
> Let him sit alone and be patient, when He has laid it upon him.
> Let him put his mouth to the dust--there may yet be hope
> Let him offer his cheek to the smiter; let him be surfeited with mockery.
> (vv. 25-30)

Gottwald correctly claims that these verses speak of patience and long-suffering. However, he reads them out of context. When read within the larger context of the chapter and all of Lamentations, these verses do not

[68]Gottwald, *Studies*, 106.

describe the actual state of mind of the speaker in chapter 3, or any other voice in the poems. None of the personae in Lamentations advocates bearing a yoke; instead, all bitterly protest their lot. Zion is "sitting alone" but she is far from patient with what God has laid upon her. The speaker in chapter 3 is anything but silent in the face of suffering, either before or after this declaration of its virtue. Moreover, the conclusion of his speech, at the end of the chapter, is a far cry from "offer[ing] his cheek to the smiter." Rather, it is an impassioned cry for vengeance against the enemy:

> "Give them anguish of heart; Your curse be upon them!
> Oh, pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord! (3:65-66)

Second, these verses and the ones that follow are unusual stylistically. They have the appearance of formal statements rather than emotional, spontaneous insights. Following the preface of verses 22-24, the poet describes God's nature in twelve verses. Consistent with the acrostic pattern of the entire poem, each group of three is based on a letter of the alphabet. However, the application of the acrostic at this point is especially formal. The first group of three begins as expected with the Hebrew letter ט, but they are unusual in that each begins with the same word: טוב ("good"). The translation gives some sense of how this repetition might sound in the original (vv. 25-27, above). The next three verses begin with the same verb form, each instructing a man how to behave, as the translation suggests. Then in the following three verses, again the same word is used to begin each verse: כי ("for" or "since"). The fourth set of verses each begins with an infinitive preceded by a ל, another device which lends an air of formality to the utterance:

> For the Lord does not reject forever,

For after he has afflicted he will have pity, out of his abounding mercy;
For he does not deliberately torment men, or afflict them.[69]
To crush underfoot all the prisoners of the earth,
To pervert a man's just case is against the desire of the Most High.
To subvert a man in his cause--this the Lord does not approve.[70] (vv. 31-36)

The repetition of initial words טוב and כי and the repetitive structures of vv. 28-30 and 34-36 are unusual stylistic features which emphasize their formal nature. The reason for such formality at this point is a matter of conjecture. Perhaps these verses reflect the speaker turning to his religious worldview after lamenting over his experience of God as his enemy (3:1-18). Here he states his belief in God's mercy as well as His justice. This expression of religious belief culminates, after these verses, with the dramatic cry: "Let us search and examine our ways..." The conventional theology of his time was not so different from that of our own day. The logic that the modern commentators reveal is the same logic that the poet uses. If God is just and if He does not reject forever, then when we confess our sins we will be restored to His good graces.

Thus the mention of sin at verse 42 which seems the result of "searching and examination" is actually part of the religious worldview to which the poet turns in this time of distress. The single reference to sin in chapter 3 may not be a heart-felt admission of guilt, but part of the theology which the speaker recalls in an attempt to find some way to explain his physical suffering and mental anguish.

However, the remaining verses of chapter 3 do not build on these statements of belief. Rather, the speaker's attempt to fall back on this belief

[69]Translation of these three verses follows Hillers, who best captures their parallel nature , except "For" is used instead of Hillers' choice of "Before."
[70]These three verses are from Gordis' translation, which best reflects the initial infinitives.

system immediately begins to unravel. If the belief is correct, God in His kindness and mercy should respond to an admission of sin with forgiveness. This does not happen. God has not listened nor forgiven nor shown compassion:

> We have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not forgiven.
> You have clothed Yourself in anger and pursued us, You have slain without pity.
> You have screened Yourself off with a cloud, that no prayer may pass through. (3:42-44)

The rest of the chapter returns to a lament over suffering and God's silence, ending with an impassioned plea for vengeance on the enemy, antithetical to his earlier call for "patience" and "offer[ing] his cheek to the smiter."

The mention of sin in chapter 3 is not proof that the people admit that they have truly transgressed. Neither is it support for the view that the catastrophe was God's just punishment for their sins. Rather, this mention of sin is part of a religious statement that the poet turns to and then abandons because it does not accurately express his current condition or his feelings.

The Remaining Sins

The Book of Lamentations contains thirteen explicit references to sin or transgression as the reason for the catastrophe. Six of these references have been the subject of extended analysis, above. A seventh, 4:22, uses the word עון in a context that also means "punishment."[71]

The remaining six references occur in chapter 1 (vv. 5, 8, 14, 18, 20, 22). There is a controversy over verse 14, which may in fact not refer to sin after all. Gordis believes that it does, seeing the sins as a web that rises to choke its

[71]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 137; Gordis, *Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 149.

victim, reminiscent of Laocoon and his sons being choked to death by serpents rising from the sea.[72]

He stands guard over my sins, in his hand they are woven together,
They climb up my neck, they destroy my strength.

The picturesque image of Laocoon might have helped Gordis shape his translation of this difficult verse, but his interpretation is not shared by others. Hillers chooses to read שׂ for שׁ in פִּשְׁעִי , thereby altering the meaning considerably. Rather than "my sins," the word פִּשְׁעִי means "my steps":[73]

Watch is kept over my steps. They are entangled by his hand.
His yoke is on my neck. He has brought my strength low.[74]

These alternative readings are offered as evidence that 1:14 contains textual problems which make it difficult to interpret. We cannot be sure if Jerusalem, in the persona of a woman, is speaking of her sins or, instead, offering another metaphor for the ways God has afflicted and constrained her physically, along with fire in her bones and a net at her feet (v. 13).

In contrast, the remaining references to sin in chapter 1 are straightforward. Each reference assumes the conventional theological view: this tragedy has happened because of Jerusalem's transgressions. However, the statements are made in passing, as part of a larger train of thought about suffering. Both the poet and Jerusalem speak with much more passion about the hopelessness of her suffering than its possible cause. Nor, for that matter, do they speak of remorse or repentance for the alleged sins. The resulting impression is that these references to sin are like cliches. They are unexamined statements based on conventional religious thought. Few in number and unspecific, these mentions of sin do not "prove" that Israel has a

[72]Gordis, *Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 158.
[73]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 73.
[74]Ibid., 62.

sense of guilt or sense of responsibility for God's anger. On the contrary, the poet's vagueness on these subjects reflect his lack of concern for these subjects, in contrast to his great concern for the immediate suffering in all of its forms.

Looking For The Last Word

Even a book as brief as Lamentations offers unlimited opportunity for interpretation. Each interpretation will highlight certain themes and verses to support its theories. The strength of an interpretation depends on how well it accounts for all aspects of the work, not just those aspects used in support of the specific line of argument. Thus the informed reader will read between the lines of an interpretation and ask, "What themes and verses are *not* being mentioned? Do they add credence to the argument, or are they omitted because they might undermine it?"

Thus far we have seen a tendency for commentators to use verses out of context to support their claims regarding the nature of Israel's sins. At first glance there seem to be enough statements of sin to suggest that the people were convinced of their guilt. But a detailed reading of these references to sin, within their respective contexts, reveals a more ambiguous picture.

The same problem of selective reading applies to the final verses of the Book of Lamentations, 5:19-22. Commentators tend to deal with these verses in one of three ways: diminish the verses' importance by arguing that chapter 3 is the climax of the book; explain away the uncomfortable meaning of these final verses; or ignore the verses completely.

Our earlier discussion of chapter 3 mentioned several writers who take the first approach for ideological as well as literary reasons. In the middle of chapter 3 the poet speaks words which appear to support the view of those

readers who assume that Lamentations is based on covenantal theology. In addition to its apparent theology, the size, central position and forceful poetry of chapter 3 might suggest that it is the ideological center of the book, overshadowing contradictory verses such as 5:19-22.

Some writers take the extreme position of ignoring the end of Lamentations entirely. For example, in his anthology *Literature of Destruction*, Roskies includes only chapters 1-3 of Lamentations, with no indication that two other chapters exist! Mintz, as stated earlier, uses literary grounds to justify the exclusion of chapters 4 and 5 from his analysis.

The majority of writers take the middle road of finding some way to explain the final verses of Lamentations without detracting from or contradicting the allegedly hopeful theology found elsewhere in the book. Their various approaches will be included in a detailed analysis of the final four verses. First, however, we must consider why chapter 5 and its concluding verses should not be overshadowed by chapter 3.

Arguments supporting the importance of chapter 5 are based on both style and content. Kaufmann, for example, devotes over half of his article to the linguistic unity of the five poems. He carefully documents the development of a number of motifs such as Jerusalem's deception by her friends, the fate of the children, the famine, etc. He shows how each motif is developed, expanded and intensified through the poems.

Wiesmann was an early advocate for the theological unity of the Book of Lamentations. He argued that the main message of hope was not found in chapter 3, for it did not make sense for the poet to build people up, only to bring them back down to the depths later in the poems. The point of chapter 3 was, rather, to show that even in the midst of suffering one should never

give up hope for God's love.[75]

Without exploring the merits of Wiesmann's theological conclusions, we can accept his observation that it does not make sense to look for the main message of hope in chapter 3. The poems of Lamentations are carefully constructed and are related to each other both by thematic elements and literary techniques, as Kaufmann has shown in detail. Whether written by a single poet or by several poets and then redacted, the poems come to us as an intentional unit. The question is: What was the organizing intention? If the poet/editor wanted to leave the reader with a positive or hopeful message, he had many models from the tradition. The *nechemta*, or concluding note of consolation, is a significant feature of Jewish religious messages dating from the prophets and the psalms. Further, it simply makes sense, as Wiesmann points out, that an author would not lead his audience to a desired conclusion, then deliberately lead the audience away from that conclusion to its very opposite. A sequential work of art such as music, poetry or drama has an internal movement which may take many turns, but eventually ends with the final notes, the last word. The artist has chosen to leave the audience with this final impression. Its choice is not an accident.

Therefore, the final words of the last poem of Lamentations cannot be overlooked; they demand serious attention.

The Coda

The JPS translation of the final verses reads as follows:

> But You, O Lord, are enthroned forever, Your throne endures through the ages ("from generation to generation").
> Why have You forgotten us utterly ("everlasting"), forsaken us for all

[75]See Moore, "Human Suffering," 541-42 for this summary of Wiesmann.

time?
Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as of old!
For truly, You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us. (5:19-22)

The first word, "but," is not literally present in the Hebrew. However, Hillers, like the JPS *Tanakh,* includes a conjunction ("yet") which he says is suggested by the use and prominent position of the pronoun "you."[76] Although not central to the meaning of these verses, the presence or absence of this word affects the verses' relationship to the preceding passage, and thus to chapter 5 as a whole.

Chapter 5 is the shortest in Lamentations. The first line exhorts God to see the suffering His people have endured, then the majority of the poem (vv. 2-14) details that suffering of people from all walks of life. Two verses then describe the end of the people's joy and fame because they have fallen from God's favor (vv. 15-16). This long recitation of woe ends with the following two verses:

Because of this our hearts are sick, because of these our eyes are dimmed:
Because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it. (5:17-18)

Depending on the understanding of v. 19, the concluding four verses are either connected to this description of suffering, or are a separate theme. "*But* You, O Lord, are enthroned forever..." suggests a connection in a positive sense. Mount Zion, God's dwelling place on earth, may be desolate, but that doesn't mean that God has withdrawn completely. He is not limited by this temporal throne. It may have been destroyed, but He continues to reign for all time, through all human history ("from generation to generation").

Reading verse 19 without the conjunction suggests a shift in the speakers' thoughts beginning at this verse. At the beginning of the poem they speak of

[76]Hillers, *Lamentations,* 160.

their suffering, observing that they have fallen out of favor with God. They conclude the account of their suffering with a description of Mount Zion's desolation. Only after this long description of woe do they turn to address God, in verse 19. Without a conjunction, the shift is abrupt and could sound like an accusation: "'*You* are enthroned forever...' regardless of what happens to us. Will you ever bother to take note of us again?"

Albrektson offers another suggestion for verse 19. He takes the verse out of context and uses it as support for his theory regarding the cultic traditions of Zion as the abode of God.[77] It is true that the language of this verse has a certain formal, liturgical quality. The seven Hebrew words are all commonly used in many contexts to describe God's kingship. Perhaps this line is indeed an echo from earlier cultic liturgy.

These three interpretations for verse 19 offer a concise example of how readily the text yields multiple meanings, even meanings that might be contradictory. Verse 19 can be read with a subtly hopeful tone, implying a connection between the temporal now and God's infinite lordship. A reading that is closer to the literal meaning of the Hebrew turns the last four lines into a coda, a self-contained formal conclusion to the composition. Another theory suggests that the line had an independent existence, and its use here may not have a linguistic connection with any preceding lines.

While recognizing the possibility of alternative interpretations, the following discussion builds on the second proposal, that the final four lines are a single unit and can be seen as the poet's concluding sentiment.

The dominant imagery of verses 19 and 20 is eternity. Four different terms are used in the a and b parts of the two verses: לעולם ("forever"), לדור ודור ("from generation to generation"), לנצח ("everlasting") and

[77] Albrektson, *Studies*, 227.

לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים ("for all time"). The meaning of these verses is straightforward. In verse 19 the people assert God's eternal dominion; in verse 20 they wonder if they will be forgotten and forsaken by God for this same eternity.

The literary and theological problems center on the final two verses, 21 and 22. The problem is not in the literal meaning of verse 21, since the words are clear and easily translated. However, the verse's intention is not clear. Is it speaking of a movement forward, towards repentance and a new religious order? Or does it reflect a yearning for the past with no suggestion of repentance?

The Hebrew root שׁוּב appears twice in the verse. The root literally means "to turn back," "to return." This root is used relatively frequently in the poems of Lamentations.[78] In only one of those verses, 3:40, does the root signify a return to God.

The root שׁוּב can also mean "repentance." A well-known use of שׁוּב as "repentance" is found in Jer 31:17: הֹשִׁבֵנִי וְאָשׁוּבָה ("turn me back and I shall be turned" or "cause me to repent, and I will repent"). This phrase shows a strong parallel with Lamentations 5:21: הֹשִׁיבֵנוּ...וְנָשׁוּב. This parallel could be read as a deliberate intertextual reference on the part of the author of Lamentations. However, only Gordis discusses this possible meaning for 5:21. He favors it because it fits his strong preconceptions regarding sin and repentance in Lamentations.

> The chapter is not a lament upon the fall of Jerusalem, but a penitential psalm confessing the sins which have led to the disaster and invoking God's forgiveness.[79]

Given Gordis' interpretation of the chapter, "repentance" is a logical choice of meaning for שׁוּב. However, rather than read שׁוּב as "repentance,"

[78]Verses 1:8, 11, 13, 16, 19; 2:3, 8, 14; 3:3, 21, 40, 64 and 5:21.
[79]Gordis, *Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 150. See also 196.

one can read the literal meaning: "return." This leads to the next question: Return to what?

Gottwald wonders if this should be interpreted politically or spiritually.[80] Before he launches into an explanation of how this verse represents a spiritual "conversion" in the larger cycle of chastisement-repentance-conversion-hope which for him is the basis of Lamentations, Gottwald briefly considers the possibility that it might mean a political renewal:

> Certainly it is not a matter of "pure spirit." The parallel hemistich, "renew our days as of old!" sounds suspiciously like a return of the kingship, the temple, and the religious order (cf. 1.7).[81]

It does, indeed, sound like a return to the old order. This possibility is not difficult to see; it even occurs to Gottwald although it is contrary to his overall view of Lamentations. Although many, like Gottwald, see Lamentations as a transition to a new religious world-view, this verse seems to contradict that view. The people are pleading to be returned to their former status of power and security. There is no hint of awareness of sin nor is their a move towards repentance. Rather, they cry out for an end to suffering; they cry out for God to return to their midst and smile favorably on them as before. When they say שׁוּב, they are saying: "Return to our midst, God, and cause us to return [to the good old days]." This interpretation is strengthened by a comparison that Gottwald himself made between the words in 5:21, יַמֵּינוּ כְקֶדֶם ("[renew] our days as of old") and nearly the same expression in 1.7, מִימֵי קֶדֶם ("[the treasures she had] from days of old").

One wonders if the final line of Lamentations is intentionally obscure or ambiguous. Variations in early manuscripts and translations have led scholars to apply the concept of *lectio difficilior* to this line: the more

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[80]Gottwald, *Studies*, 103.
[81]Ibid.

difficult reading is probably the accurate one. A variety of interpretations have been offered for the opening words, כִּי אִם.[82] Although the interpretations are ostensibly based on philological considerations, the conclusion selected by each scholar is harmonious with his ideological bias.

Hillers in general does not stress the theological aspects of Lamentations. His introduction to the Anchor Bible commentary is predominantly concerned with Lamentations' authorship and literary characteristics. His notes are linguistic and only in his brief comments at the end of each chapter does he speculate on possible theological meanings. Thus he does not seem to have a strong ideological stake, as his reading of the final verse indicates. He presents four possible interpretations, selecting the final one as preferred. He sees כִּי אִם as an adversative conjunction ("But instead..."), having the following meaning:

> But instead [of doing what we just asked in the preceding verse],
> you have completely rejected us; you have been very angry with us.

He acknowledges that the ending as he has interpreted it is fairly somber: "As the poet writes, however, there is not yet any sign of favorable action by God, and the poem and book end, not in despair, yet very soberly."[83]

Albrektson proposes the translation "but," "nevertheless." He realizes this means the book ends on a negative note, but takes some comfort in the fact that the author has given "indirect expression to his hope" in the "prayer" of the preceding verse.[84] Albrektson acknowledges that the poem's negative concluding tone is understandable under the circumstances, therefore:

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[82]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 160-61; Albrektson, *Studies*, 205-7; Robert Gordis, "The Conclusion of the Book of Lamentations (5:22)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93(1974): 289-291.
[83]Hillers, *Lamentations*, 165.
[84]Albrektson, *Studies*, 206.

> It is really no wonder that in his last line he stresses once more the grim realities of the present, which have been his main theme throughout chapter 5.[85]

In this way Albrektson recognizes the bleak tone of the final line, but diminishes its importance by focusing it on present events, leaving open the possibility of hope for the future.

Gordis provides a striking instance of a scholar allowing his ideology to influence his reading. As we saw earlier, he views chapter 5 as a penitential psalm. He also calls it a prayer for forgiveness and restoration.[86] Given this preconception about the chapter's form and meaning, only certain translations of the final line will do. He reviews several interpretations of כִּי אִם, only to reject each one, including Hillers', because it is "inappropriate" or "unsatisfactory" for the conclusion of a penitential poem.

His solution to the problem is to interpret the words as "even if," "although," making verse 22 a subordinate clause to verse 21. He supports these linguistic and syntactical decisions with a variety of biblical analogies. To complete his interpretation, he asserts without any supporting argumentation that the verbs in this verse are to be understood as pluperfects (i.e., action completed prior to a specified time). Thus his translation of the concluding verses of Lamentations reads:

> Why do you neglect us eternally, forsake us for so long?
> Turn us to yourself, O Lord, and we shall return; renew our days as of old,
> *even though* you *had* despised us greatly and *were* very angry with us.

This, now, is a "vigorous, clear, and appropriate conclusion" to the penitential prayer at the end of the Book of Lamentations.[87]

Gordis' translation is clever, but forced. As we have seen, chapter 5 is a

[85]Ibid., 207.
[86]Gordis, "Conclusion," 289.
[87]Ibid., 292-3.

lament over the suffering and reversals of the citizens of Jerusalem. What might be taken as a moment of hope in chapter 3 may instead be a collection of religious formulations which do not engage the speaker past his own utterance of them, for he quickly falls back into passionate language of suffering and vengeance. Each of the five poems of Lamentations has its own rhythms and concerns, but overall thematic and structural elements unify them. The final four verses of Lamentations can be seen as a coda which summarizes the mood of the entire book: God is firmly enthroned, and although we are His people, He seems to have abandoned us. We yearn to be returned to our former state of power, prosperity and health, but it seems that in great His anger, God has totally rejected us.

Hillers will not allow that this ending is one of despair. "Sober" is as far as he will go. His reluctance to use a word like "despair" or "hopeless" is typical of most readers of Lamentations. We are conditioned not just by our culture but by our religious tradition of several millennia to find the happy ending, or at least the message of hope. Using theological and historical hindsight, we are tempted to see transitions among people who themselves have no sense that they are living in times of transition. The poet of Lamentations did not know that Jerusalem and the Temple would be rebuilt within a century, or that Judaism would evolve from a cultic, site-centered religion to one that stresses a more personal relationship with God. The poet only knew that Jerusalem had been destroyed, that her citizens were exiled or suffering horribly among the ruins, and that God--who was the author of this catastrophe--was silent. Clearly God's anger was great, was perhaps even eternal. Had He utterly rejected His formerly chosen people? Or was there some measure of hope left? The final verses express the ambiguity of the speaker's feelings, and the poems in general. On the one hand, God seems to

have first destroyed and then abandoned His people. On the other hand, the very act of crying out to God implies the crier's persistent belief that God is, indeed, present to hear the cry.

The Book of Lamentations lends itself to many theological interpretations, several of which have been explored in this paper. Some readers view the poems as cries of suffering and despair which eventually turn to a hope in God's ultimate redemption. Others people find hope not within the poems themselves as much as in its relationship with other books of Scripture, such as Deuteronomy and the prophets. Christian theology takes this type of intertextual reading further, seeing in Lamentations the earliest models for the "suffering servant" and submission to God's mysterious ways. Yet another type of reading takes a more historical approach, analyzing the poems' theology in terms of the confluence of different religious traditions in seventh-century Judah.

God's role in the disaster is never questioned. Although the destruction was through human hands, God permitted and guided the event. The challenge for most readers is to find the reason that God caused the catastrophe. The most common answer involves the covenant. Since Judaism is built on the idea of the covenant between God and Israel, the events of Lamentations are seen as a fulfillment of the terms of covenant. This view, with which readers begin an analysis of the text, is supported by the occasional mentions of sin throughout the five poems.

However, these references to sin are generally taken out of context and used like rabbinic "proof texts" to support an existing belief. This paper offers several alternative interpretations of commonly cited passages. These interpretations attempt to read passages within their larger context, and without any preconceived theological position to defend. This type of reading leads to a different impression than the ones noted above. Although the people in Lamentations speak of their sin, they do not seem to understand

what that sin was. The speakers in the poems are articulate about their suffering, but do not equate it with comparable sins for which they are being punished. This reading does not find repentance and hope for redemption in the poems, but a hurt and confused people looking for relief. The poems' concluding lines are not an impassioned cry of repentance or a sign of a religious paradigm shift. Rather, the final lines are a plea to go back, a plea to be restored to a former state. This is a desperate plea, because it also suggests that God may no longer be listening, may no longer care about His once-chosen people.

Ultimately there is no single "right" reading of the Book of Lamentations. While the poems seem specific in their references to the the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, they are also universal in nature. They speak about suffering, about God's role in human events, and about the relationship of sin to punishment. Support for any number of theological positions can be found within the Book of Lamentations, as this paper has demonstrated. The challenge for both reader and scholar is to balance preconceived theologies with a clear-sighted view of what the text itself is saying.

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